

# Risky Business Kiribati:

HIV prevention amongst women who board  
foreign fishing vessels to sell sex



Karen McMillan and Heather Worth

International HIV Research Group  
School of Public Health and Community Medicine  
The University of New South Wales.



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*Please contact Karen McMillan at [k.mcmillan@unsw.edu.au](mailto:k.mcmillan@unsw.edu.au) for any further information on the study and the report.*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Fishing and the maritime industry are central to everyday life and both the formal and informal economies of the Republic of Kiribati. In consideration of Kiribati's vulnerability to HIV, seafarers are always, understandably, a central concern. The issue of I-Kiribati women who board foreign fishing vessels for sex work is a matter that also regularly appears in documents and papers considering HIV prevention strategies for Kiribati. Although there has, to date, been no diagnoses of HIV from among this group, the position of such women as potential vectors of transmission of the virus into the general population of Kiribati tends to be given more prominence than their own specific vulnerabilities. Sex workers have long been blamed for HIV among seafarers in the Pacific. In 1998, one Pacific AIDS Alert article stated, without evidence, that: "there appears to be widespread HIV infection among the seafaring community throughout the Pacific and this is usually from young women working as casual sex workers"<sup>1</sup>

This report documents the findings of a qualitative investigation into the context of HIV vulnerability and risk for women who engage in sex work on board foreign boats. The research aims to inform HIV prevention strategies and programs for this group, and is based on fieldwork carried out between February and August 2010 in Tarawa, Kiribati. In-depth interview data were gathered from 25 young women in South Tarawa who talked about their lives with a specific focus on their experiences and sexual relationships with foreign seafarers on board fishing vessels.

The research contributes to a larger regional project investigating sex work, HIV prevention and transmission risk behaviour in the Pacific that is currently being undertaken by the International HIV Research Group of the University of New South Wales.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The Republic of Kiribati is a small Pacific nation comprised of the Gilbert, Line and Phoenix Island groups scattered along the equator. Kiribati has a youthful population and very limited resources. It has been classified by the United Nations as a least developed nation. At last census<sup>2</sup>, the median age was 20.7 years, with 37% of the population of Kiribati being 15 years of age or younger. The major island in the Gilbert group, Tarawa, contains the country's main port, the parliament, and is also the centre of the public service and business sector. Some 3,000 kilometres east of Tarawa, Kiritimati Island in the Line Islands group is the site of Kiribati's other major shipping port and the country's second major population centre.

South Tarawa has a population density 20 times that of the national average. In the port area of Betio over 10,000 people live on 1.7 square km<sup>3</sup>. The average household size is 7.5 persons, and nearly one-third of people live in households of 10 or more persons. Within these household groups it can be expected that only one or two members will have permanent full-time work<sup>4</sup>.

Relative poverty and deprivation are becoming more visible in Kiribati<sup>5</sup>. Only 14% of the population are wage-earners, and two-thirds of these are male<sup>6</sup>. Wage employment opportunities can absorb only one-quarter of the school leavers each year<sup>7</sup>, thus formal job prospects are limited, especially for girls. Young I-Kiribati must increasingly rely on the informal economy for access to cash<sup>8</sup>.

The maritime industry, and foreign fishing vessels in particular, are crucial to the economy of Kiribati. Wages and other remittances from I-Kiribati seamen and fishermen on overseas ships are major sources of income for local families. Earnings from Kiribati's Exclusive Economic Zone access fee and the licensing of foreign fishing vessels are central to the generation of government revenue. Large foreign 'factory' ships moor off the port of Betio for months at a time, and cash spent by foreign seafarers while on-shore also delivers substantial economic benefits to the district.

