

ENHANCING HUMAN SECURITY
THROUGH GENDER EQUALITY
IN THE CONTEXT
OF
HIV/ AIDS EPIDEMIC
ROLE OF MINISTRY OF ROAD TRANSPORT AND HIGHWAYS

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HIV/AIDS IN INDIA

It's Growing Threat

The last two decades of the 20th century have exposed the populations across the world to crisis situations created by the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. Efforts made to combat the disease have brought into focus the complex nature of HIV/AIDS and given rise to issues of governance, not necessarily political or administrative in nature, that empower people to meet the developmental needs and challenges of the times. HIV/AIDS has emerged as the single most challenge to public health, human rights and development in the 21st century. Globally HIV/AIDS has acquired epidemic proportions. Between 1999- 2001 the number of people living with HIV/AIDS increased from 33.6 million to 40 million. No Continent or country has been spared. Since 1994 Asia has seen a 100% increase. Though the South Asian region has adult prevalence rate of 0.6% as against 8.8% in the Sub- Saharan Africa, the region has the second largest population of people living with HIV/AIDS ((PLWHA) in the world. The large population base (25% of world's population lives in this region), and the rate of growth in the number of people living with HIV/AIDS in the countries of the region (they have grown by 10% since 2001 in Asia and the Pacific) has given the problem a dimension necessitating priority focus on issues and causes responsible for it. There are several features common to the spread of HIV/AIDS in the South Asian countries. The high rates of poverty and consequent poor living conditions, gender inequality, high prevalence of communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, low level of knowledge and high level of illiteracy as a result of which population will be less aware about the methods of reducing risk of HIV infection, and immigrant and displaced population are associated with the spread of HIV. Majority of these comprise of socio-economically poor and disadvantaged categories of people both in the urban and rural areas. (HIV/AIDS and Development in South Asia, 2003 Regional Human Development Report.)

In India the spread is as alarming between 1986, when the first case was detected, and 2001 by which time 3.97 million were reported to be infected by HIV/AIDS virus.

Many of the global trends of HIV/AIDS are equally applicable to India. Some of identified trends are:

- Rapid spread to all segments of the population.
- Age group of the majority affected – 89% cases are reported in the age group of 18 –40 years –a group that is sexually active and economically productive.
- Rapid pace of increase amongst women –from 41%of the people living with HIV/AIDS in 1997 it rose to 47% in the year 2000.
- The increasing number of newborn children infected.
- Total number of children who are orphaned due to AIDS or live with one parent – at the end of 2001 there were 14 million such children.
- 80% of infections are through sexual transmission.

(Source: Report on the Global HIV/AIDS epidemic, UNAIDS, 2002)

In order to understand the challenge HIV/AIDS poses for the population at large and women in particular in proper perspective, it is important to know the special features and characteristics of the problem and its impact on different groups of people.

Some specific features of HIV/AIDS could be classified as:

- *HIV/AIDS is a “ Gender “issue.*
- *HIV/AIDS is a “human rights “issue.*

- *HIV/AIDS is a developmental issue*
- *HIV/AIDS is a multi-dimensional issue*

Why HIV/AIDS is a “Gender “ issue

The rapid spread of HIV/AIDS in the last two decades amongst all sections of the society, in all areas and regions, irrespective of caste, creed or sex and specially amongst women has given rise to issues determining relationships between the sexes that impact on the status of HIV/AIDS. With reference to HIV/AIDS gender inequalities and the impact these have on the dimensions of the problem are a matter of major concern. The fact that of the total number of people living with HIV/AIDS practically 47% were women in 2001 and their number is growing at a faster pace than men has led both National Governments and International organizations to focus on features associated with the spread of HIV. The high rates of poverty and consequent poor living conditions, gender inequality, low levels of knowledge and lack of awareness about methods of preventing and reducing the risk of HIV infection, the increasing pace at which migrant and displaced populations are growing, are some of the factors responsible for its spread.

