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National Association
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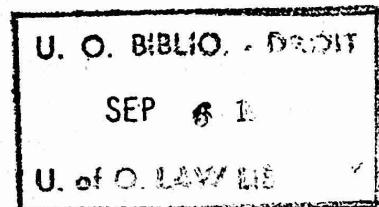
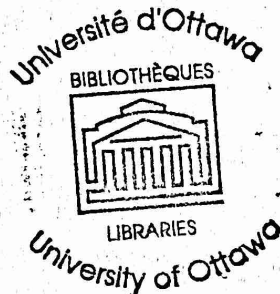
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ISSUES AND ACTION ON A.I.D.S

IN THE PHILIPPINES

by: Sylvia Ciocon de la Paz
(Gabriela, Philippines)

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NEW / NOUVEAU
Telephone / Téléphone: (613) 241-7570
Facsimile / Télécopieur: (613) 241-4657

Introduction

This paper aims to present the current situation on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or A.I.D.S. in the Philippines, as a public health issue, as a gender issue and as an overtly political issue in relation to the United States military bases in the Philippines.

Action programs and campaigns of GABRIELA and other non-government organizations are also presented as well as highlight of the Philippine government response to the problem of AIDS.

Current Statistics on A.I.D.S. in the Philippines¹

A.I.D.S. begins with an infection of Human Immunodeficiency Virus or H.I.V. The HIV damages the body's immune system and makes it vulnerable to infection and concerns which become the direct causes of death. Diseases directly causing death in an AIDS victim includes Pneumocystic pneumonia, Kaposi's sarcoma, brain infection, persistent diarrhea and herpes infection. In Third World countries, such diseases include tuberculosis of the bone, cryptococcal meningitis and central nervous system toxoplasmosis.²

Testing for HIV infection in the Philippines began in May 1985 by two research agencies working independently of each other, the Research Institute of Tropical Medicine under the Department of Health and the United States Naval Medical Research Unit - 2. Tests were done on a total number of 94,472 individuals as of November 30, 1988.

Between May 1985 and November 30, 1988 a total of 92 individuals were found positive for HIV antibodies but were without signs and symptoms of AIDS, 58 were female prostitutes, 30 private referrals, 4 homosexuals and bisexuals, and none among blood donors and rehabilitation center residents and staff.

A total number of 19 individuals were found positive for HIV antibodies and showed signs and symptoms of AIDS. They are otherwise called full blown AIDS cases.

As of April 1988 the Philippines was declared by the Department of Health as at an early stage of an epidemic with HIV. Based on DOH Projection of AIDS incidence, there could be over 600 infected persons in the Philippines at present using the 10% formula of confirmed to estimated infections. Assuming that the current doubling time is about one year, there would be about 5000 infected and 200 AIDS and AIDS Related Complex Cases by 1990.³

A.I.D.S. as a Public Health Issue:

Major consideration of AIDS as a public health issue are as follows:

1. Infection with the AIDS Virus is life-long, there is no known cure, and silent spread through blood, semen and vaginal fluids may occur through an infected population showing no signs and symptoms of A.I.D.S.⁴
2. Majority of AIDS Victim come from the population in their most productive years crucial to the economic and reproductive life of a society.⁵
3. A.I.D.S. is a fatal disease that places enormous burdens on already strained health resources. The Health budget is only 2.6% of the total national budget and this has proven inadequate to provide basic health services. Infectious diseases have remained among the top ten causes of deaths in the Philippines for decades. The entry of A.I.D.S. in the Philippines is cause for grave concern and requires urgent measures in a poorly nourished population whose immune systems are already severely compromised by other infectious diseases.

A.I.D.S. as a Gender Issue

The sexual exploitation of women in the Philippines is a key factor to the problem of A.I.D.S. The majority of those found positive for HIV antibodies were prostituted women. Unlike in other countries whose becoming a prostitute may be a matter of choice, in the Philippines it is mainly a matter of circumstance.

Gross economic inequality, underemployment and job marginalization have led to the commodification of women.⁶ Prostitution is institutionalized in the Philippines as it is closely linked with the tourist industry and with the US military bases.⁷ Today, there is an estimated 20,000 registered hospitality women, a euphemism for prostituted women, half of whom work in Olongapo and Angeles where the US military bases are. This includes unregistered hospitality workers whose numbers are believed to be two to three times more than those registered.⁸

Prostituted women around the US military bases are unjustly and inaccurately pinpointed as the source of the AIDS infection.⁹ Such victim blaming shifts responsibility for the entry of AIDS in the first place through the tourist industry and US military bases.

A.I.D.S. as a Political Issue

The entry of AIDS may include not only the US servicemen but also tourists and returning Filipino A.I.D.S. victims who contract the disease abroad, still, because of its relation to prostitution around the US bases, A.I.D.S. has become an overtly political issue.

In the past the general observation was that where there were military bases, there were prostitutes. Recent developments

indicate that where there are bases and prostitution A.I.D.S. may not be far behind.¹⁰

The retention of the US bases involves the issue of foreign intervention and its removal is crucial to the pursuit of national sovereignty. The AIDS problem adds another dimension to the issue of the US bases, a health dimension. The risk of further entry and spread of AIDS through the US servicemen and the prostitution industry that surrounds the bases adds urgency to the struggle to remove the U.S. bases from the Philippines.