In a recent survey of youth aged from 15 to 24 years in Betio, Tarawa, 27% reported having participated in sex involving the exchange of cash or goods in the past year<sup>9</sup>. Procuring sex and managing a brothel are illegal activities in Kiribati, but there is no specific law against

sex work. Some local women are known to travel out to the foreign vessels to drink and have sex with crew members in exchange for money, fish and luxury items. The term *ainen matawa* has been coined locally as a label for the women who board foreign fishing vessels and engage in sex for money and goods with foreign seafarers. Once known as Korekorea – signalling the principal nationality of their clients<sup>10</sup> - this term was dropped from official usage, and consequently common parlance, in deference to Korean sensitivities. Numbers of *ainen matawa* appear to be on the increase in both the two major ports of Kiribati: South Tarawa and Kiritimati Island. In 2003 the number of women involved on South Tarawa was estimated to be between 30 and 50<sup>11</sup>, and is currently estimated at around 80<sup>12</sup>. Population growth has been extremely rapid in Kiritimati Island and numbers of *ainen matawa* are currently estimated to be about 50.

HIV was first diagnosed in Kiribati in 1991. To December 2009, 52 cases of HIV had been reported in Kiribati, including 23 AIDS-related deaths<sup>13</sup>. Thirty-three of the diagnosed HIV cases were male and nineteen were female<sup>14</sup>, and many of the early HIV infections in Kiribati occurred among seafarers and their wives. Internationally, seafarers are considered to be an at-risk group for HIV due to their mobility and to long periods of separation from home and family which has been associated with the buying of sex. Where condoms are not used during paid sex, sex work has also been associated with elevated HIV transmission risk as sex work often involves multiple concurrent sexual partners. Surveys of I-Kiribati seafarers in 2005

and in 2008 detected no new cases of HIV<sup>16,17</sup>; however, almost half of the seafarers surveyed reported having paid money for sex in the previous 12 months<sup>18</sup>. Rates of condom use (at last sexual encounter) were lower when seafarers had exchanged goods or favours for sex (48%), than when money was paid for sex (61%)<sup>19</sup>.

On the basis of the associations of both seafarers and sex worker groups with an elevated risk of exposure to HIV, there is an ongoing concern in Kiribati about HIV transmission risk for *ainen matawa* who have sex with foreign seafarers. A 2006 investigation into STI and HIV prevalence in women boarding foreign fishing vessels found no HIV among *ainen matawa*; however, rates of other STIs were very high, with 58% of the participants surveyed having one or more STI<sup>20</sup>. Research by Tebuka Toatu identified the major factors associated with women boarding foreign fishing vessels as being: limited education, lack of employment opportunities and access to alcohol<sup>21</sup>. The same study found that the women had a good awareness of HIV and condoms but that condom use was intermittent only<sup>22</sup>.

### 3. AINEN MATAWA AND HIV PREVENTION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

In February 2010, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 25 women who had had sex for money and goods with a crew member of a foreign fishing vessel in the past 12 months. All of the interviewees self-identified as *ainen matawa*.

The interviews were designed to investigate the circumstances and context of local sex work in Tarawa, focusing on the commerce between local women and crew members of foreign fishing vessels. The study aimed to further an understanding of factors impacting on vulnerability to HIV transmission and condom use behaviours in particular, among this group. The research also sought to understand the wider context of the young women's relationships with their own I-Kiribati community and with foreign seafarers.

This research was funded by AusAID through a targeted HIV social research grant to the International HIV Research Group (IHRG) of the University of New South Wales, Australia. The research was conducted in partnership with the Pacific STI and HIV Research Centre (PSHRC) of the Fiji School of Medicine (FSM), and supported by KANGO with the assistance of young women known locally as *ainen matawa* in Tarawa.

This report is based on fieldwork data collected through key informant consultations, in-depth interviews and archival searches undertaken in Tarawa during 2010. The report is aimed at policy and program developers, service providers, researchers, and civil society and community organisations along with other individuals and groups who have an interest in HIV prevention in Kiribati.

#### • Methodology

In order for policy and interventions aimed at HIV transmission risk reduction targeting *ainen matawa* to be effective, the everyday realities and circumstances of this group must be adequately understood and HIV prevention measures must be acceptable and appropriate to the women involved. A face-to-face semi-structured interview method was employed in order to allow the participants to talk about their lives and relationships with foreign seafarers, and to facilitate an understanding of condom use in particular in the context of these relationships.

