

HIV risks through the tuna industry

Aliti Vunisea¹

Korekoreas — or women sex workers in Kiribati — are increasingly associated with tuna industry operations, visiting foreign fishing vessels that come into port for transshipment purposes. These young women are in the trade essentially because of the lack of alternatives for employment and entertainment. Like women involved in the trade elsewhere in the Pacific region, these women are branded by terms that define the work they are engaged in, which explains the name “korekoreas”. In most cases, women sex workers have very limited education and training.

Activities of sex workers and related problems are some of the challenges facing fisheries departments in Pacific Island countries. For most of our island nations, the tuna industry offers the greatest potential for economic development but, at the same time, it brings social costs that most countries are ill equipped to deal with. The saying that prostitution is one of the oldest trades in the world is often used to explain away the presence of sex workers. However, in the case of their association with the tuna industry, the concern is not simply their presence but the modern social and health costs related to their activities. One significant cost is the greater risk of HIV/AIDS, which has in recent decades become a major health, social and economic issue for Pacific Island countries, and is closely linked to seafarers and the tuna industry.

For countries with limited land areas and a fast-growing population like Kiribati, the need for

employment, resources and capital to cushion the impact of population growth is urgent.

The current population of Kiribati is 84,494 (Report on the 2000 Census of Population), spread over 33 islands with a total land area of 810 square kilometres. South Tarawa’s population alone stands at 36,717, which is 43 per cent of the total population. The population in most villages on South Tarawa is highly concentrated, ranging from 1500 to 12,300. Concentration is highest in Betio village, home to 12,268 people or 33 per cent of the total population of South Tarawa. The majority of the population (72.5 per cent) are under 34 years of age; 88 per cent of the population are under 50 years of age, those within the working age. With unemployment already a major problem, these trends in population density and age relate closely to higher levels of unemployment.

Moreover, the youthful nature of the population, as shown in Figure 1, will increase the pressure on resources, services and infrastructure in future. It also indicates that informal and illegal activities, such as the sex trade, could become more prominent alternative methods of income generation. In other words, many young people are likely to be pushed into activities such as the sex trade because of lack of alternatives.

Kiribati depends significantly on the tuna industry, and most earnings come from licensing fees and transshipment activities. Because of limitations in

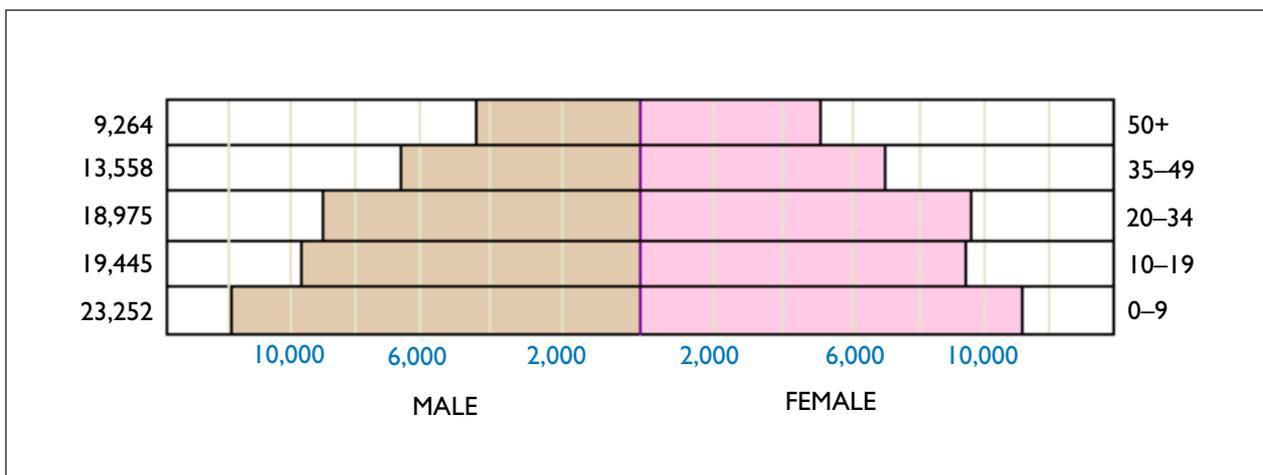


Figure 1. Population pyramid for Kiribati, 2000

1 Coastal Fisheries Management Officer, SPC, BP D5, 98848 Noumea Cedex, New Caledonia. Email: AlitiV@spc.int

industrial development, another major means of income generation is for young men to become seafarers in foreign fishing vessels. The increasing involvement of local people both as crew on foreign vessels and in the industry at home makes the tuna industry the most promising option for economic development for the country in the future.

As a direct result of Kiribati men becoming crew members on foreign fishing vessels, a high number of households are headed by women. Remittances from these men also contribute substantially to the country's revenue and to household finances. On the other hand, as international travellers visiting ports in other parts of the world, these men are exposed to the risk of HIV infection. Most seafarers do not take precautions when in different ports and therefore are vulnerable to sex-related diseases. Kiribati women are then exposed to two potential sources of HIV infection: foreign crew members coming into port, and their own men when they return from serving as seafarers in foreign countries.

When local people are involved in transshipment activities, such as those in Kiribati ports, they interact with foreign crew members and people of different ethnic backgrounds. Most of these crew members are unaware of and insensitive to local cultures and traditions. Thus, interacting with local women is not an issue with them. In a small, close knit community such as Kiribati, activities related to the sex trade and relationships with local women are openly conducted without much consideration for local people.

A growth in transshipment activities usually also means an increase in shore-based services and, in turn, an increase in activities associated with the sex trade. In Betio particularly, more entertainment and service ventures have developed around the wharf area. Sex workers frequent the ports and vessels in Betio harbour and, because of gaps in policies and regulations, most of their activities cannot be fully addressed through legal means. Where women are arrested for suspected prostitution and loitering, loopholes in the legal system prevent the police from following through the cases to prosecution and conviction. Women as young as 15 years old are on the Police Department records as being apprehended on vessels.

It has been noted that the sex trade:

...is one of the most important factors regarding gender in tuna fisheries develop-

ment in Kiribati. There appears to be widespread HIV infection among the seafaring community throughout the Pacific and this is usually from young women working as casual sex workers to earn money. (Seafarers in the Pacific 1998)

The expansion of the tuna industry could mean the sex trade also becomes more involved with the industry. This outcome is especially likely without appropriate legal mechanisms to address prostitution and illegal activities associated with the trade. A growth in the sex trade also contributes to the breakdown of family and communal groups, alcohol and drug abuse and other social problems, as well as to smuggling.

In recent years, increasing HIV infection rates amongst Pacific Island seafarers have become a major concern. Seafarers and their wives make up more than half of the 38 cases of HIV infection in Kiribati. It is apparent that the seafaring industry will continue to be a major contributor to the growing number of HIV cases in the Pacific region. The nature of the industry exposes seafarers to extreme environments where in one instance they are out at sea — isolated, confined, and under strict rules — and the next they are in port, bombarded with sex workers and alcohol. Young women who are involved in this trade do not undergo compulsory medical tests of any kind and may well be victims of both foreign crew members and their own seafarers back from overseas.

The tuna industry and the employment of local men as seafarers on foreign vessels are necessary for the economic development of Kiribati. The tuna industry, which can only expand in the future, brings substantial benefits to small island countries.

Given that the tuna industry is here to stay, efforts to combat its undesirable side effects should be rigorous. In particular, there is a need for campaigns, awareness raising and positive steps to reduce the risk of HIV/AIDS.

Reference

Seafarers in the Pacific. 1998. Pacific AIDS Alert Bulletin 15.