Gender inequalities that perpetuate the epidemic are:

- Power imbalances in relationships which affect the decision making power of women in all matters including sexual relationships increase women’s vulnerabilities to HIV/AIDS.
- Trafficking/ violence against women – it exposes them to HIV infections
- Feminization of poverty- Socio- economic burden on women is increasing due to HIV/AIDS – as care givers, as people living with HIV/AIDS, as managers of women headed households – economic compulsions often force women to take risks for survival.
- Societal and cultural norms often make a virtue of ignorance about sex and sexuality, especially with reference to girls and women.
- Discriminatory practices and stigmatization further accentuate the inequities. Inequalities are visible in all walks of life including access to health care including reproductive rights, education, vocational training, support services, opportunities for enhancing incomes, role in decision making, participation in economic and political life and to information.

There is a growing recognition that “the gender dynamics of the epidemic “is largely responsible for the fast pace at which the infection is spreading in India and the region. Epidemiological factors on account of which women have no control over decisions about their bodies or sexual health, their generally low socio-economic status and structural inequities which fuel the

epidemic make women more vulnerable to STD and HIV/AIDS. Physiologically also, women face a greater risk—the risk of unprotected sex is two to four times that of men for women. Semen has higher concentration of virus than vaginal secretions. Male to female transmission is more efficient.

Source: Women, Vulnerabilities and HIV/AIDS- (Draft Working Paper of UNIFEM 7th April 2001)

Socio-cultural factors further increase women's vulnerabilities. Early marriage (close to 60% of women in rural areas get married before they are 18 and become mothers before they turn 19), inadequate understanding of their reproductive system, low access to information and medical care, violence against women, prostitution, legal discrimination and subordinate status expose them to infections.

The Sentinel Surveillance data from antenatal clinics from 7 Metro cities supports the evidence that HIV infections are percolating from various high-risk groups to low risk groups' population.

The greater vulnerability of women due to social, traditional norms is largely responsible for the constant narrowing of the gender gap and the spread of HIV amongst women with monogamous relationships. Girls and young women are increasingly showing a higher rate of acquisition compared to boys and men of similar age.

Why HIV/AIDS matters to the Ministry of Road Transport & Highways:

The sectoral guidelines of the European Commission state- 'While new and improved infrastructure brings economic and social benefits, it can also facilitate and spread the disease. Opening up new traffic routes and improving access and personal mobility can contribute to the rapid spread of communicable disease such as AIDS.'(Towards sustainable transport infrastructure: A Sectoral Approach in Practice. Director-General for Development European Commission, July 1996).

Improving transport services means more people to operate the services. Drivers of trucks and other transport services have to spend long durations away from home and hence the likelihood of their indulgence in sexual activity.

The Transport sector matters to HIV/AIDS because better infrastructure increases the mobility of passengers and operators. There is adequate evidence to establish the close linkage between mobility, migration and the spread of HIV. Studies have brought out strong evidence to establish the role played by the crew members of trucks plying on the inter-city roads in the spread of the disease. Their high mobility to and from cities with high prevalence of HIV to other parts of the country (including the rural areas), combined with the high rate of sexual promiscuity among them on their travel routes, places them at a high risk of contracting HIV infection and spreading it to the commercial sex workers in other regions and to their own spouses.

The findings of the Healthy Highways Project (HHP) Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey supported by DFID(Department of International Development) and NACO(National Aids

Control Organization) in 1998 studied the trends in HIV/AIDS related knowledge, attitudes and behaviours in sub-populations associated with the trucking industry, especially those at high risk of acquiring HIV infection. The study covered four segments- truck drivers, truck helpers, stationary workers and female sex workers operating exclusively on highways. Major findings indicate a high rate of high-risk behaviour amongst truck helpers and truck drivers. Forty percent truck helpers and 36% truck drivers said they had sex with FSWs (Female Sex Workers) and non-regular partners. The study further found that 64% truck drivers, 71% truck helpers and 74% stationary workers had not used condom during last sex with a non-regular partner.

Besides, workers involved in the construction and maintenance of infrastructure often comprise of the mobile population and are, therefore, at risk.