A literature and archival search documented past surveys of women who board foreign fishing vessels and the most recent data on the Kiribati population and economic context. HIV and STI prevention service providers in Kiribati and current peer educators were also consulted as key informants. These key informants provided background information on the HIV prevention programs and services currently provided, demand for those services, and program delivery and recruitment specifically targeting *ainen matawa*.

Site visits were made to Betio bars and seafarers clubs, and to the port area. Recruitment was seeded by peer educators, and invitations were extended to women, and any men, known to have been spending nights on board foreign fishing vessels and who were currently on shore. All interview participants self-identified as *ainen matawa* and had boarded a foreign fishing vessel for sex in the past year. Male and transgender were also eligible for inclusion in the study. There is no formal institutional process in Kiribati for ensuring ethical standards, so the proposal for this research was evaluated and approval obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New South Wales.

Participation was completely voluntary. Information on the study was delivered to participants verbally and a signed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interview. Participation was limited to those over 16 years of age.

Interviews enquired into:

- Personal background and history of sex work and sexual transactions with seafarers
- Economic and other functions of the relationships
- Descriptions of types of sexual exchange and the conditions under which this takes place, including an account of the wider context of risks and consequences

- Condom access and use, including negotiation with seafarers
- Access and use of sexual health and treatment services.

Interviews were conducted in I-Kiribati and translation was undertaken by the interviewers at the time of transcription. After preliminary analysis, meetings were held with groups of *ainen matawa* for feedback and validation of the findings. This also provided an opportunity to clarify any ambiguities or uncertainties in the data.

- **Interview participants**

The final interviewees were all female, and all lived in South Tarawa. Those who were currently boarding boats were single, or separated from husbands, and nearly all lived apart from family. The youngest was 16 and the oldest was 28. The participants informed us that the women who board fishing boats are generally aged between 18 and 25. However, some girls as young as 14 have been known to board.

Twenty-five interviews were completed, although twenty-six were undertaken. One feminine young man who was known to spend time on board foreign vessels had his interview discontinued as he stated during interview that he did not have sex with the seafarers. Most interviews were recorded by audio-tape. Some were hand-written due to the participant's reluctance to be audio-taped. All completed interviews were with young women.



## 4. RESULTS

**Ainen matawa constitute a small community.** The women who board foreign vessels said that they know each other and are aware of who stays on board the boats, as they regularly socialise together and move around on the vessels. Some *ainen matawa* also share accommodation on shore. This is a very practical arrangement as the women may spend weeks, and even months, at a time on a boat where they have a seafarer partner. These shared arrangements offer an opportunity for efficient delivery of condoms and HIV/STI prevention education and information.

*We enjoy staying on the boat doing nothing. We sleep, wake up and eat. We move around on the boat visiting our girlfriends. We have no problems with our partners and the rest of the crew. We seem to know each other very well and usually tease each other. We are given money from our partners when they get their pay, if they don't get paid we don't receive any.*

(Louise)

**The label 'ainen matawa' is a dominant identity for women who board foreign vessels.** All study participants self-identified as *ainen matawa*. There is little privacy in the social world of Tarawa and the foreign seafarers on shore. The participants also pointed out that other local people travel out to the foreign boats to pick up fish and for informal trade, and in this way information about which local women are staying on board reaches shore. The young women also noted that their own style of dress made them easily identifiable as *ainen matawa* to other I-Kiribati (although appearing modest enough to the researcher's western eye). Becoming identified as an *ainen matawa* tends to result in women who board the boats being marginalised from family and friends.

The participants' narratives indicate that identification as an *ainen matawa* renders the women vulnerable to violence from family, sexual abuse from local men and local boatmen, and sometimes deters them from laying complaints with the police when these assaults occur. The young women interviewed in this study typically told of leaving home once their family knew that they had spent time on a foreign vessel. This knowledge

variously led to beatings, being tied up, and in at least one case the onset of sexual abuse by a stepfather.

