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A new approach to evaluating a peer education programme for sex workers

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● Introduction

Two years ago, a peer education programme was developed in Nepal to equip urban sex workers with the skills to help their fellow workers practise safer sex, to update their own knowledge on risks from unsafe sex and to provide a forum for sex workers to discuss imaginative approaches to safer sex beyond the condom. Initially 18 sex workers, all women, attended and this number has increased as the programme has developed. The women are keen to become peer educators because they are interested to learn about health issues and enjoy increased status among their peers because they give out condoms and assist other sex workers in the use of local services for sexually transmitted diseases.

While some of the sex workers who attended were able to read and write, the majority were illiterate or semi-literate. In the spirit of good participation, the workshop was adapted accordingly, using picture codes, symbols and stories to promote communication. However, one problem remained. How could we evaluate the success of the programme with regard to the desired objective of reducing risky sexual behaviour? Furthermore, how could the women evaluate their success as peer educators? Diaries were out of the question because of limited literacy, and besides, if discovered, they could be incriminating for women whose occupation was a secret from their loved ones. Verbal accounts were likely to be inaccurate and forgotten and women could not be expected to report to the programme on a daily or even weekly basis.

Mala

As a result, we developed an innovative and attractive alternative: the 'Mala' system. 'Mala' means necklace and is a popular accessory for all women. We decided to provide each participant with a set of different coloured beads, and during the workshop, and, in consultation with the group, allocated different colours to different activities relating to their role as peer educators as well as their own sexual practice. The activity relating to each colour is listed below.

- Red; asked a client to use a condom and he agreed.
- Green; accompanied a girl to the clinic.
- White; asked a client to use condoms and he refused.
- Yellow; gave a fellow worker condoms.
- Black; avoided intercourse, had safer sex.
- Blue; had sex without a condom.

The idea was that after each activity, women would thread the appropriate colour on to their mala. Each month the situation would be reviewed.

At the monthly review meetings, project outreach workers sit with the peer educators individually and look at their necklaces checking that the colours represent the agreed activities. Since the sex workers/peer educators themselves allocate the colours and activities, this has not proved too difficult. Results and queries are noted in the record book and subsequently discussed with all the peer educators together.



Figure 1. Diagram of a 'Mala'

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NOTES

This article was first published in *PLA Notes* 33 October 1998 as an extract. It is being included again with this special issue on Sexual and Reproductive Health as it offers an effective way of evaluating a sensitive area of work and it is hoped that those who may have missed this item previously will be able to learn from the authors' experiences.

- **Impact**

The Mala is a unique self-assessment tool which has helped women to monitor both their own activities as commercial sex workers as well as their role as peer educators. Because it is highly visual, patterns and trends are easy to identify. There has, for example been a marked increase in condom use among the peer educators and their peer sex workers over the monitoring period. However there are usually several blue beads where women have sex with regular clients and/or boyfriends and do not wish to use condoms. Non penetrative sex initially never occurred, although in the last 6 months it has appeared in two women's necklaces.

Monitoring of the system has been increased in the last 6 months and it has become clear that, with regular support and supervision, the Mala system can be an effective, attractive and enjoyable way of evaluating an otherwise difficult field of work. Not only can sex workers measure their own success and activities, but they also have an attractive accessory at the end which can be understood by no-one, other than their fellow peer educators and project supervisors.