Development of road transport and highways aims at improving the movement of goods, services and people at the national, regional and international level. Transport systems provide an important support to development strategies by facilitating economic production and trade; helping increase production in the agricultural sector; investing in people through education; employment creation and improving access to health. The constant interaction with people in providing services to various sectors at different places, on account of the nature of their work, puts both the providers and beneficiaries at risk of contracting HIV infection. (Summary Report: Behavioural Surveillance Survey in Healthy Highways Project, India—Department of International Development –Impact Assessment for HIV/STI prevention programmes Baseline report series).

India has one of the largest road networks in the world with an estimated 5 million long distance truck drivers. These men are away from their families for long durations, and in the stressful environment along the highways they are susceptible to unhealthy activities such as alcoholism, drug abuse and sex with commercial sex workers and non-regular partners.

While railways, airlines, and shipping services are also a part of the transport sector, in the first instance road transport needs priority consideration as the bulk of movement of goods and people is handled by it. There are four main areas of concern in the transport sector with reference to HIV/AIDS:

- People employed in building and maintaining infrastructure;
- People on the roads for providing transport services;
- Professionals engaged in the management of the sector; and
- Passengers.

The activities related to building and maintaining of the transport infrastructure often require groups of workers to remain away from homes and families for long periods just like the truck operators. Being away from families increases the likelihood of their indulging in sex and having more sexual partners. Sexual activity associated with the circumstances in which the workers find themselves increases the chance of exposure to HIV, not only for the workers but also for their spouses and communities in the areas in which they are working. As a major cause for the spread of HIV infection is through sexual transmission, the high rate of sexual promiscuity makes them a highly vulnerable group.

In Malawi, studies have shown, that road construction has been linked to the spread of HIV. A recent study of Thai long haul truck drivers found that 86% of the single men and 63% of the married men had had commercial sex.

In India a study conducted by Dr. K S Rao on ' Sexual lifestyle of long distance lorry drivers in India: Questionnaire Survey found that 87% of the drivers were sexually promiscuous and 78% of the unmarried sexually promiscuous men in the 21-30 age group reported having 31-60 sexual partners in the last 12 months.

(British Medical Journal BMJ. 1999 January 16; 318(7177): 162-163).

Transport managers, both in the government and the private sector, for the same reasons as the construction workers and truck drivers, run the risk of contracting the HIV virus.

Mobility increases with better and improved transport infrastructure. While increasing mobility is generally a development goal- it leads to economic growth, facilitates access to services and improves quality of life- it also provides greater opportunities for sexual activity to those away from homes. They succumb to desires easily as the nature of their job subjects them to a range of pressures. Travel to long distances in search of work as also for leisure has become fairly common these days. This also impacts on the spread of HIV.

Linkage between Gender, HIV/AIDS and Road Transport & Highways:

HIV/AIDS has become a gender issue and is increasingly becoming so in countries like India, where traditional and social norms perpetuate gender discrimination and inequities. Recent statistics indicate that the epidemic is swiftly shifting towards women and young people and from high-risk groups like sex workers, IDUs, migrant men to general population. Almost 35% of HIV positive people in the region are women. The number of women who are testing positive in antenatal clinics is on the rise as also the pediatric transmission and incidence among female partners of male IDUs

The country has a vast network of national highways and an enormous surface transport system. Trucks play a very significant role with approximately ten million members- drivers and assistants- involved in the truckers industry. Besides, there are buses that transport passengers to long distances across the country. Various studies conducted on the highways revealed that most of the truckers, who come from diverse social and cultural milieu, spend up to eleven months of the year away from home. Life on the highways is stressful. Hence, to avoid pressure, stress and reduce fatigue in order to continue driving, they often consume alcohol and drugs during driving and indulge in sex with commercial sex workers under influence of alcohol for sexual gratification. This results in high prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS as shown by various studies.

On account of the nature of work, the truckers and drivers on highways are deprived of a healthy family and social life. Their indulgence in alcohol and drug abuse makes them susceptible to addiction, road accidents, loss of job, and disruption in family life. Sexual contact with sex

workers and multiple partners makes them vulnerable to contracting Sexually Transmitted Diseases including HIV, which apart from directly affecting their physical health and the economic sustainability of their families, exposes their spouses to the diseases. The prevalence of HIV among monogamous, married women and the accompanying increase in vertical transmission is largely responsible for the spread of the disease and for the narrowing of the gender gap. (Gangakhedkar, et al, 1999).