### **Women who are identified as *ainen matawa* suffer from marginalisation and discrimination.**

Participants typically said that the abandonment and rejection by family and former friends did not bother them. However, the participants also noted that the term '*ainen matawa*' was not one they particularly liked to hear as it is usually 'said in a bad way' and used in a derogatory manner. Furthermore, numerous participants spoke of how people look down on *ainen matawa*, and described young women known to board the boats to sell sex as putting on a brave face and 'laughing loud' in order to preserve some pride and to 'cover the hurt' felt at being spurned and denigrated. Many of the participants' own efforts at bravado were belied in their comments about the hidden pain and shame experienced by others.

A number of young women asked specifically to participate in the interviews so that they could speak about particular relationship experiences. These stories were often poignant, expressing a heavy burden of shame and (often unwarranted) feelings of guilt. All participants were reluctant to say much about their families, and the topic of what family thought was clearly a painful subject for most.

*When I got home I was beaten by my brothers. My father told me that if this is what I want to do with my life then it's better that they leave me alone, and not to blame them if anything happens to me. I have school friends who discriminate against me but this doesn't affect me because I enjoy what I'm doing.*

(Jill)

**Ainen matawa are at risk from non-consensual sex, especially gang-rape and other violence.** According to participants' descriptions of their daily lives, drinking alcohol is a dominant feature in the life of *ainen matawa* and in their relationships with sexual partners. Most participants described boarding a foreign vessel

for the first time after drinking and socialising with a crew member in a Betio bar or club. Many interviewees also alluded to the fact that becoming heavily intoxicated at onshore bars and nightclubs renders women vulnerable to sexual abuse and gang-rape by locals, and also to poor decisions about which boats are safe to board.

The interviewees told of situations where local boatmen demanded sex from *ainen matawa* and abandoned them on small islets if they refused. Others also told of policemen requesting sex in return for ignoring their presence on the boats or releasing them from custody.

*One time all the girls on board the boat were taken ashore by the Police... We pleaded with them to leave us on the boat. They told us that the only way to stay on board is to have sex with them. We turned them down and went with the rest of the girls to jail. We spent a day in jail and were released the next day.*  
(Joanne)

*A police boat came to the ships and took all the girls to shore, putting us behind bars. While we were in prison a Police Officer came around to the cell and got one of the girls out. When she came back she told us that we are free now and we can go home. I learned from her that he told her that the only means of getting us out was to have sex with him, which she did.*  
(Maree)

**The norms of male sexual behaviour among the different nationalities of seafarers are distinct, and risk varies accordingly.** According to the women interviewed in this study, certain nationalities manning foreign vessels are also notorious for gang-rape women who board their vessels. The women spoke about the differences between Taiwanese seafarers and

Korean seafarers in particular. Korean seafarers are popular with *ainen matawa* and are preferred over local partners as well as over seamen of other nationalities. Interviewees explained that because the Koreans choose to stay with one woman and also because they are known to look after their sexual partners, treating them kindly and with generosity. In contrast to this, the Taiwanese seafarers are said to want a different sexual partner each time and have gained a reputation for treating local women exploitatively and with disregard for their welfare. Participants said that many young women who have ventured onto a Taiwanese boat have been subjected to gang-rapes. Local men were also characterised by participants as being less caring, more aggressive and controlling, and more sexually exploitative than the Korean seafarers.

Life on board a Korean vessel is experienced by *ainen matawa* as being safer than life on-shore. Young women who board vessels said that they chose to stay on board for extended periods. Interviewees explained that shipboard life on these vessels offers not only numerous luxury consumables such as alcohol and food, but also a security that is not available on shore to *ainen matawa*. The young women spoke of the manner in which their Korean partners cooked and provided for them and also about the way in which these regular sexual partners protected them when they became intoxicated.

