



Press Release

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Lao women at greater AIDS risk: UN

Women in Lao PDR are at an unacceptably high risk of contracting HIV and AIDS, according to a UN expert.

"Around the world, there are disproportionate numbers of women contracting HIV, particularly between the ages of 15 and 25. We need to make sure that girls and women in Lao PDR do not face the same fate", says Kathleen Cravero, Deputy Executive Director of UNAIDS, who has been in the country to boost awareness and ask officials for greater efforts in dealing with the issue.

"More and more in Lao PDR, as in much of Asia, a typical AIDS patient is less likely to be a service woman than a migrant worker returning from Thailand. Many of these go on to infect their partners, which of course puts wives at a very high risk," she said, pointing to the fact that Savannakhet, where much of the population regularly travels illegally to Thailand for work, has the highest rates of HIV infection in the country.

According to UNAIDS, Lao PDR could become a success story by stopping the epidemic before it starts. Key to this success is preventing infection among women and girls.

"Women are often at greater risk of contracting HIV/AIDS because they are less empowered, less educated about ways to protect themselves, and often economically disadvantaged. They are sometimes driven into high-risk behaviour by desperation for money," said Ms. Cravero.

Her concerns echo a recent statement by the Steering Committee for the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS to call urgent attention to the rising prevalence of HIV and AIDS among women and girls, and the "critical need for intensified action to reverse this trend."

"If we protect women against HIV AIDS, we are also protecting children" said Olivia Yambi, UNICEF Representative in Laos at the launch of the Mekong Coalition on Women and AIDS. "Lao PDR is at a crucial stage where, if we act firmly, we can ensure this country stays at low risk. The United Nations system is firmly committed to supporting the Government's national policy of HIV prevention and care."

Although its infection rate is believed to be rising, Lao PDR currently has one of the lowest in the region, despite being surrounded by several countries where prevalence is high. A 2003 report indicated that there were 1,102 known cases of HIV positive people in Lao PDR. However, with the rapid increase in the movement of people internally and across borders, Lao PDR has become much more vulnerable to an HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Ms. Cravero is in Lao PDR to help launch the Coalition on Women and AIDS and secure greater financial and political commitment to fighting the disease. Whilst here, she met with the Deputy Prime Minister, President of the Lao Women's Union, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice President of the National Assembly, repeating the message that there needs to be continued national efforts to tackle HIV/AIDS before it reaches epidemic proportions.

She also called on NGOs and Lao PDR mass organisations, including the Lao Trade Union, Lao Youth Union and Lao Women's Union to intensify their involvement in the struggle against AIDS.

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