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HIV epidemic looming in the Philippines

HONG KONG: Low condom use, needle sharing and a rise in casual sex and prostitution may unleash an HIV epidemic in the Philippines, according to a new study.

The report, published in the *Journal of the International AIDS Society*, said young adults, gay and bisexual men, prostitutes, injecting drug users, overseas Filipino workers and sex partners of all these groups were vulnerable to contracting the virus.

"There is no guarantee that a large HIV epidemic will be avoided in the near future. Indeed, an expanding HIV epidemic is likely to be only a matter of time as the components for such an epidemic are already present in the Philippines," wrote Anna Farr and David Wilson at the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research at the University of New South Wales in Sydney.

Unlike other countries in the region,

the spread of HIV in the Philippines has been described as "low and slow" because of a disperse geography, relatively uncommon intravenous drug use, sexual conservatism and high male circumcision rates.

But the authors said an HIV epidemic was possible because of the presence of many conditions "for a large, increasing and generalised epidemic."

"These include: a low rate of condom use; unsafe practices among intravenous drug users; large migration rates; increasing trends in extramarital and premarital sex; a lack of education and common misconceptions about HIV/AIDS; and cultural factors that inhibit public discussion of issues of a sexual nature," they wrote.

The report also focused on the 7.5 million Filipinos working abroad in 170 countries.

"By participating in casual unprotected sex or other risky behaviour

while overseas in higher prevalence settings, overseas Filipino workers become a substantial source of new HIV cases in the Philippines upon their return home," they said.

Overseas Filipino workers make up 30 to 35% of all HIV cases reported in the country, the report said.

The Philippines has the lowest rate of condom use in Asia – just 20 to 30% among groups at risk of HIV infection such as sex workers, according to the report. "A common perception is that condoms are only for birth control and not for protection against HIV and other sexually-transmitted illnesses," the authors wrote.

"This perception is reinforced by the view that condoms are discouraged by the Roman Catholic Church, Government family planning programmes have policies against supplying condoms to unmarried people," they added. – Reuters