

Sex workers and AIDS - an introduction to the issues

Andrew Hunter

Sex worker rights groups in this country have come a long way since the first group, from which we take our name, was formed to fight for the decriminalisation of prostitution, and the rights of prostitutes in South Australia in 1978. In 1983, when the Australian Prostitutes Collective was formed with groups in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, the spectre of AIDS was just looming on the Australian horizon.

Although we as prostitutes' rights groups were oft accused of simply 'jumping on the AIDS bandwagon' for reasons of funding, the fact is we were right in there from the start. The APC Vic put out its first AIDS information pamphlet entitled 'Facts on AIDS and the Working Girl' in 1984. And during visits in that time, the APC groups in all areas gave AIDS information to workers and educated them in the basic issues of AIDS prevention. We knew that one area was bound to come up - scapegoating prostitutes for heterosexual AIDS. This was historically the way that heterosexual society absolved itself of responsibility in previous STD epidemics.

So firstly we had to fight against this stigmatising myth; and secondly we had to design our programs to reflect the reality of the epidemic. That meant protecting workers from catching, rather than spreading HIV; and educating workers who injected drugs. The APC NSW ran the first needle exchange in Australia for their IV using members. Initially this was funded from donations and staff wages.

Other groups around the country did not receive funding as early as the Sydney group. They were working unfunded and spending a lot of time in health department offices trying to convince the bureaucrats they would not run off with the money. A 'second wave' of sex worker groups was formed out of the 'Sex Industry and the AIDS Debate' conference in Melbourne in 1988. These groups grew out of the response to AIDS and other health issues, but still had a focus on broader rights issues.

Despite the work that we do, and the funding a lot of our groups have, we still believe that there is more we need to do, and better ways of doing the job. One of the ongoing differences between our groups and the funding bodies is that of project versus organisational funding. We believe, and our programs have borne this out, that prostitutes do not want to access a group or speak to an educator about AIDS issues only. Sex Workers want information on many issues that do not have direct relation to AIDS prevention. If this other

information is not provided, sex workers will stay away in droves. In relation to our funding, this means that funding the infrastructure of Sex Workers' groups is desirable so we can provide information services and advocacy that workers see as relevant to them. AIDS education is not possible in isolation. Workers need reasons to contact groups, and there can be no education without contact. The different groups have been emphasising this point for years, and the Scarlet Alliance will lobby the point 'till the cows come home' if necessary.

Recognition that the context in which information on AIDS prevention is given to sex workers is as important as the actual information is something that funding and policy bodies need to recognise. The Scarlet Alliance will only be too happy to take this issue up with them. One of the major incentives for them could be cost effectiveness. For example, it takes less money to employ a worker who advocates for prostitutes that have been discriminated against in health services, and who also educates health service staff, than to employ specific health workers, counsellors and clinicians to deal with the HIV and general health concerns of prostitutes.

The way that the gay community has constructed AIDS services will not necessarily be the most effective way of running services for Workers in the Sex Industry. Unlike gay men, prostitutes are not a separate community, and it is not desirable to attempt to construct a false one for the purposes of HIV prevention. Health issues for prostitutes have more in common with the occupational health and safety areas of other industries. Condoms for prostitutes are like hard hats for building workers. They are necessary to prevent injuries.

Just as unions have looked at other issues that affect occupational health and safety such as stress, long shifts and the like, we also need to be able to work on issues that may force sex-workers to engage in having unsafe sexual practices. Stress and other issues that come up are, due to the illegality and stigmatisation of sex work, a necessary area for prostitute groups to work in as they directly relate to HIV transmission.

Sometimes going out and educating prostitutes is not the most effective way of preventing HIV transmission. We all in our different ways address the issues I have touched upon above, but often

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cannot spend as much time on the most important issues due to funding guidelines. Until such time as these administrative and structural impediments are addressed, AIDS programs will not be running as effectively as they should be.

The Scarlet Alliance will be addressing these issues at a national policy level for our member groups. With this central lobbying role and our resource distribution we will leave more time for those workers 'on the ground' to get on with the job. Then they will only have to tackle their one state's bureaucratic maze. We will co-ordinate the training of education and support staff so that each group is not having to reinvent the wheel. The Alliance will also offer information and support to newly formed groups in the smaller states and territories, This will allow all organisations to make the most effective use of the time and resources that they have. The role of the Alliance can be summed up as advocating for, and providing service delivery to, sex worker rights groups.

Presently, we are also making more and more contacts with sex worker groups in the Asia-Pacific region, with a view to assisting them to run effective HIV programs and addressing all the issues that this entails. We are asking these groups to identify what sort of assistance they want from us, so that the most practical help is provided.

We have set ourselves lofty goals and face many difficult tasks. The most difficult tasks of actually standing up and demanding equal rights for prostitutes have already been done. We are out there, going headlong into the fight for the rights we deserve. This feature on sex worker issues will hopefully open the eyes of many people in Australia and overseas who think that educating prostitutes about HIV involves giving out condoms to 'stop them spreading it to the heterosexual men'.

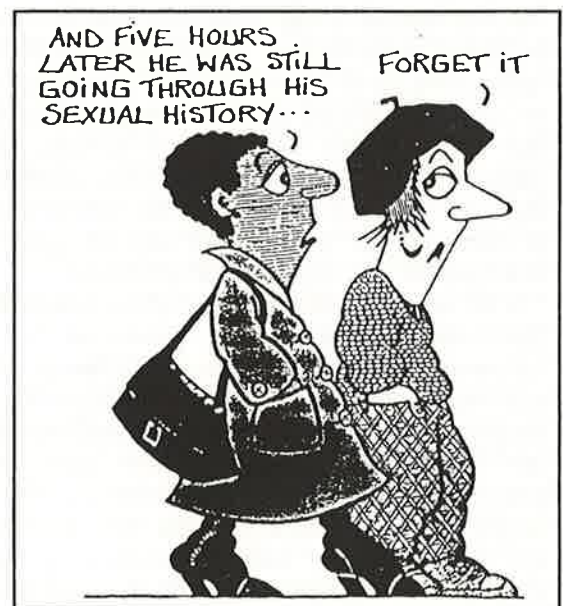
Aims and objectives of the Scarlet Alliance

The Scarlet Alliance, a national forum for Sex Worker Rights Organisations, which provides support, information and solidarity on issues of local and national significance is a grouping of autonomous member organisations adhering to the following:

1. To promote the civil rights of past and present sex workers and to work towards ending all forms of discrimination against them.
2. To lobby for legal and administrative frameworks which do not discriminate against prostitutes.

3. To challenge any government at any time when and where it implements legislation and or law enforcement discriminatory and repressive to the rights and autonomy of prostitutes and which is therefore not conducive to successful HIV prevention education programs.
 4. To actively work towards guaranteeing the rights of all sex workers to optimum Occupational Health and safety provisions that will promote conditions where safer sex and general health knowledge can be converted to safe work practices.
- Within this objective we make a commitment that, while there is an AIDS pandemic, a primary focus of Occupational Health and Safety roles will be the prevention of the transmission of HIV and the care and support of sex industry workers and their families who are affected by HIV.
5. To strive to achieve, as appropriate, the objectives outlined above for immigrant and non-English speaking sex workers in Australia.
 6. To liaise with overseas sex worker rights groups in the development of regional and international networks and objectives.

The Scarlet Alliance expresses solidarity with indigenous and independent sex workers who are not members of existing rights organisations.



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