

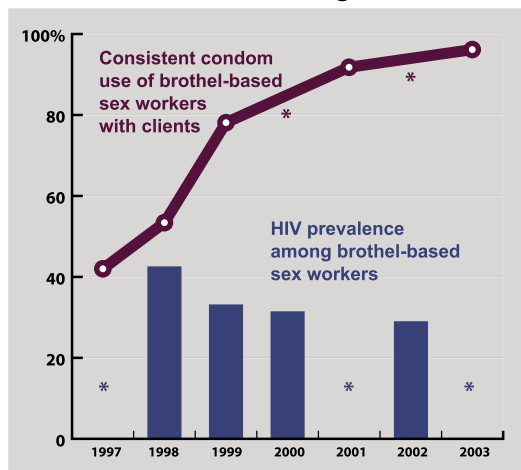


# Declining HIV Gives Hope in Cambodia

*Targeted Condom Promotion Credited for Fall in Prevalence*

Cambodia is one of the rare countries where HIV/AIDS prevention efforts clearly have led to a decline in HIV prevalence among both high risk groups and the general population. The government's policy of 100% condom use in commercial sex establishments is widely credited, and PSI is the leading non-governmental organization (NGO) educating commercial sex workers (CSWs) and providing them access to affordable, high quality condoms.

## In Cambodia, Trends in Condom Use and HIV Prevalence among Sex Workers



\* Indicates that no data is available for that year.

HIV prevalence in Cambodia, while still the highest in Asia, has dropped among the general population from 3.3% in 1998 to 2.6% in 2002, and among “direct” (brothel-based) CSWs from 42.6% in 1998 to 28.8% in 2002.<sup>1</sup> Sexually-transmitted infections are also on the decline.

“Prostitution is no longer the major driving force of the AIDS epidemic in Cambodia because of widespread condom use,” the World Health Organization (WHO) announced in August 2003.<sup>2</sup> WHO said the sex industry accounted for only 21% of new HIV infections in Cambodia in 2002, down from 80-90%.

The WHO has lauded the “remarkable turnaround” of the AIDS epidemic in Cambodia. “This is not the end of the HIV epidemic in Cambodia but it shows that a sound epidemiologically-based prevention strategy can work,” said Shigeru Omi, WHO Western Pacific director. Omi noted that the reversal was the result of condom promotion programs in the sex industry.

The UNAIDS 2003 AIDS Epidemic Update confirmed the trend when it reported that “seroprevalence appears to have dropped significantly among brothel-based sex workers . . . and among urban police, largely due to the vigorous condom promotion programme supported by the government and nongovernmental organizations. Cambodia’s Ministry of Health recently estimated that the country would have seen three times as many HIV infections had it not mounted this response.”<sup>3</sup>

Cambodia learned from the experience of Thailand, where the government instituted a 100% condom use program in sex establishments in 1989, resulting in a dramatic fall of HIV prevalence. Inspired, Cambodia adopted the 100% condom use policy in brothels in 1998. HIV prevalence began declining the following year.

PSI has been in the forefront of the fight against HIV/AIDS in Cambodia with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) since 1994 and, more

**PROFITH**  
SOCIAL MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS FOR HEALTH

**Population Services International**  
1120 19th St., NW  
Suite 600  
Washington, DC 20036 USA  
Phone: (202) 785-0072  
Email: [info@psi.org](mailto:info@psi.org)  
[www.psi.org](http://www.psi.org)

**PSI/Europe**  
Douglas House 1st Floor  
16-18 Douglas Street  
London SW1P 4PB, UK  
Phone: +44 (0)20-7834-3400  
Email: [info@psieurope.org.uk](mailto:info@psieurope.org.uk)

**PSI/Cambodia**  
No. 29, 334 Street  
Boeung Keng Kang 1  
Khan Chamcar Mon  
Phnom Penh, Cambodia  
Phone: 011-855-23-218-846  
Email: [generalinfo@psi.org.kh](mailto:generalinfo@psi.org.kh)

<sup>1</sup> HIV Sero-Surveillance Survey, National Center for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and STDs.

