

# **Sexual Behaviour of Long Distance Truckers in India**

Arvind Pandey, S.K. Benara, R.M. Mishra, D. Sahu, Nandini Roy, U. Sengupta, Rajat Adhikary

## **Background**

India has one of the largest road networks with about 5 million truck drivers in the country and about half of them ply on long distance routes traversing across state and National Highways. The vulnerability of truckers and their helpers in the spread of HIV has been well documented. The apparent reason for the vulnerability is due to the work pattern that requires long separation of truckers from their home and their spouses and indulging in high-risk sexual behaviour. It is desirable to understand their sexual behaviour and the means being used for prevention in order to evolve any strategy to prevent them from such vulnerability. The present paper aims to describe the sexual behaviour of the long distance truck drivers in the country and the preventive measures taken by them to avoid STI/HIV.

## **Data and Methodology**

In collaboration with the India's National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) started Avahan programme in the 2004 reaching out to long-distance truck drivers (LDTDs) plying along the National Highways through Transport Corporation of India Foundation (TCIF), a social sector wing of a major cargo transport company, Transport Corporation of India. To assess the outcomes and impact of the interventions under the Avahan project, the Integrated Behavioral and Biological Assessment – National Highways (IBBA-NH) was conducted during June-September 2007 covering 4 selected extreme route corridors (North-East, North-South, North-West and South-East) of India as the baseline of the intervention programme. A long distance truck driver was defined as a trucker who took consignment from one place to destinations located along the national highways traversing more than 800 kilometers one-way before returning back to the place of origin.

There were seven transshipment locations selected across seven cities of India for collecting the data. A two-stage time-location cluster (TLC) sampling was used to randomly select about 500 long distance truck drivers from each route category. Pre-survey assessment exercises were undertaken for the sampling frame development. In the first stage of sample selection, the required number of time location clusters (TLCs) was selected and at the second stage, long distance trucks were selected. Respondents were the main drivers of selected long distance trucks. A total of 2066 main drivers were covered in the study. Behavioral and biological data were anonymous. Analysis of behavioural and biological data was carried out using the software "Statistical Package for Social Sciences" (SPSS).

## **Results**

On an average the LDTDs in the sample were 30 years old. Over four-fifth of the respondents (83-90%) were literate and three-fourths were currently married. Most of the respondents have been working as driver for last 6–8 years except in South-East where it

was around 10 years. The mean and median duration of time spent working as a helper or assistant driver ranged between 2-4 years for each of the four route corridors. They spend 10-12 days on one round trip, which includes time spent on driving to the destination, unloading and reloading the next consignment and driving back to place or origin. They spent 48–72 hours waiting at destination/ transshipment for the next consignment. Amongst the four routes, the busiest route was South-East as only 16% of LDTDs spend 3 days or more at destination compared to other routes (NW- 30%; NS-60%; NE-31%).

Data reveals that on each of the four routes, LDTDs were indulged in high-risk behaviour during past 12 months. The mean age at first sex varied between 18-19 years across the four routes. The sexual debut (first sexual encounter at age less than 17) was slightly quicker in the North-East (35%) and North-West (34%) compared to other routes North-South (30%) and South-East (21%). Among the four routes higher proportion of respondents (44%) from South-East reported sexual relationships with paid female partners compared to their counterparts traveling on North-South (30%), North-West (29%), and North-East (25%) route. A substantial proportion (North-East: 53%, North-South: 42%, North-West: 43%, South-East: 25%) had 1-2 paid partners during the last 12 months. However, the mean number of partners was highest in the North-South (8 partners) and South-East (7 partners) route compared to North-West and North-East (5 partners). Even within a route, variation in the number of paid partners was observed.

More married respondents in South-East route reported to have paid and non-paid female sexual partners than other route categories. On the whole, more number (48%) of currently married truck drivers plying on South-East route had sexual partners besides their wives compared to their counter parts (North-West – 33% & North-South -31%; North-East-25%).

More unmarried respondents from North-South (53%) and South-East (58%) had paid partners, while for North-East it was the least (37%). For these respondents non-paid partners were more in North-East route (47%) and the least in North-West route (38%). On the whole, 82% of the unmarried respondents from South-East route have at least one sexual partner (either paid or unpaid female partner or male/hijra partner) followed by North-South (74%), North-West (66%) and North-East (62%).

Among married respondents about 2-4 percent ever had male/hijra partner. However, among unmarried respondents, ever had sex with male/hijra ranged from 4 to 17 percent with minimum (4%) for South-East and maximum (17%) for North-West.

Most of the currently married truck drivers have visited their spouses in last 12 months. Larger proportion of respondents from North-West route (53%) visit wife once in a month followed by North-South (48%), North-East (39%) and least from South-East (17%) routes. In a month, the mean number of sexual contacts with wife was reportedly highest among drivers traveling in the South-East route (12 contacts) compared to other routes (6 –7 contacts). This is understandable as LDTDs in South-East route stayed with spouse for a longer duration. There were few respondents who did not have sex with

wife in last one month and the proportion was highest in North-East (15%) and least in South-East (2%).

Over one-third of the respondents who had paid female partners in last 12 months reported to have the same in last one month in North-East, North-South and North-West routes while this reported by two-fifth of respondents from South-East route. The average sex contacts with paid female partners in last one month ranged 2–3 for the four route corridors.

Very few respondents have consistently used condom with spouse and non-paid female partner. Reporting of consistent condom use with non-paid partners varied among the four routes was highest in North-South route (21%) and lowest in South-East route (14%). While consistent condom use was considerably higher with paid female partners; amongst all routes, consistent condom use with paid partners was highest in North-South route (74%) and lowest in South-East route (64%).