The mobility of the transport workers endangers a large segment of the population, and especially women across the country to STD and HIV/AIDS. They are largely responsible for the rapid spread of the disease to rural areas in the last two decades.

Report of the 'All India Rapid Survey On Truck Drivers Halt Points for STD/AIDS Prevention Among Intercity Truck Drivers' (Indian Institute Of Health Management Research, Jaipur, May 1995) clearly states that studies in India provide 'sufficient empirical data to confirm the direct linkage of sexual behaviour patterns among truck drivers in not only contracting HIV infection by themselves, but also transmitting it to other sex workers along the various highways around the country. (Singh, Y N et. al. 1993).

As a result of the increasing demand for commercial sex by transport workers on the highways, women from poor families and /or women headed households are often lured into becoming sex workers to earn easy money along the highways.

Some groups belonging to the socially and economically deprived Castes and Tribes have adopted the practice of forcing their girls to adopt commercial sex work as a profession to support the family

As spouses of those infected by HIV/AIDS, women have to bear the socio-economic burden of providing financial and other support to families, repaying debts and bearing the additional costs of medicines and hospital care. It often results in withdrawal of children, especially girl child from school, thus denying them the right to education.

Single partner positive women, within the household bear a greater burden and feel the impact of the infection much more severely. In a study compiled by the Lawyer's Collective in India with their clients, of the 67 positive women respondents, at least 60% were economically dependent and unemployed..

Women form about 60% of the migrant workers engaged in road construction activity. They are often sexually abused and are at risk of contracting STD/HIV.

The high mobility and frequent multi-partner sexual behaviour of the truck drivers and their assistants makes them a high- risk group for contracting and spreading STD/HIV infection. As women are the biggest sufferers for various reasons, there is an urgent need to mainstream gender concerns into the policies and programmes of the Ministry for ensuring the well being of all those directly connected and /or associated with the sector..

Role of Road Transport &Highways:

In view of the above, keeping in view the multifaceted needs of those affected, a comprehensive approach to meet the challenge HIV is posing is required. As both the causes and trends of HIV/AIDS establish the multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary nature of the epidemic, it is necessary to study the policy, plans and programmes of the Government Ministries and Departments that have a bearing on HIV/AIDS with a view to enhance our understanding of their relevance, role, and responsibilities to the epidemic. The review of policies and programmes will further facilitate the introduction of gender perspectives in plans and programmes with a view to reduce gender disparities that are responsible for the unequal flow of benefits to women and other weaker sections which alone can empower women and reduce the socio-economic and physical impact of the HIV infection.

All Ministries do not have an explicit policy for HIV/AIDS, even though their programmes directly or indirectly enhance or limit the capacities of individuals to reduce risks of HIV infection. While practically all Ministries can empower some segment of the population to enhance their security, a few Ministries have been selected for the study initially. The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has a crucial role to play in preventing and controlling the spread of HIV infection.

The Ministry of Road Transport & Highways, as the name itself suggests, is responsible for developing and maintaining the National Highways and the vast network of roads. Roads, Highways and Road transport are fundamental segments of the infrastructure required for the growth of the nation. The pace and pattern of development in the country largely depends on the network and quality of roadways available for transportation of both goods and passengers. The efficiency and effectiveness of the system depends on the physical and mental health as also the economic stability of the service providers and their families.

The Ministry 's responsibilities cover a vast and varied area of activities connected with the transport industry. The Ministry takes stock of the existing road network and addresses diverse issues facing the road and transport sector. Apart from expanding, strengthening and improving the accessibility of different regions, it provides financial and technical support for development of rural and state roads, over bridges and under bridges.

The Ministry also establishes norms for motor vehicles and takes up schemes and programmes for ensuring road safety including training of heavy vehicle drivers.