*I felt safe on the boat compared with drinking on land where when you are drunk and sleep somewhere for sure you will be gang-raped. On the boat when you are drunk and sleep in the galley or on deck, your partner will come and carry you to his room.*  
(Robyn)

**Ainen matawa do not necessarily engage in multiple concurrent sexual relationships.** *Ainen matawa* said that they generally stay with one client while on board a particular boat. Foreign fishing vessels may moor off Betio for up to three months. Participants told us that women who board the vessels often stay on board for as long as the vessel is moored, coming ashore only to visit bars and nightclubs. Some of the women interviewed profess to have only one partner

and to board a vessel only when this partner is in port. However, serial monogamy was the norm among the participants, and they would hook up with a new client as soon as possible after the previous one had set sail. Some interviewees said that they will take transport straight to another vessel when they can, avoiding coming ashore for as long as possible.

*The only way to maintain my relationship with my partner is to contact him. He gave me his phone number and he also asked me to remain faithful which I cannot do because as soon as his boat leaves the harbour, I board another boat. The reason why I can't fulfil his request is that I don't want to be bossed around and I enjoy being a free agent.*

(Karen)

**While the young women do not perceive these relationships to be permanent or exclusive, they are often ongoing.** *Ainen matawa* affectionately, and often laughingly, describe their foreign seafarer clients as 'boyfriends' and 'little husbands'. Many of these young women spoke about loving their Korean partners. According to the women in this study, three or four *ainen matawa* are known to have left with and married a foreign seafarer, but many more (around 30) babies have been born in Kiribati to foreign seafarers. Many of the young women explained that they know and follow the sailing schedules of their boyfriend's boats so they can reconnect with their various partners when they return to port.

*The difference between the Korean seafarers and the locals is that Korean seafarers are more kind, loving and caring. I cannot recall ever being mistreated or forced to have sex by them. We were like their wives.*

(Helen)

*I prefer the Korean seafarers to the local boys and the Taiwanese seafarers, because the Korean seafarer always does what we want to do, and gets the things that we want. The Taiwanese are very much like the locals. They always do gang-rape.*

(Nicola)

**Condom use considerations for *ainen matawa* and their partners will be akin to those for other wives and girlfriends of seafarers,** including local seafarers. According to the *ainen matawa*'s descriptions of their relationships, despite being predicated on the exchange of sex and goods, these relationships can be characterised as serial monogamy. This has ramifications for their condom use behaviours within those relationships. While a few of the peer educators professed to use condoms consistently unless very drunk, most participants said that consistent condom use occurs for the first week or two of the relationship only and then it ceases. Those women explained that condom use stopped because both partners 'trusted' one another. Once the relationship has become cemented in this way, condoms appear to be used predominantly for contraceptive purposes. Participants also said that the young seafarers often want to father babies with them and that a number of I-Kiribati women now have babies to Korean seafarers who send financial support.

*Most of the time I use condoms but at some stage I don't use them after I get to know my partner. I initiate condom use to prevent infections and also as a means of contraception. I learned about condoms from KANGO peer educators.*

(Lynn)

*I usually use condoms with partners but there are times when I don't use one with a partner that I love. Often my partner does not want to use condoms because he wants to have a baby with me.*

(Jennie)

**Peer services are key to the delivery of both male and female condoms.** While peer educators said that male condoms are generally requested, there is also a regular, albeit small, demand for female condoms too. Interviewees asserted that male condoms are also readily available on the boats, although sometimes they are said to run out. At present, two separate NGOs oversee coordinated outreach services which deliver condoms to bars and nightclubs in Betio, Tarawa on Friday and Saturday nights. While there is some necessary overlap in target groups, there is a good

degree of cooperation and coordination between the two services: the Kiribati Family Health Association (KFHA) based group aims at delivering services to young people more generally, while the KANGO group specifically targets *ainen matawa* and seafarers, and now includes up to eight *ainen matawa* as peer educators.

*We get our condom supply from peer sex workers who are involved in doing outreach. We also can collect our condom supply from bars on land. I initiate condom use with my partners and use contraception as an excuse. Sometimes if my partners are against condom use I wear a female condom.*

(Jane)

The number of *ainen matawa* involved in the peer education program has been steadily increasing over the past year. In order to communicate effectively with *ainen matawa*, it is crucial that educators are not only known to and trusted among the community of women who board foreign boats, they also need to be highly motivated and confident and open in speaking about sex, condom use and HIV. The involvement of young women who are themselves *ainen matawa* is critical. These young women often educate their partners as well as their peers.

