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Facts about Malaysia's male sex workers

KUALA LUMPUR: Most of the public is aware of female sex workers and their unrecognised trade in Malaysia. However, how many know of the more elusive male sex workers?

Only those who are acquainted with these people can reveal details of their background and their clandestine activities. One such person is a transvestite called 'Atuk'.

Atuk, whose real name is Roslan Hamzah, 52, had come across these people when he was plying his own trade in the notorious Lorong Haji Taib. He now works for an outreach programme to help people like himself and male sex workers.

Atuk is HIV positive but has renounced destructive habits, such as taking drugs and renting out his body for sex.

What makes one end up as a male sex worker? Travails of life and drug abuse are among the chief reasons cited by men who disregard their ego, dignity, and religious beliefs and end up selling their bodies to those who want to satisfy their lust.

Some may have applied for jobs several times and failed to secure one. Even those who could obtain work could hardly make ends meet, especially when living in Kuala Lumpur. So these people, too, become vulnerable and many ended up as male sex workers to

supplement their income.

On the scale of earnings, Atuk had this to say: "On the average, if you are handsome, have an attractive physique, still young, you can earn between two to three hundred ringgit per day with up to three customers."

Asked about their ages, Atuk said there were some sex workers as young as 14 and others as old as 30.

"They cannot exceed 30 years of age and they have to be real men, never mind if they are married," notes Atuk.

According to Atuk, most sex workers entertain guests after taking drugs or liquor.

"Out of 50 people, I can say 48 will entertain customers this way," said Atuk.

Normally, male sex workers take syabu (ice) and heroin, or at least liquor.

Ice is the street name for methamphetamine, which is popular among addicts.

As described by Atuk, some join the trade because of the influence of friends, while a few ignorant ones, especially those who migrate from villages to towns looking for employment, also end up as sex workers.

Many have also told Atuk that they were in the trade for fun or to make quick money.

"This is one story that I have heard. When the boy reached Pudu Raya, he asked for directions from the wrong person, a male sex worker, who instead influenced the

boy to join the trade.

"They will say if you want an easy life, this is the way. If you have the looks...."

"Those who came from the villages want jobs but when they hear of opportunities like this to make easy money without having to work hard, only have to entertain gay men, mak nyah, or women, they may want to give a try.

"They are just ordinary men, like most with the instincts to get married and have a family....," noted Atuk.

Almost everyone wants to know who these male sex workers are. From his own experience and outreach work, Atuk noted that male sex workers were mostly Malays.

He also learned that some male sex workers around Kuala Lumpur come from as far as Sabah, Sarawak, Thailand, and China.

Atuk has also observed that many male sex workers in the city hail from Kelantan.

He recalled the unfortunate story of two brothers in the trade from Kelantan.

"The elder one was infected with HIV first, and the younger one contracted

HIV later, after both brothers shared the same needle to inject drugs," he said.

When Atuk first got to know them, the elder one was 15 and the younger one 14.

"That is the reality and worst, still I saw the elder one

changing girlfriends, though he was HIV positive," he added.

Asked about the number of male sex workers, Atuk said he knows about 100 of them in the city.

Atuk, himself, is worried about the fate of male sex workers and the impact of their activities on others.

"What is the implication for their partners, their customers, their parents, society? If they get married, what is the effect on their children?"

"Many of those that I met later were new faces, I don't know where they came from," he said. And what happened to those that Atuk used to know? Where are they now?

"What is worrying me is their state of health, something that most choose to ignore. This is among the issues that I often raise on discussions relating to HIV/AIDs," he added.

Atuk also said that he once encountered a male undergraduate who entered the sex trade to make money.

In another instance, Atuk had come across a married soldier who doubled as a sex worker to supplement his income. "He told me his salary was not enough," Atuk said.

While serving the PT Foundation, the largest community-based organization that provides outreach for HIV high risk

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groups in Kuala Lumpur, Atuk noted that his outreach work was aimed at male sex workers.

According to Atuk, he meets them and explains the dangers of their activities. He gives them advice on preventing the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (STD), including HIV/AIDS.

The male sex workers are provided with free condoms.

Atuk is quite critical of the fact that male sex workers are ignored and that not much effort is made to help them.

"I see their problem in the wider perspective. If he is HIV positive, what is the effect to his partner? If he is sharing needles and contracts Hepatitis C, what is the effect on his children, wife?

"We are aware that wives are increasingly contracting HIV from their husbands.

"In the context of HIV prevention, we can advise them to take precautions to protect themselves from STDs, including HIV.

"After taking our advice, and if they decide to turn a new leaf, that is really good, great," noted Atuk.

Atuk said that some male sex workers had a false notion that they were not at risk of contracting diseases.

"Moreover, some may have left the trade but may not know that they have contracted diseases," he said.

- Bernama