While physical safety is a matter of utmost importance, environmental well-being is also a matter of concern. It codifies and enforces stringent norms for controlling pollution due to vehicular emissions.

In view of the fact that about 87% of passengers and 65% of freight is estimated to move by roads and the number of motor vehicles on the roads are increasing rapidly, the Ministry formulates broad policies relating to road transport and environmental and safety aspects. For this purpose it administers the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988; Central Motor vehicles Rules 1989; Road Transport Corporations Act, 1950; and Carriers Act, 1865.

Road Safety - making roads safe by taking appropriate steps to inculcate a sense of heightened awareness in the populace- also falls within the purview of the Ministry of Road Transport & Highways. In order to formulate policies for road safety to minimize road accidents in the country, a Road Safety Cell has been functioning in the Ministry since 1986. Some of the important schemes being implemented include Publicity programmes, Grants-in-aid to Voluntary Organizations for organizing road safety programmes, National Highway Accident Relief Service Scheme, Refresher Training to Heavy Vehicles drivers in the unorganized sector, Grant-in-aid for setting up Driver training Schools etc.

The Ministry also has a Transport Research Wing to provide necessary research and data support to various wings of the Ministry of Road Transport & Highways and the Ministry of Shipping.

It is apparent that the Ministry of Road Transport & Highways is responsible for not only the development and maintenance of the vast network of rural, state and national roadways, but also for the quality and safety-both physical and environmental- of the transport system and the activities connected with it. It is also clear that for this purpose it administers and enforces Acts and implements schemes to fulfill its objectives. As mentioned above, apart from enforcing legislation, formulating rules and regulations, the Ministry formulates and implements a large number of schemes and programmes through selected institutes and Non governmental Organizations. Through them the Ministry administers road safety programmes, assists refresher training to heavy vehicle drivers in the unorganized sector, sets up model driving training schools, provides relief in case of accidents on the national highways, gives national awards to NGOs and State Transport Undertakings for ensuring road safety etc. Besides, it also implements schemes for human resource development training, pollution testing and control and for research and development.

While most of these schemes have a bearing on the performance and well being of those engaged in operating or utilizing the transport services, a detailed examination of the two schemes mentioned below will help in identifying entry points through which the health and safety concerns of truckers, drivers, their assistants and others in the transport industry can be mainstreamed to protect them from contracting HIV. The two schemes are:

- Grant-in-Aid to Agencies for Administering Road Safety Programmes
- Refresher Training to Heavy Vehicle Drivers in Unorganized Sector.

Grant-in –Aid to Agencies for Administering Road Safety Programmes

The scheme is being implemented through voluntary organizations/autonomous bodies/ educational institutions engaged in research activity or field programmes relating to road safety. Financial assistance is being provided for:

- Raising road safety consciousness among the road users;
- Publicity Campaigns on road safety;
- Providing training facilities to drivers and medical aid to the victims of road accidents;

- Organizing training programmes for special target groups like drivers of heavy vehicles/goods vehicles, etc
- Research and Development of traffic control methods, design of vehicles and roads, etc;
- Sponsoring/financing of publication of popular literature on road safety.

The above list is illustrative and organizations are free to submit suitable proposals keeping in view the essential objective of improving road safety.

The scheme is comprehensive and includes road safety concerns of road users and target groups like drivers of heavy vehicles etc. The behaviour patterns of the truck drivers, which have been a subject of study through several research projects, bear testimony to the unhealthy environment that most of them face on Highways. As already mentioned, the high level of sexual promiscuity amongst the truckers makes them extremely vulnerable to HIV infection.

The All India Rapid Survey on Truck Driver Halt Points undertaken for STD/AIDS prevention among intercity truck drivers reported multiple reasons for stoppages. Out of the 561 halt points, board and lodging was reported to be the major reason for stoppages at most of the halt points (505). Besides food and resting and bathing facilities, liquor was also reported to be easily available at roadside dhabas found at these halt places. Another major reason for stoppages was for servicing, repairs and replenishment of fuel for the vehicles (420 halt points). Loading and unloading of goods was mentioned as a reason at 145 halt points usually situated near a city or an industrial area.

