

## Breaking the Silence HIV/AIDS in Pakistan



### Honest Talk Inspires Safer Choices in Serey Gath, Hyderabad

In Pakistan's fourth largest red-light district, few people knew the facts about HIV/AIDS. Even fewer were willing to talk about it. But things have changed since May 2003, when Greenstar Social Marketing, in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), and the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP), began an innovative intervention to prevent transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in Serey Gath, Hyderabad. Two years later, this \$189,850 pilot project has successfully increased safer behaviours among brothel-based female sex workers (FSWs) and improved the availability of STI services in Serey Gath.

Sex work is illegal in Pakistan, yet it is practiced in all major cities – either overtly under the cover of dancing, singing or covertly in hotels and guesthouses under the guise of companionship. Limited available research indicates that HIV prevalence among high-risk populations such as FSWs and long-distance truck drivers is 1-2% – considerably higher than the official national prevalence of 0.1%.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic challenges us to learn from the tragic experiences of other nations. Implementing innovative, collaborative, efficient programs can help prevent HIV from becoming established among vulnerable groups and spreading to general populations. HIV/AIDS presents a potentially explosive public health danger in Pakistan today – but we still have time to take action.



## Greenstar's HIV/STI Prevention Strategy

To reach and empower those at high risk of contracting HIV/STI, our Serey Gath program focuses on service delivery and peer outreach. These methods strengthen the credibility of field workers, spur interpersonal communications (IPC), and enable healthier behaviours.

### Greenstar's core strengths in the battle against HIV/AIDS include:

- STI training and service delivery in the private sector
- Peer outreach among FSWs and truckers
- Communication campaigns for behaviour change
- Social marketing condoms and pre-packaged STI treatment kits
- National infrastructure designed for rapid scale-up

We have a five-year history of advocacy and health delivery among truck drivers and associated populations, FSWs, and internal migrants in Pakistan. As partner to the NACP, Greenstar contributes to the National Strategic Framework for HIV/AIDS. We also draw on our close partnership with Population Services International, known worldwide for effective HIV/AIDS prevention.

## From Relevant Research to Project Design

Detailed, in-depth qualitative and quantitative research was conducted among the target populations at Serey Gath. These surveys answered fundamental questions: Was there still time to prevent HIV/STI infections? Were people aware of these health issues? Did they know the basic facts? See themselves at risk? Change their behaviour accordingly? Have other pressing health needs?

Based on these findings, we designed an IPC campaign to:

- Increase knowledge of HIV/STI prevention, products, and services
- Improve access to quality HIV/STI-prevention products and services
- Create informed demand for these
- Enhance the environment for sustainable HIV/STI programs



In collaboration with the Sindh AIDS Control Programme (SACP), Greenstar also conducted a baseline sero-surveillance study in December 2003. Peer workers did pre-test counseling and the 158 participants consented to blood samples. The major findings — 0% HIV/AIDS, 1% Hepatitis-B, 6% Hepatitis-C, and 11% Syphilis cases identified — confirmed

## Building the Program through Partnerships

Establishing peer outreach networks was facilitated by our NGO partners in Hyderabad, the Sindh Development Society and the Sindh Agricultural and Forestry Workers Coordinating Organization. Aahung, our NGO partner in Karachi, developed and designed the training curriculum, while building training capacity in Hyderabad.

### Enlisting Female Sex Workers to Reach their Peers



Six FSWs from the brothels of Serey Gath were hired as peer outreach workers. They were trained in interpersonal communications regarding HIV and other STIs, and delivered these health messages to their peers.

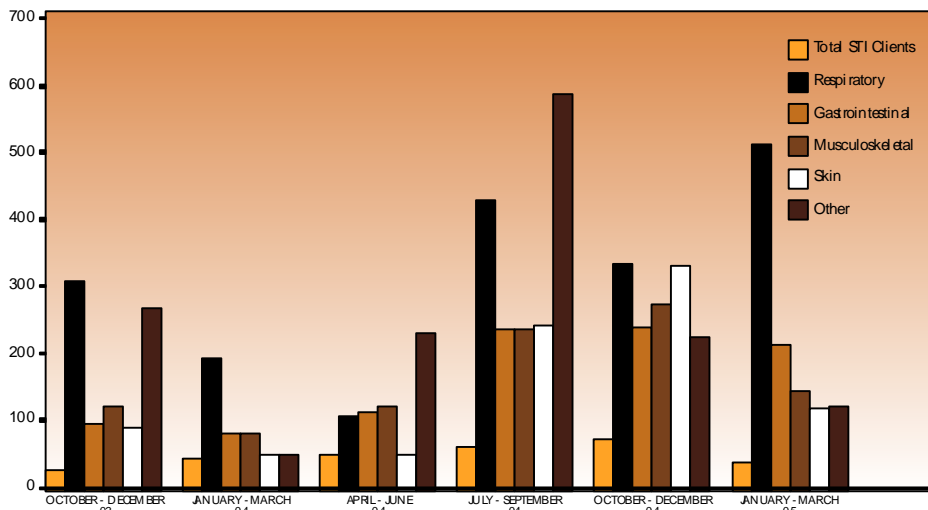
“It’s not easy... teaching them the art of negotiating condom use with their clients or convincing them that it is alright to go to the doctor for STI’s” - explained peer worker Janat.

“But it gets easier with time.”

- added colleague Lilly with newfound confidence.