*Ainen matawa* who have already become peer educators said they were motivated by a concern about HIV prevention for themselves and their friends, and also by a desire to gain skills and training.

*When I'm on a ship for the first time, I usually initiate the negotiation of condom use with my partner. He will agree. Once I noticed that my partner usually wore two condoms when we had sex. He said that he had to wear two condoms at a time to be safe. Every time we had sex the condoms broke and I had to explain to him the reason why, based on my knowledge gained from Peer Education.*

(Maree)

**The relationship of *ainen matawa* and seafarers generally falls under the rubric of 'sex work'; however, this disguises many particularities of the *ainen matawa's* sexual relationships** that will be relevant to HIV prevention efforts. *Ainen matawa* are considered to be sex workers by the organisations that provide condoms and HIV prevention services to them. It should be noted, however, that a hard distinction between the categories of casual transactional sex and sex work in an informal economy is difficult to sustain.

As described by the participants, the sexual relationships between *ainen matawa* and foreign seafarers are consciously transactional and economic. The young women who go out to the boats to stay with seafarers asserted that they expect to be supplied with alcohol and food whenever they want it while on board and that they also generally expect to leave the boat with cash, fish and/or other goods. However, they pointed out that their expectations of payment vary according to the position and resources of their partner. Participants said that most *ainen matawa* do little or no sex work with locals, and that they seldom have regular local boyfriends or husbands at the same time as they are boarding boats. Sex workers are assumed to have multiple concurrent sexual partners, yet if these young women are protected adequately from gang-rape and sexual violence, *ainen matawa* will typically engage in sequential rather than multiple concurrent sexual relationships.

**There are also sex workers operating from around the port who remain undercover because they do not board vessels.** Participants described a class of sex workers who also drink at the bars and frequent port venues, and who exchange sex for money, alcohol and other goods, but do not leave the shore. According to study participants, these land-based sex workers typically deny that they engage in any sexual activities, and look down on the *ainen matawa*.

**Some interviews raised problems with access to and use of sexual health and STI/HIV testing services.** A few participants did not know what STI or HIV testing services were available and where they could be accessed. The very high rates of STIs found among *ainen matawa* in recent studies would also indicate some inadequacies in the utilisation of STI testing and treatment services. Some of the interviewees admitted to a reluctance to expose

themselves to censure by testing, and a disinclination to disclose pertinent details when they do use sexual health services as they fear lack of confidentiality. These same concerns about lack of confidentiality and exposure to censure deterred some from using STI and HIV testing services.

*I'm afraid that people there might recognise me and tell the others in the clinic that I'm a sex worker.*

(Donna)

### • Limitations of the study

No interviews were conducted on Kiritimati Island where it is known that local women also board foreign fishing vessels in port. Little is known about the situation of *ainen matawa* on Kiritimati Island and the circumstances of their relationships and sexual commerce, although at the time of writing, a behavioural survey was being conducted by the Kiribati Ministry of Health. It should not simply be assumed that core issues will be the same in Tarawa and in Kiritimati. One difference that has been noted by key informants is that the women who regularly board foreign vessels in Kiritimati Island live with their families, while the young women who board the boats in Betio do not.

This study does not investigate sex work on land. The findings here suggest that research into sex work on land would involve a distinct group of women, and that issues and concerns would differ between the groups. It is evident that at least some *ainen matawa* engage in paid sex on shore and with locals; however, there is a greater reluctance to admit to this than to sex with foreign seafarers. Transactional sex and sex work that does not involve foreigners and travel on to boats is easier to keep hidden and to deny.

The experiences, concerns and HIV prevention needs of young males who stay on board foreign boats are not represented here. There is evidence of young men also boarding and sleeping on board foreign vessels. However, the social stigma, and potential danger, attached to identification for men who have sex with men is so great that it is unlikely any of these young men would openly admit to having sex with seafarers. The young men spoken with in the course of this research asserted that they provided companionship and entertainment only.

