



Batam Sex Worker Study 2012

Introduction

Over the past 5 years, Batam welcomed about 1 million visitors every year and many of them came via ferry from Singapore¹. According to local sources, it is estimated that there are about 5,500 illegal sex workers in Batam either working in the sex farms (loosely regulated establishments) or in the entertainment outlets (pubs, clubs, karaoke and massage parlors). HIV prevalence among sex workers in Batam was as high as 9% in 2007².

Little is known about the knowledge on HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections as well as on the attitudes and practice towards the prevention of these infections amongst the sex worker population. In addition, it has also long been suspected that there are cases of sexual exploitation among the sex workers in Batam.

To understand these issues, HOME (Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics) conducted a research study in Batam jointly with Batam NGOs, Yayasan Lintas Nusa and Yayasan Dunia Viva Wanita, in early 2012.

Objectives

- (1) To assess knowledge, attitudes and behaviors among sex workers with regards to HIV/STIs and safer sex practices
- (2) To understand more on conditions and circumstances which favor the sexual exploitation of women in Batam
- (3) To help conceptualize and recommend program initiatives to cross border government and non-government agencies in the prevention of the spread of HIV/STIs and in the combat against human trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation.

Data Collection

Interviewer-administered survey was conducted with 152 sex workers from 4 sex farms (out of 8 sex farms in Batam) and 148 sex workers from pubs/clubs/karaoke/bars from Jodoh and Nagoya – there are altogether 175 entertainment outlets in Batam. All 300 respondents are Indonesians and all surveys have been conducted over the period between 1 April and 1 May 2012.

Key Findings

(1) Underage Sex Workers

9 out of 300 respondents (about 3%) started working as a sex worker at the age below 18. Though the study indicated only a small percentage of children (below 18 years old) being sexually exploited in Batam, it is noted however that frequently Indonesian sex and domestic workers are known to overstate their ages under threat by pimps and recruiters not to reveal their real ages. 76% of the study group reached

¹ <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/indonesias-batam-island-eyes-singapore-tourism-boom-073616789.html>

² http://www.aidsdatahub.org/dmdocuments/sex_work_hiv_indonesia.pdf

only up to junior high school – the employability of women for other work improve only if they have completed senior high school.

(2) Forced Sex Trafficking

Findings indicated that an alarming one third were either forced or tricked into sex work. And among them, 35% were forced or tricked by the agent/recruiter while another 35% were tricked or forced by their relatives, girlfriend, neighbors, boyfriend and others.

At one sex farm visited, there were high fencing and security to suggest that sex workers could not leave these farms at will. An NGO reported that two sex workers escaped the sex farms and sought refuge at the shelter for trafficked women.

(3) Inconsistent Use of Condom and Lack of HIV/STIs education

The majority of the sex workers or 75% in the study are inconsistent in the use of condoms when having sex with customers. And among the customers are Singaporeans who also refuse to use the condom. 60% said they have Singaporeans customers and a quarter of Singaporean customers always use a condom. More than 45% of the sex workers have to provide condom themselves. Those working in sex farms are more likely to follow 100% condom use compared to those from the entertainment outlets (2:1).

Only half of respondents go for monthly regular medical check-ups. This could be that they have to pay for screening. A very high percentage (90%) of sex workers has never attended any training or education on HIV/STIs and safe sex practices. There appears the need to provide HIV/STI education program for sex workers and for students at Junior High School. As to the health screening behaviour, sex workers in the entertainment outlets are more likely to go for monthly check up than those from the sex farms (3:2) despite the presence of health screening clinics located inside the sex farms.

Conclusion

This research study highlights some important public health issues such as inconsistent condom use, irregular screening and the lack of education on the prevention HIV and STIs support among sex workers in the population. The prevalence of such high risk behaviours among sex workers and their customers is worrisome and suggest that more has to be done in the area of education and provision of a conducive environment for safer sex practices.

