



# Unveiling secret world of married sex workers

Contrary to the past scenario where prostitution was a preserve for single women, a current survey reveals that married men and women are now in the trade

**H**er scarlet red dress seems to be screaming for attention, it clings tightly to her body revealing her curves as she walks across the street which is has been her 'office' for over the last seven years.

Ann\* turned to this trade at the tender of 23 after giving birth and had no job to feed the baby. "I tried doing odd jobs like being a domestic worker and washing people's clothes in the estate but it did not give me enough money to support the baby," says Ann.

## Secrete trade

She says it got tougher when it was time to enroll her son to school. This is when a neighbour tipped her about this secret trade where she could earn good money in a span of a few hours and this she felt would go a long way in boosting her husband's income.

Ann is not the only sex worker who is married as a new survey of

commercial sex work in Kenya has revealed, the first to include male sex workers, has revealed that 40 percent of female and male commercial sex workers are in marriages or stable unions.

## Survey

According to the survey by the National AIDS and Sexually transmitted infections Control Programme (NAS COP), the World Bank, Kenya Prisons and Canada's University of Manitoba, there are an estimated 200,000 commercial sex workers in Kenya, 15,000 of whom are men.

The study, which covered all the country's urban areas with the exception of North Eastern Province, found that Rift Valley and Nairobi provinces had the biggest number of sex workers.

"A majority of the male commercial sex workers have sex with men, and this puts them at greater risk because anal sex, as is already

known, is a catalyst for the spread of HIV, and because of the stigma involved, many do not seek services like HIV testing," said Nicholas Muraguri, head of NAS COP.

## Infection statistics

The Kenya National AIDS Strategic Plan 2009-13 identifies the most at-risk populations as key drivers of new HIV infections, making up one-third of all new cases. Muraguri says the government has recognised the need to create safe access to HIV services for often marginalised high-risk groups. Statistics show that people in stable sexual partnerships account for 44 percent of new HIV infections.



PHOTO BY IRIN

According to analysis sex workers and their clients together contribute 14 percent of all new HIV infections.

Muraguri said the high number of married commercial sex workers could accelerate the spread of HIV within marriage - statistics show that people in stable sexual partnerships account for 44 percent of new HIV infections.

"Their spouses or girlfriends or boyfriends do not know they are engaged in commercial sex work, which puts marriages and stable unions at even greater risk of HIV," he pointed out.

## Conflict in marriage

"My husband who works as a watch man still thinks I am a domestic worker how can I tell him how I earn my money, it would bring conflict in our marriage," says Ann adding that to guard her big secret she has to sneak out at around eight pm after her husband has left for his nightly duties.

The survey did not assess the level of condom use between sex workers and their clients, but Mu-

raguri points out that initial studies had shown that "The level of condom use between sex workers and their clients is just slightly above 50 percent, which is worrying. Sex workers tend not to use condoms with their regular clients."

According to the Kenya HIV Prevention Response and Modes of Transmission Analysis, 2009, commercial sex workers and their clients together contribute 14 percent of all new HIV infections, while men who have sex with men and prisoners account for 15.2 percent.

"These are groups that continue to operate secretly because there are no safe conditions for them," he said. "We must provide this access either within the law or through change in societal mentality to ensure they receive services to save them and the general population."

\* Not real name.