Change Story 5:
Providing Health Services and Information to Migrants Who Use Drugs in Central Asia

Introduction
The intra-regional migration flow between the Russian Federation and Central Asia is one of the largest labour migration flows around the globe. AFEW International has been working with partners to raise awareness on the lack of access to health services of central Asian labour migrants, and the need for safe migration.

Problem
The Russian Federation is a primary destination for labour migrants from Central Asia. The process of irregular migration is paired with considerable health risks, as migrants face difficulties in accessing medical and social assistance. Social, economic and political factors in host countries and countries of origin put labour migrants at increased risk of HIV. Recent years have shown a growth of HIV among labour migrants from Tajikistan. Additionally, numerous studies show that migrants from Central Asia have very little knowledge of viral diseases, including STIs and HIV. This holds particularly true for people who use drugs (PWUD), who have limited access to specialised services.

The number of new HIV cases in Tajikistan among people with a history of international labour migration has increased from 12.3% in 2013 to 14.6% in 2017. In Tajikistan, 42% of PWUD have had experience with labour migration or have plans to migrate for the purpose of labour. During an initial meeting in 2016, IOM Tajikistan expressed the view that working with PWUD would be too difficult. Therefore, no data was collected about migrating PWUD and their needs, which prevented an adequate response.

Change
AFEW International has played a crucial role in convincing IOM Tajikistan that migrants who use drugs need specialised HIV services. In 2019, IOM Tajikistan has for the first time recognized the lack of specific services for migrating PWUD as a problem. As a direct result of the ongoing partnership between AFEW and IOM Tajikistan, there is now focused attention on key populations among migrants, and in particular the needs of migrants who use drugs.

Based on a needs assessment conducted by AFEW Tajikistan and AFEW Kyrgyzstan in 2017 indicating that migrating PWUD have unique needs when it comes to HIV and health, AFEW Kyrgyzstan developed information booklets particularly focused on migrants who use drugs. Since 2019, 6,000 booklets have been distributed amongst migrants and PWUD.

1 (UNFPA, 2018)
2 Presentation IOM Tajikistan, Session on migration during AFEW’s regional autumn school in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (30 October 2019)
4 “Findings from a needs assessment survey of labour migrants among people who use drugs in the pilot regions of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan”, AFEW 2017
5 Interview with Rukhsoshona Qurbonova, IOM Tajikistan (8 January 2020)
The booklet contains information on available health, HIV and harm reduction services to migrants in Russia, including contact details for Russian NGOs that provide these services. IOM Tajikistan and the governmental programs are now very open to distributing information materials, including the information booklets.

IOM Tajikistan has launched a joint project with AFEW International in which they will monitor and support health-seeking behaviour of migrating key populations, including PWUD. Outreach workers are collecting data to map the behaviour of migrant key populations to better understand and target these groups with services. IOM Tajikistan has now also developed their own information booklets for migrants who use drugs with information on legal and health services in Russia and Kazakhstan. The willingness to include HIV and referrals to harm reduction programmes shows a step forward towards decreased stigma and discrimination.

**ANALYSIS**

This is the first time that IOM Tajikistan is providing service delivery specifically for migrants who use drugs. The fact that IOM acknowledges the necessity to work with PWUD is essential for a sustainable approach to medical service delivery. IOM closely collaborates with the Tajik government, which further solidifies the service provision to migrants. This change has established cross-sectoral and cross-border cooperation between AFEW International, IOM Tajikistan, AFEW Kyrgyzstan, Russian service delivery NGOs and the relevant Tajik Ministries and AIDS Centres. The cross-border cooperation will serve as a referral system through which migrants can more easily receive medical and legal support. The established cooperation allows AFEW International to better target the right institutions to address the needs of services for migrants in Tajikistan.

**LOCKING AHEAD**

One of the recommendations regarding access to information for migrants who use drugs is to include all relevant information, including the information provided in the booklets and contact details of service providing NGOs, on the website of the local AIDS Centres. This ensures that information for migrants remains accessible, can be monitored and regularly updated, and is prevented from being lost if NGO websites become unavailable. Working with an UN-related organisation, such as IOM, significantly increases the chances for a sustainable approach to service delivery for migrants who use drugs. The operational research currently being conducted by AFEW International and IOM Tajikistan will also be used to better target migrants who use drugs with health services.

AFEW and Bridging the Gaps will measure results by analysing to what extent IOM Tajikistan is picking up these activities after the end of the project and manages to change policy on the international level. Relevant governmental officials will attend a regional event in Dushanbe in 2020 to advance a cross-sectoral and cross-border approach of KPs among migrants, with participation of Russian, Kyrgyz and Tajik government representatives as well as NGOs and health officials. There is also close cooperation with a UNDP-led, Global Fund-funded project on HIV and key populations, local authorities and the Tajik Ministries of Labour, Migration and Employment, and Health and Social protection. This cooperation further fosters a cross-sectoral and cross-border approach to promoting the needs of migrating PWUD.

**PERSONAL STORY**

Mehrdad is a 36 year old migrant from Central Asia. He has migrated to Russia several times to earn money for his family. Mehrdad uses drugs during his trips to Russia, but had little to no information on safe migration, HIV prevention and harm reduction. On one trip home, he received consultation and one of the booklets developed by AFEW Kyrgyzstan. He now feels more prepared to migrate and equipped with information to keep himself safe and healthy.

“For those who are migrating for the first time, this is very useful information: how to prepare for the trip, how to register, where to go if you encounter problems... It is important that you can get reliable information.”

– Mehrdad

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6 https://www.iom.int/news/iom-becomes-related-organization-united-nations