<sup>2</sup> “AIDS Threat From Prostitution Drops in Thailand and Cambodia,” World Health Organization press release, August 15, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> “AIDS Epidemic Update,” December 2003, UNAIDS.

recently, the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID). PSI/Cambodia's highly targeted social marketing program has popularized *Number One* male condoms in commercial sex establishments to such an extent that a 2002 distribution study found that Number One was available in 97% of all brothels in both urban and rural areas. PSI/Cambodia has the fourth highest condom sales per capita of any PSI social marketing project in the world.

From 1997 to 2003, consistent condom use increased significantly among important high risk groups. In "sweetheart relationships<sup>4</sup>," consistent condom use by policemen has increased from 11.4% in 1997 to 41.2% in 2003<sup>5</sup>. In commercial sex relationships, consistent condom use has increased from 43.3% to 86.9% among the military, from 65.6% to 94.2% among policemen and from 42% to 96% among female brothel-based sex workers, the latter very close to achieving the ambitious goal of 100% condom use.

In October 2003, PSI launched the *care* female condom in two areas of the country to give CSWs a safe alternative when clients refuse to wear male condoms. Although it is too early to make any conclusions about the impact of this female-controlled method in Cambodia, the initial response has been encouraging.

But condom use outside of brothels remains low, especially among couples in "sweetheart" and married relationships. HIV sentinel surveillance data demonstrate that transmission from husband to wife has increased dramatically, accounting for 25% of new infections in 1995 and now representing the largest vector of transmission. In response to this changing face of the AIDS epidemic, PSI/Cambodia launched *OK Condom*, a second male condom brand, in February 2004 to attract new condom users who are at risk of HIV. Less than 20% of sexually active men and women have ever used a condom, representing an enormous unmet need.

Some say that distinct strategies should be developed for the victims of forced prostitution and sex trafficking, and voluntary sex workers. In reality, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between the different types of CSWs. Despite these problems, however, PSI increasingly recognizes the importance of addressing the different realities of direct and indirect CSWs. In both Cambodia and Thailand, for example, PSI has developed strategies to reach the more elusive indirect CSWs. PSI/Cambodia has just piloted a project in

Phnom Penh aimed at disseminating information and condoms in beer gardens, karaoke bars and massage parlors. PSI/Thailand has initiated outreach to girls living in dormitories on industrial estates and working in entertainment venues in northern Thailand.

In addition to condom social marketing, PSI/Cambodia implements innovative behavior change campaigns designed to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and encourage safer sexual behavior. In 2003, it launched a 12-episode television soap opera loosely translated as "Punishment of Love" with the objective of stimulating discussion of HIV/AIDS among relatives and friends, improving personal risk assessment skills, encouraging care and compassion for people living with HIV/AIDS and promoting social acceptance of consistent condom use. An abstract on the results of the Media Impact Survey pertaining to this soap opera was accepted for an oral presentation at the International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, Thailand in July 2004.

The campaign elicited praise by King Norodom Sihanouk and Prime Minister Hun Sen. In giving his royal blessing to the campaign, King Sihanouk wrote: "In expressing my admiration to PSI/Cambodia for its many achievements extremely beneficial to the health of the Cambodian people, I would like to express my deep gratitude to its members and to present my warmest congratulations and fervent wishes for the continued success of their noble endeavor."<sup>6</sup>

The success of the government and NGOs such as PSI does not mark the end of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Cambodia, but it does indicate that well-targeted social marketing efforts, including the strategic promotion of condoms, undertaken in close collaboration with the government and other NGOs, can have a significant impact on the epidemic. Condom social marketing efforts — like this one in Cambodia — must be scaled up to reach high risk groups in low prevalence countries where HIV is concentrated, and to reach both the general population and high risk groups in high prevalence countries where everyone is at risk.

<sup>4</sup> "Sweetheart relationships" in Cambodia are defined as non-commercial, non-marital sexual relationships that possess a certain degree of affection and trust from at least one partner. The factors influencing financial support, material exchange and condom use vary depending on the situation, the target group and the individual.

<sup>5</sup> Behavior Surveillance Survey Trends 1997-2003, National Center for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and STDs, March 24, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Personal letter from His Royal Highness Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia, to Barry Whittle, PSI Country Representative, dated May 25, 2003.

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#### PSI's Core Values:

Bottom Line Health Impact • Private Sector Speed and Efficiency •  
Decentralization, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship • Long-term Commitment to the People We Serve