## Establishing a Clinic in the Community

Deterred by police harassment, FSWs and their families once relied solely on traditional birth attendants for health assistance. Greenstar's clinic *Naya Aghaaz Sehat Markaz* (New Start Health Centre) was established in Serey Gath to provide easy access to affordable, quality care for general, reproductive, and sexual health needs. Over time, Naya Aghaaz emerged as a safe haven for discussing personal and community issues. In fact, the clinic has remained open since the project ended, with clients paying what they can afford.



Naya Aghaaz served 6407 clients between September 2003 and March 2005.

STI patient numbers steadily rose from seven in December 2003 to 28 in Dec 2004.

Client flows dropped following the program's official end in December 2004.



*"I knew about STI's but was very shy of letting anyone know, even a doctor. But after I met Dr. Ishrat, I knew I could talk to her about any problem I had. She was like a friend."*

- Mariam explained

## Building Self-esteem through Adult Literacy

When asked how our program could further improve their lives, FSWs asked for help with reading and writing. Our partners in Hyderabad responded by funding a six-month literacy class at Naya Aghaaz, completed by 25 FSWs and 13 children. This initiative went a long way toward building trust between the

## Supporting Safety through Condom Access

Condom access and negotiation were also vital components of this project. Condoms were made available to all traditional and non-traditional outlets; they are carried by all area retailers, 13 brothels, Naya Aghaaz, and peer workers. Condom demonstrations were a regular part of FSW group meetings.



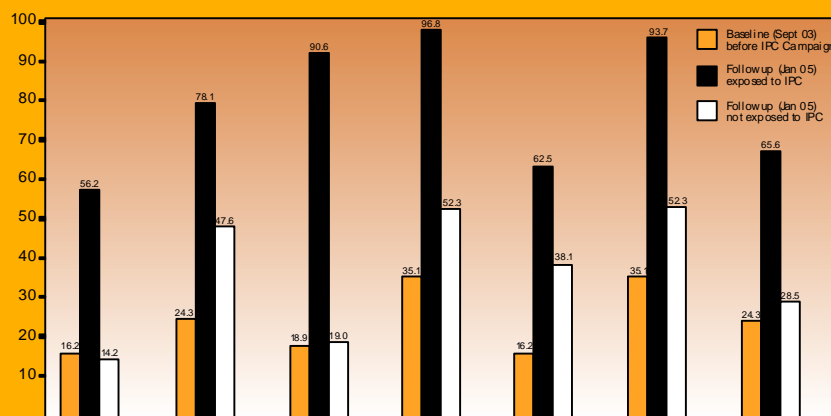
*“It was embarrassing to go to the corner shop or a pharmacy and ask for a condom. Plus the fear factor of harassment by the police. This is far more convenient.”*

- admitted Bano.

## Achieving Results: Our Health Impact in Serey Gath

Research results indicated that among FSWs exposed to our IPC campaigns, risk perception of contracting HIV/STI had increased dramatically by December 2004. Awareness of where to receive STI services and condoms had also grown. Most impressively, **FSWs reached by our peer educators were more than three times more likely to have used a condom during their last sexual act.** Moreover, FSWs who were not directly exposed to IPC were also more likely to adopt positive behaviours, probably due to the “halo effect” of positive changes in their environment.

### SEREY GATH EVALUATION



- Significance level:  $P < .05$ . Proportions adjusted for age, marital status, education, and SES.
- Includes all respondents who reported profession as sex worker/show biz/singer dancer.
- Although 40% of FSWs reported they were not exposed to IPC, only four inadvertently were not contacted; the other 17 did participate in IPC activities but did not recognize them as such.
- For more information, see Greenstar Serey



“I now know the importance of safe sex. I insist that my clients use a condom. When some resist I counsel them for a while... of course there are some stubborn ones... but you have to lay the rules.”

- Zuleka.





## Lessons Learned

### ● Involve the Target Audience

Street performance is an effective tool in our HIV interventions with truckers, but we did not confirm it would motivate healthier behaviour among FSWs, nor did we include them in its development. The performance turned out to be ineffective. However, our inclusion of FSWs in site selection, peer educator recruitment, and outreach strategy development was successful and helped build trust.

### ● Establish Trust within the Community

Winning the confidence of this long-marginalized group was difficult but essential. Over time and with involvement, the FSWs became convinced of the project's intentions and benefits, including the value of risking cash for condom negotiation.

### ● Coordinate with Gatekeepers and Government

Entering this carefully guarded community was made possible by close collaboration with local police, Hindu and Muslim religious leaders, and the district *Nazim* (Mayor), as well as pimps, madams, and brothel owners. Local Ministry of Health officials were equally essential partners, with the SACP Manager and



# Moving Forward

Serey Gath is a small but noteworthy example of how HIV/STI transmission can be minimized within a crucial target population. Breaking the silence surrounding HIV/AIDS has commenced; but we have only begun to change life-or-death behaviours. Through HIV/STI training and service delivery, peer outreach and targeted communications, condoms and STI treatment kits, and our national infrastructure, Greenstar can make a significant contribution to HIV prevention in Pakistan.

**For more information on this program and how you can help, please contact:**

Dr. Haris Ahmed at [harisahmed@greenstar.org.pk](mailto:harisahmed@greenstar.org.pk) Greenstar Social Marketing Pakistan  
(Guarantee) Limited, 21-C, Zamzama Commercial Lane No.5, Phase-V,  
D.H.A, Karachi 75600. Tel: (021) 5838841-46, 5376081-86. Fax: (021) 5867891.



**greenstar**  
Social Marketing