

Sex Workers Need Empowering

Maw Kaw Kaw

"I am aware that it is a good income working as a sex worker. I can send back money to my family. I have worked at sea nearly two months."

"My friend told me to follow her. She told me to sell sex to foreigners. And then I asked her – Do the men buy sex from foreigners? She told me that men were carrying things. The women can communicate better than men so women are having to sell sex. When I arrived there, the work was prostitution"

As told by a sex worker who is living with HIV.

Her father passed away when she was a child, and she was left with five siblings. Her father was a soldier. As her father worked in public service, her family had to move from one place to another with her father. Her family did not have a stable place to stay. After her father died their family did not have the ability or the resources to stand on their own.

"I had to work in construction because of family poverty. I had to carry heavy amounts of soil which was not suitable for my age. The employer told me that if I was not able to carry the soil in a basket, he wouldn't give me work the next day. So I tried to carry the baskets even though they were too heavy for me because I needed a job. If I did not have a job, my family would have nothing to eat. The employer put a lot of wet soil into the basket and asked me to carry it. I had to carry cement until my back broke" . She tells of the difficulties her family faced and how she tried to help her family out of poverty after her father passed away.

The family had to move out from the house that the military gave to them after her father died. Her family moved from Shan State to Yangon region. She worked in different factories to support her brothers and sisters education.

"I got a job in sea food processing factory opened by a Chinese company. It was a pretty good income. But I needed to

work day and night. I did not get down time that every human needs, and I did not sleep enough. The important thing was that if I worked overtime I could get more money. At that time, my income was enough for my family, but unfortunately the sea food factory was shut down."

She faced difficulties after the sea food factory was shut down so one of her friends told her to go with her and sell produce to the foreigners on the ship. She became a sex worker when her friend lied to her about the ship.

"I worked on a ship as sex worker. After I knew it was to work as a sex worker, I tried to go back. People told me 'If you escape, the employer will kick you out into the sea. If you die no one would know it – the police are not here. You will die'. After they told me that, I was afraid to escape, so I started to work as a sex worker".

"It was good income working as sex worker. I can send back money to my family. I was worked as a sex worker nearly two years."

"Then my friend contacted me to say that the sea food factory was open again. I went back to the sea food factory and worked there again. When I compare the money that I earn from the sea food factory with money from working as a sex worker, it's very different. Income from sex work is much better than the factory. And I need to cover four family members daily needs and education."

"One day one of my customers told me to stop working as a sex worker. I stayed with him for 8 months. He is a sailor. When he went back to work, I was pregnant. At the time, I was too young so I did not know that I was pregnant. Even though I worked as a sex worker, I did not have any knowledge about that. In my mind I only think, I need to get money". She continued to work as a sex worker when her husband is far away from. She thought to abort the baby but she was afraid she would be arrested so she did not do it.

"I did not know about the law. My mother knew that I was working as a prostitute. The police arrested me and I went to jail for a year. My baby was born in the jail." No laws

protected her, and she did not have knowledge about how the law worked either. When she was released from prison, her family became split up from each other. She moved to the illegal area and started to sell water glory for her family's daily income. However she cannot out from her family's poverty cycle.

When her child was two years old she was faced with financial difficulties so she went back to life as a sex worker to solve her financial problems. ***"I went to the Myeik to work, that's where I got HIV. I have been taking ARV (HIV Medicine) medicine since 2008. Now, my son attends grade 10. I don't want anything to affect my son's progress,"*** she says explaining her current family, and her surrounding situation.

"People think that women work as prostitutes and so they get HIV disease. Actually we (sex workers) do not spread these diseases to other people. We have clean bodies without disease, but we get it from our customers. Maybe because we don't know how to use a condom. However, we don't aim to spread it to our partners – they come and spread it to us. Before we didn't know that we could test the blood and so maybe we spread it to other people without knowing because we did not know that we have HIV disease. After we knew it, we never aimed to spread it."

For ordinary women, if they were infected with the disease by their husband, they got sympathy from their neighbour and could share their feelings with their neighbour.

"Sex workers need knowledge awareness, and they need to work to change the way that society sees them," said Ma Mayrry Ah who works at an INGO which is an organisation working with sex workers. ***"Sex working women infected with the disease are not treated the same as ordinary women. The surround neighbours discriminate against them, and blame them. If we look at the reasons for sex workers working in the sex business, 9 out of 10 (9/10) are people who face family financial difficulties. Sex workers are people who struggle with family livelihood, who were orphans, who were trafficked, who worked in domestic work. We try to help them a lot, but if they do not change***

their capacity will not improve.”

“Moreover, if the Myanmar Government pass the Sex Worker Protection law, it will help sex workers, and decrease HIV disease as well. The reason is when sex workers use a condom they can be arrested by the police. Even though the police say that they do not arrest for using a condom, the police arrest the sex worker because they must arrest according to the law. Sex Workers are afraid of this because they are not aware of this attitude so they are arrested by the police. After they are arrested by the police, they stop using condoms even though the police do not arrest them. If they get a right to work transparently and have medical check ups regularly it will be really good for the sex workers. ”