GABRIELA's Response to the AIDS Problem

Women Against AIDS (Waid Cam) was founded upon the initiative of then GABRIELA's Network (later Commission) on Violence Against Women and was launched at a press conference on October 16, 1986 with the following as member organizations: Church Women United, Association of Women in Theology (AWIT), Church Based Consumers Movement (CBCM), Kilusang ng Manggagawang Kababaihan (KMK), Health Action Implementation Network (HAIN), Medical Action Group (MAG), NCCP Division of Family Ministries, Center for Women's Resources (CWR), SPADE, NOWRP, WCDE - IS, BAGWIS, BUKLOD, AID and alternative tourism organizations.

Objectives

1. To strengthen the Philippine anti-bases position in providing one more solid argument: AIDS
2. To widen the mass base of the anti-base position in gaining more anti-bases position and gaining more anti-base advocates locally and internationally, through the AIDS Issue.
3. To provide opportunities for women organizing through the AIDS issue.
4. To educate Filipinos toward a nationalist perspective regarding the US Bases through the Aids issue.
5. To provide health education to prostituted women.

6. To provide AIDS education to the Filipino public.

Demands

1. That the Philippine government institute an AIDS prevention and education program and inform the people of steps it has taken.
2. That, long term solutions directed at the root causes of prostitution be undertaken. Meanwhile immediate legislative and government action must be taken to safeguard the rights, health, safety, and welfare of actual and potential AIDS victims among prostituted women.
3. That the US government provide lifetime medical care, livelihood support and indemnification of Philippine US bases connected AIDS victims and their dependent.
4. That the RP-US Military Bases Agreement be abrogated before 1991 and convert the bases to enterprises to benefit Filipinos and restore their dignity and sovereignty as a nation.

Activities

I. Education

1. September 2, 1986 Symposia on Women and the Bases at NCCP
2. September 10, 1986 Health Seminar in Contraception-AIDS for Women in Olongapo, co-sponsored by HAIN
3. October 16, 1986 Press Conference at UCCP co-sponsored by Alliance against Institutionalized Dehumanization (AID)
4. Press Conference on anti-bases issues co-sponsored by CSP, ABC, and Bayan

II. Mass Action

1. October 3, 1986 First Anti-Bases Rally in Olongapo, AIDS taken up as an issue
2. December 18, 1987 Joint Statement on AIDS as a Political and Public Health Problem by the Task Force AIDS

3. September 1988 Petition on Aids signed by 482 women bar workers in Olongapo demanding support for AIDS victims and AIDS clearance for US servicemen
4. October 1988 Picket at the DOH to project Women's demands, to pressure government and MBA panel to divulge results of negotiations on AIDS, to revive public consciousness of AIDS, and expose government inaction on earlier demands.

Accomplishments

1. A campaign on Women against AIDS has been launched and its potentials as an anti-bases issue has been tested.
2. Mass Media has picked up AIDS and other women's issues
3. The potential of AIDS as an issue for international networking and support is recognized
4. Obtained Legislative support for condom use, and stop legislative discrimination against homosexuals and other minority group.

What needs to be done

Revive and sustain Waids Cam focus on organizational machinery, and planning concrete action programs based on set objectives, time frame and scope.

Government Response to A.I.D.S. Problem

Strategies for AIDS Prevention and Control

Government through its national AIDS Prevention and Control Committee and the AIDS program secretariat will employ the following strategies based on its National Medium Term Plan for the Prevention and Control of AIDS - the Philippines 1989 - 1993:

1. Prevention of the spread of HIV by all routes including sexual, blood and perinatal to include:
 - identification and surveillance of high risk group
 - health education for the general population and individuals and groups known to engage in high risk behavior
 - increased screening of blood supplies
 - education of and support to health professionals toward

reduction of HIV transmission through blood transfusion and injection.

2. Reduction of the import of the infection on both HIV infected and AIDS cases to include counselling clinical management and transfer to alternative occupation for prostitutes.
3. Strengthen the capability of the DOH, related agencies and NGO's to control the spread of HIV infection

Activities to Date:

1. Training courses on laboratory diagnosis of HIV
2. Sero - surveys on sentinel groups
3. DOH circulars/orders
 - creating AIDS Prevention and Control Committee on February 1987
 - making AIDS a notifiable disease
 - requiring confidentiality of records
 - AIDS education campaign for all health personnel at the central office
 - on non-issuance of health clearance by STD clinics for "hospitality girls" found positive to HIV
 - on formation of local AIDS committee
4. Meetings and consultations with World Health Organization, NAURU - 2 and US AID, the Philippine Red Cross and other government and non government organizations preparatory to formulation of the national plan for AIDS prevention and control.
5. The DOH has disseminated AIDS information through mass media and seminars.
6. Commission on Immigration and Deportation requires AIDS clearance certificates for permanent immigrant, illegal aliens and refugees.
7. The Secretary of Health and the AIDS Committee have met with the military commanders and health authorities of the US bases and discussed the AIDS problem. The US base commanders assured the DOH that all US military personnel based outside the US were being screened for HIV. The US military does not report the seroprevalence among military staff.

NOTES

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8. Dayrit, M., et al, "AIDS in the Philippines, How much has it spread, What has been done, What lies ahead?" Philippine Medical Association Journal, Vol. 63 no. 2 - 3 August - September 1987
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