

HEALTH

Rise in Cuban prostitution causes sex diseases to soar

By Dalia Acosta

HAVANA (IPS) — The increasing incidence of sexually transmitted diseases among prostitutes is becoming a severe public health problem in Cuba, according to a senior official of the Ministry of Public Health.

"There has been an increase in these types of diseases, including AIDS, among people who engage in prostitution, both women and men," said Rigoberto Torres, an epidemiologist who heads the Ministry's STD and AIDS program.

Official reports reveal that the incidence of gonorrhea in Cuba increased 147 times between 1970 and 1995, while the 1990 syphilis rate was 12 times as high as it was in the 1970s.

Despite the increases, the percentage of the population infected with sexually transmitted diseases is still quite small.

There is no official data on prostitution in Cuba. But, the *Juventud Rebelde*, the official newspaper of the Union of Communist Youth, reported that the high rate of STD infection was confirmed at a health center for prostitutes.

The sex trade reemerged in Cuba at the beginning of this decade along with the growth in tourism — which brings in more than one million visitors a year.

Prostitution is not a crime according to the Penal Code, but persons who engage in it can be arrested for endangering society or for sexual harassment (against

potential clients).

In the past few months, the health center at La Lisa, a town on the outskirts of Havana, has seen hundreds of prostitutes who were brought there for checkups before being returned to their families — usually far from the capital.

According to *Juventud Rebelde*, these women "are found accosting foreign visitors in tourist centers."

Seventy percent come from the provinces and the vast majority lack a residence permit for Havana.

"The worst sign in the laboratory analysis is that out of 10 prostitutes, at least two test positive for syphilis," according to the newspaper.

"They are young, very young, and they look old, both inside and outside," said

Herminia Sherman, a nurse who has worked at the center for 25 years.

"They are 17, 20 years old, and have vaginas that look like they have had 10 children."

Official sources report that last year, for each 100,000 inhabitants there were 143.3 cases of syphilis, 307.6 of gonorrhea, and 11 HIV infections.

According to *Salud en el Tiempo*, a publication of the Health Ministry's National Office on Statistics, the incidence of syphilis increased from 7.2 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in 1970 to 86.8 in 1990.

The increase in cases of gonorrhea has been even more acute, moving from 2.8 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1970 to 201.1 in 1980, and

then reaching its most critical level in the last three decades with 411.7 cases per 100,000 in 1995.

The rate of HIV infection and AIDS cases also underwent a significant increase, from 2.6 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1990 to 11 per 100,000 in 1997, reaching a cumulative total of more than 2,000 cases since 1980.

While female prostitutes are more visible than their male counterparts, the historical trend has been for more men than women to be infected with STDs.

The incidence of syphilis per 100,000 inhabitants in 1997 was 147.6 for men and 138.9 among women.

The difference for gonorrhea was even greater: 475.2 per 100,000 for men

and 138.1 per 100,000 for women.

And, there were 16.9 HIV/AIDS cases for every 100,000 men as against 4.9 for every 100,000 women.

Maria Isabel Dominguez, a researcher at the Center for Psychological and Sociological Research of the Academy of Sciences, said that during the first half of 1997, 116 cases of HIV infection were detected among prostitutes.

Speaking at an international conference in Havana, Dominguez said that although the numbers were still very small in relation to the total cases of infection, there is a serious upward trend, as in the same period in 1995 only 55 similar cases were reported.

Breaking silence key to Blacks' fight against AIDS epidemic

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

It was the week before this year's World AIDS Day, Dec. 1 and the young Black minister worked his congregation into a near frenzy as he railed against the evils of drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and adultery.

But he got the loudest applause when he denounced homosexuality as the greatest sin of all, and called it a major threat to the Black family and a cause of moral breakdown and disease within Black communities.

The disease he was talking about was AIDS.

Yet, even as he thundered against gays the grim reality is that African-Americans now account for more than 40 percent of AIDS cases in the United States. By the year 2000 they will make up half of all AIDS cases in the country. This comes at a time when AIDS deaths have dropped among Whites.

With a health crisis that wrecks this kind of carnage, it's convenient to blame uncaring politicians, insensitive health officials, public indifference, and of course, racism, for the crisis.

But these usual suspects aren't the only ones responsible for letting this health problem get out of hand. Many African-Americans ignored it too.

As the AIDS/HIV death toll rose among African-Americans, many leaders and organizations kept silent or denied that it was a major

problem.

Or many, such as the minister above, clung tightly to the myth that AIDS is almost exclusively a product of homosexuality. That's only one of the misconceptions that many African-Americans have swallowed about AIDS. Below are the myths that are repeated the most often.

White gay affliction: The majority of new AIDS cases in the United States are among African-American and Latinos. They contracted AIDS through heterosexual sex or drug injections with unclean needles.

Male disease: Recent studies confirm that women appear physiologically more susceptible to contracting AIDS than men. They are twice as likely to contract HIV from sexual relations with a male partner than the other way around. Black women now are the fastest rising number of AIDS cases.

Punishment for sin:

Many Black ministers cite the line in Leviticus in the Bible that brands the act of men laying down with men as "the abomination." But, there are many other passages in the Bible that command tolerance and respect for differences among people, and that includes different lifestyles as well.

Destruction of the black family: The list of the greatest threats to Black family stability are the disproportionate high rates of unemployment, imprisonment, poor education, disease and drug and alcohol addiction among Black men. The gay lifestyle is not and should not be listed as a cause of Black family instability.

Now that the AIDS crisis has imploded within Black communities, many Blacks are scrambling to take action.

The NAACP has launched a crash program of AIDS education. The Congressional Black Caucus

pushed Clinton to add \$156 million more in federal funds for treatment and prevention programs. Black health professionals say they will make AIDS

prevention their top priority. And most importantly, all major historically Black church groups called for a Black Church Speak-Out on AIDS on World's AIDS Day.

These are much needed steps in the battle against AIDS. But, the war can't be won until the conspiracy of silence about AIDS among all Blacks is finally broken.

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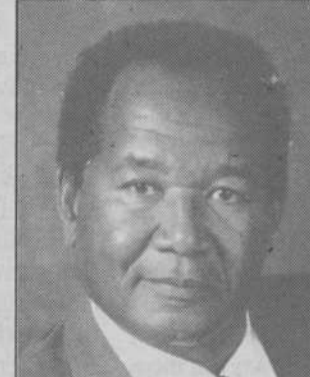
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