A Sari State

No girl power in India

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A 1994 act, ironically dubbed the Protection of Commercial Sex Workers, required the Indian state of Maharashtra to brand red-light-district women with HIV with indelible ink. Last winter the state implemented its second punitive policy when it ordered boarding houses -- filled with underage girls “rescued” from raided brothels -- to conduct HIV tests on roomies within 48 hours of their arrival. Those with HIV are transferred to a government-run institution where they get “appropriate care and treatment without their knowledge,” said the state’s Department of Women and Child Welfare.

The girls have little power to oppose HIV surveillance. Many flee the boarding houses to avoid forced testing and then “go back to the brothels because nobody else will have them,” said Indian AIDS advocate Ashok Row Kavi. “Why isolate prostitutes? They have no negotiating power to use condoms. Only behavior change among male clients can reduce the rate of infection.”

India has the world’s highest incidence of HIV. Of its 950 million people, as many as five million may have HIV.

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