The study confirmed evidence of sex trafficking as a third of respondents stated that they were under coercion to become sex workers and a small percentage entered the industry when they were below eighteen. And even as under aged sex workers are a small percentage, given the practice of overstating their ages, the findings may be indicative of a larger percentage of minors in the industry. Given the anti- human trafficking law in Indonesia and the Woman's Charter in Singapore, Singaporean customers could be criminal offenders under the law on both sides of the borders.

Recommendations

1. HIV/STIs Education and Sex Worker Outreach in Batam

Singapore NGOs in collaboration with Batam NGOs should conduct brothel based outreach. With the frequency of flow of people across the borders would impact upon the increase in the spread of HIV and AIDs the need for cross border learning and outreach is vital to a response to the problem of high risk behaviour in the sex industry.

Batam GOS and NGOs should initiate sexual reproductive health program in secondary schools since the study shows that more 75% of sex workers dropped out of school either before or after junior high school (secondary school). More setting-specific education activities such as HIV/STI talks at the factories, industrial zones and shipyards will need to be organized to raise awareness of HIV/STIs and safer sex practices among migrant populations in Batam.

2. HIV/STIs Education and Outreach to Singaporean Customers

The refusal of customers to use condom consistently is worrisome as the spread of HIV virus is borderless. There is an urgency to educate Singaporean men who frequent Batam (about high prevalence of HIV and STIs among sex workers in Batam). HIV/STI information should be made accessible on board the ferries bound for Batam. There is an urgent need for local and regional partners to work in close collaboration to raise awareness among clients of sex workers, pimps/brothel owners, local authorities, business sector, etc.

There should be laws in place to provide for the consistent use of the condom and any customer who refuses to use the condom should be subject to penalties under such a law. There should also be collaboration across borders to provide customers with accessibility to free condoms and HIV/STI screening and information on Mobile Testing Service van schedule in Singapore and HIV Testing services in Batam.

3. Greater law enforcement to combat sex trafficking and offences

Customers should also be made aware of the law on anti - human trafficking in Indonesia and the law in Singapore against sex with minors with or without their consent. This also calls for greater enforcement and prosecution against offenders.

The Trafficking in Persons National Plan of Action on both sides of the border should call for bilateral agreement on law enforcement in the combat against the trafficking of women and children. Sex farms and brothels in Batam should be prosecuted for the 'imprisonment' and the coercive like conditions that contribute to sex trafficking conditions.

The TIP National Plan of Action should provide for rehabilitation and reintegration services for the victims of sexual exploitation in collaboration with local and international organizations. The Batam authority should work closely with NGOs to provide sex workers a choice to leave the trade. It has been publicized in the local newspaper in Batam, Batam Post, that the Sing Thai sex farm was supposedly to be a rehabilitation centre for sex workers and our research study has provided evidence that the sex workers in Sing Thai and other sex farms were not being provided with rehabilitation services – in reality these farms were merely a village of brothels managed by pimps who lived on the earnings of these sex workers.

4. Joint Research Studies

Based on the current findings on evidences of sexual exploitation, more research studies will need to be conducted in the combat against the sex trafficking of women and children in Batam and other islands of the Kepri. It has been reported that Singaporean customers frequent other islands. We recognise too the difficulty in this area of research especially among customers who would rather be hidden from public scrutiny.

5. Media Publicity

Given the seriousness of IV pandemic and the increasing numbers of HIV positive patients across the border and the seriousness of the transnational crime of human trafficking there appears an apparent lack of media interest. We hope that the initial findings of this research will give the media reason to publicise the ‘tip of the iceberg’ problem impacting on public health and human exploitation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research study would not have been conducted without the collaboration of our NGO partners in BATAM – Yayasan Dunia Viva Wanita and Yayasan Lintas Nusa and with the support of the Head of Batam HIV AIDS Commission. We are also extremely grateful for the direction of Professor Kayoko Ueno of the University of Tokushima and the support of Mr Leon Perera, Managing Director of Spire Research Consulting.