

The Disease That 'Has a Woman Face': Feminization of HIV/AIDS in Nagaland, North-East India

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Abstract : Unlike the cases of cases of homosexuals, haemophilic and or drug users in USA, France, Africa and other countries, in India the first case of HIV/AIDS was detected in heterosexual female sex workers (FSW) in Chennai in 1986. This image played an important role in understanding HIV/AIDS scenario in the country. Similar to popular and dominant metaphors on HIV/AIDS such as 'gay plague', 'new cancer', 'lethal disease', 'slim disease', 'foreign disease', 'junkie disease', etc. around the world, the social construction of the virus was largely attributed to women in India. It was established that women particularly sex workers are 'carrier' and 'transmitter' of virus and were categorised as High Risk Groups (HRG's) alongside homosexuals, transgenders and injecting drug users. Recent literature reveals growing rate of HIV infection among housewives since 1997 which revolutionised public health scenario in India. This means shift from high risk group to general public through 'bridge population' encompassing long distance truckers and migrant labours who at the expense of their nature of work and mobility comes in contact with HRG's and transmit the virus to the general public especially women who are confined to the domestic space. As HIV epidemic expands, married women in monogamous relationship/marriage stand highly susceptible to infection with limited control, right and access over their sexual and reproductive health and planning. In context of Nagaland, a small state in North-eastern part of India HIV/AIDS transmission through injecting drug use dominated the early scene of the epidemic. However, paradigm shift occurred with declining trend of HIV prevalence among injecting drug users (IDU's) over the past years with the introduction of Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST) and easy access/availability of syringes and injecting needles. Reflection on statistical data reveals that out of 36 states and union territories in India, the position of Nagaland in HIV prevalence among IDU's has significantly dropped down from 6th position in 2003 to 16th position in 2017. The present face of virus in Nagaland is defined by (hetero) sexual mode of transmission which accounts for about 91% of as reported by Nagaland state AIDS control society (NSACS) in 2016 wherein young and married woman were found to be most affected leading to feminization of HIV/AIDS epidemic in the state. Thus, not only is HIV epidemic feminised but emerged victim to domestic violence which is more often accepted as normal part of heterosexual relationship. In the backdrop of these understanding, the present paper based on ethnographic fieldwork explores the plight, lived experiences and images of HIV+ve women with regard to sexual and reproductive rights against the backdrop of patriarchal system in Nagaland.

Keywords : HIV/AIDS, monogamy, Nagaland, sex worker disease, women

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