One of the reasons mentioned by the drivers at about 105 places was for contacting commercial sex workers. This information is of immense significance because, apart from throwing light on the reasons for halts, it also helps in identifying places where CSWs (Commercial Sex Workers) are available.

Since 80-90% of HIV infections are through sexual transmission and a large proportion of truckers indulge in multi-partner sex, it is necessary to protect them from contracting STD/HIV infections themselves and from spreading it among their spouses, non-regular partners and commercial sex workers in different parts of the country. Information and training in these aspects should, therefore, be built into the curriculum of road safety programmes.

Road safety requires that the drivers and operators of heavy vehicles should enjoy good health. Under this scheme assistance can be provided to NGOs and other organizations to inform and educate drivers and others involved in the transport sector about STD/HIV/AIDS and other diseases and the manner in which these are contracted. They should also be given information about safe sexual practices and behaviour.

Through the publicity campaigns on road safety taken up by using the mass media and inter-personal methods, safer sexual behaviour should be promoted. Targeted interventions among high- risk behaviour groups, including promotion of condom use should be propagated so that the spread of the HIV infection can be prevented amongst the truckers operating on the highways and amongst the women with whom they come in sexual contact.

Besides, facilities for providing early diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, particularly those that facilitate HIV transmission, should be made available through organizations, which provide training, and medical facilities to victims of accidents.

In view of the important role played by truck drivers and roadside female sex workers in the transmission of HIV infection to different parts of the country, it is essential that the health concerns of the drivers and women they come in contact with are protected by including the necessary information as an integral part of all road safety programmes. This is also important for socio-economic reasons and for ensuring the economic sustainability of the truckers and their families.

Scheme of Refresher Training Course of Drivers of Heavy Motor Vehicles in Unorganized Sector:

This scheme is also being operated through Voluntary Organizations, autonomous bodies and educational institutions engaged in research activity or field programmes relating to road safety. The programme is intended to cover the target group of Heavy Vehicle drivers i.e. drivers of trucks, buses and other heavy vehicles who account for more than 80% of the road accidents in the country.

The purpose of the scheme is:

- To educate/ motivate the target group of drivers to inculcate safe driving habits;
- Acquaint the group participants with the rules of the road, understand and follow the road signs and signals, road markings as well as rules and other provisions of law scrupulously;
- Keep the vehicle in a road worthy condition, specially the critical parts of the vehicle namely the brake system, electric system, tyres, etc.
- And other precautionary measures.

The programme is meant to consist of Refresher Driving Training Course for two days including medical check-up.. Under the medical check-up programme, the drivers are expected to undergo a complete check-up including eye test, B.P. and blood test so that they can be apprised about any deficiency requiring remedial measures.

Drivers employed in the un-organized sector as also the self- employed drivers are covered under the scheme.

This is an important scheme as it covers the bulk of the drivers in the transport industry. As the objective of the scheme is to educate and motivate the drivers to adopt safe driving habits, it is necessary to educate them about behaviour patterns that are conducive to a healthy and disease free life style. The refresher course content should include information about diseases such as STD/ AIDS and the manner in which they are acquired. Emphasis should be laid on providing information about preventive strategies for protecting their spouses and other women including the female sex workers from HIV infections.

Awareness education programmes through publicity by utilizing the mass media and interpersonal methods should be taken up on a massive scale not only on National Highways, but also on State and rural roads to reach out to the population at large. Facilities for medical check-ups and treatment for STD should be provided at all halt points and information about STD/HIV etc. made available to truck drivers, their assistants and the female sex workers and other women living along the highways.

A special programme should be launched to educate and inform about the dangers of acquiring STD/HIV through sex with multi-partners to female sex workers and other women who are available to the truck drivers at the 105 places identified in the Survey of the truck drivers halt points.

(Report of the All India Rapid Survey on Truck Drivers' Halt Points for STD/AIDS Prevention among Intercity Truck Drivers: Sponsored by Overseas Development Administration, World Health Organization, National Aids Control Organization(GOI) :

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