While the HIV awareness of the study participants was high, this may not be typical of all the young women who board foreign fishing vessels. As participants were recruited through peer educators, the young women who participated in the interviews were at least loosely connected to HIV peer education programs. Also participation in the study was voluntary and it is likely that those who agreed to be interviewed are among those more reconciled to, and open about, their lifestyle. Even so, there are many indications in the interviews that the impact of stigmatisation and shame is greater than these young women are generally ready to concede.

### • Conclusion

The sexual relationships and commerce between *ainen matawa* and their foreign seafarer clients differ from those that usually typify sex work in some important ways; for example, the women are generally not paid for each sexual encounter; even if short lived, the relationships are exclusive rather than concurrent; and the relationships are frequently characterised by bonds of emotional intimacy and trust.

Despite these qualities of intimacy, trust and temporary exclusivity, with respect to HIV and other STIs these relationships may simply generate greater vulnerabilities and risks compared to regular I-Kiribati wives and girlfriends of seafarers. This is primarily because *ainen matawa* tend to have multiple sequential seafarer partners. Furthermore, their very identity as *ainen matawa* renders them vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse from certain other seafarers, and from local men, including the police. In addition, experiences of marginalisation and fear of discrimination and stigmatisation often deter *ainen matawa* from using HIV and STI testing and treatment services.

Beyond ensuring access to condoms and sexual health services, HIV prevention and risk reduction activities will need to be developed with the concerns and motivations of *ainen matawa* firmly in mind. For example, simple 'no glove, no love' messages and the usual client negotiation skills workshops developed for typical sex workers will have limited efficacy.

While the risk that *ainen matawa* pose to the rest of the I-Kiribati population as potential vectors of HIV appears

to be frequently overstated, their own risk of exposure to HIV from seafarer partners cannot be discounted. In particular, it will be important not to exacerbate their vulnerabilities by demonising these young women who are exploring limited options.

*Before I started going out to the boats, I used to have a local partner and he had a drinking problem. He was working but he often spent all his money on alcohol. Sometimes he would go to work and never come back home for 3 days - drinking. He'd come home and do nothing but sleep the whole day. There were times when he'd come home on pay day empty handed. We have separated.*

(Fran)

*Life on the boats is excellent - it's what we call paradise because drinks and food are free.*

(Heather)

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Areas for further research – Four general areas where there is a need for more information have been identified through this study. There is a need for: data from the seafarers themselves; data from Kiritimati Island; information about sex work on land and; a better understanding of the circumstances and concerns of men who have sex with men.

- **Research with seafarers:** Understanding the drivers and circumstances of risk behaviour for the I-Kiribati women who have sex on board foreign fishing vessels will provide only a partial grasp of key HIV prevention issues for this group. The attitudes and desires of the seafarers themselves will be central to the negotiation of condom use. In addition, shipboard sexual cultures appear to vary between nationalities. An evidenced understanding of factors underwriting, or impacting on, onboard cultures and norms of sexual behaviour that enhance and enable HIV transmission risk reduction, as well as those which are barriers, will ultimately be necessary to the formulation of effective HIV prevention interventions and programs.
- **Data from Kiritimati Island:** A need is indicated for qualitative research providing in-depth data on the situation of young women on Kiritimati Island who board fishing vessels and their consequent HIV and STI prevention needs. Furthermore, as there are currently no peer education programs on Kiritimati, it would be an effective and timely use of limited resources and expertise to scope and seed such a program at the same time as recruiting study participants. Kiritimati Island is undergoing rapid population growth, and this is certain to increase the need for HIV prevention programs and resources, and for the evidence on which to base these programs. In addition, there are currently plans being mooted by international bodies, to alleviate population pressures on Betio by assisting the relocation of people from South Tarawa to Kiritimati<sup>23</sup>. A sudden flooding of an already over-extended labour market - one in which young women are at a particular disadvantage – could be expected to result in an increase in the numbers of women who board foreign fishing vessels and engage in sexual commerce with foreign seafarers.
- **Other sex work:** Sex work does take place on land and there is a sex trade involving local clients as well

as foreign seafarers. Many women who engage in sex work in Tarawa never board a foreign fishing vessel. This land-based sex work is likely to involve a different group of women from those who were represented in this study. The concerns, circumstances and HIV needs as well as barriers to and facilitators of sexual health service and condom use, are likely to differ from those of women publicly identified as *ainen matawa*. No programs currently target this type of sex worker, and no behavioural or other data has been gathered on this group specifically.

