

Battling Stigma and Discrimination through Legal Rights Education

By Dr Chris Walsh

A pioneering workshop on legal, sexual and human rights education for Chiang Mai's MSM, transgender and male sex worker (MSW) community was successfully held on 4-5 and 10-11 February in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The workshop was a result of collaboration between Mplus (a Thailand based organisation addressing the sexual health needs of the MSM community in Chiang Mai) Bridges Across Borders Southeast Asia BABSEA (an international grass roots human rights NGO) and The Open University. The project was funded by the Foundation for AIDS Research (amFAR) and it also brought together participants from other front-line organisations in the fight against HIV/AIDS and discrimination against MSM, including Violet Home and Rainbow Sky.

The unique international collaboration was formed to address the fact that new HIV/AIDS infections among men who have sex with men (MSM) have been increasing significantly in Chiang Mai. Additionally, Chiang Mai's diverse MSM community faces increased vulnerability due to stigma, violence and discrimination as a result of the 2nd Annual Gay Pride Parade being cancelled last year. Taken together, these factors could enhance the risk of HIV infection.

BABSEA presented an interactive workshop on a large number of topics ranging from HIV/AIDS and the law and access to health care to sexual violence, discrimination, sexual rights, criminal law and procedure and housing rights.

The workshop initiated the development of a training manual to provide Mplus+ outreach and prevention workers and volunteers with information about human, legal and sexual rights under Thai law. The idea is that this manual will be used to train new peer education outreach workers.

The manual has the potential to be used aims to by other organisations working directly with MSM, transgender and male sex workers and will provide information on how to access free legal counselling services and resources at the Chiang Mai University Legal Clinic.

MPlus+ views the production of the manual as strategic to reducing the stigma and discrimination associated with MSM and HIV/AIDS. It is anticipated that educating people about their rights will lead to improved access to health care and improved sexual health in their communities.

Dr Christopher Walsh, a Senior Lecturer at The Open University, believes that initiatives such as these workshops are crucial for Chiang Mai's MSM, transgender and male sex worker communities because it, "overcomes barriers that deny them access to resources and participation on social, economic, political and cultural relations".

The organisers anticipate that this will be the first of many initiatives for improving access to education and healthcare in Chiang Mai's MSM, transgender and male sex worker community through education about human, legal and sexual rights.