- **There also is a need for data on sex between men:** While transgender and alternate sexualities are gaining visibility, men who have sex with men are very marginalised and stigmatised in Kiribati, and there is much denial and repression in both the public and private spheres. Anecdotal evidence of the vulnerability of very young men, as well as women, to rape and sexual predation when drunk in Betio bars indicates that sex between men does occur in the local community, even if it is hidden.

### Programmatic recommendations

Peer outreach programs for *ainen matawa* are central to HIV prevention and access to related services for this group. Current programs in South Tarawa involve a variety of young people who are effective at delivering condoms to bars and clubs around Betio. However, these groups should include more *ainen matawa*. Ideally, there would be enough *ainen matawa* involved to provide peer services on board vessels and through their shared domestic arrangements. Sustaining the involvement of *ainen matawa* will require incentives such as the provision of training and financial support. Continued stigmatisation and marginalisation of *ainen matawa* will be a strong disincentive to their involvement in peer programs, as such involvement is also likely to increase their profile and visibility among the wider community. The shared community created by living arrangements, both on board vessels and on shore, creates a real opportunity for HIV prevention activities.

Continuity of support for KANGO's peer education is very important. Personnel involved in the KANGO HIV and STI prevention project have built up a valuable level of trust among the community of women who board vessels, and these personnel have a vast

amount of hands-on experience in engaging with the *ainen matawa* community. Financial and technical support needs to be made available to expand and refine KANGO's current HIV/STI prevention activities, and to ensure that HIV/STI educational programs are conducted regularly. Access to clinical service providers and promotion of regular screening for STIs and HIV would be improved if it were promoted and organised through the *ainen matawa* networks fostered by KANGO - provided that organisations were supported and resourced to include liaison with sexual health service providers in their program of activities. This report also recommends that KANGO is supported to increase the pool of peer educators from among *ainen matawa*, and, further, that current peer educators who themselves go out to the boats are upskilled. A peer-based HIV education and condom distribution outreach program should also be extended to Kiritmati Island.

HIV prevention education and awareness programs specifically aimed at *ainen matawa*, need to be developed and implemented. This would require acknowledgment of the realities of these young women's lives and desires. One instance of this would be to enable the discussion of HIV prevention considerations in relation to pregnancy and conception. Another example would be the need for workshopping of condom negotiation skills with a specific focus on the negotiation of condom use with longer-term partners.

A need for psycho-social services is indicated for some *ainen matawa*. A belief in self-efficacy is important to effective condom negotiation and motivation to HIV prevention. Self-esteem and self-efficacy are undermined by experiences of marginalisation and by painful life experiences, and numerous young women interviewed expressed a damaging sense of their own complicity in these negative experiences. Training and skills acquisition works to improve self-efficacy and self-esteem. However, training should not be simply employment focused, as it needs to be openly acknowledged that resultant employment opportunities will be rare.

### Wider social implications

The sexual relationships and behaviours that are engaged in by young women who board foreign fishing vessels for sex and economic opportunities are both circumscribed and given impetus by the wider social and economic context of daily life in South Tarawa. Many of the choices and behaviours of *ainen matawa* need to be viewed through the lens of gender and economic realities in Kiribati. In the wider policy arena it will be important to engage with issues of poverty, gendered economic inequality, domestic violence and violence against women within Kiribati society.

There is a need to address sexual violence in particular. Issues of sexual violence render *ainen matawa* even more vulnerable than other groups of women because of marginalisation. A police liaison program would both encourage the report and prosecution of gang-rapes on land or on boats and further the integration and acceptance of these young women as valued members of local society. It is necessary to ensure that the police themselves do not engage in any abuses, sexual coercion or exploitation of *ainen matawa*.



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