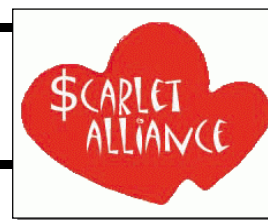


National Forum for Sex Worker Organisations & Projects

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Interview with Janelle Fawkes, President, Sept, 04

Well firstly, Scarlet Alliance is the Australian peak body of sex worker organisations, projects, and groups in Australia. We represent issues affecting sex workers at a national level. Our membership is spread throughout Australia and made up of community based organisations/projects delivering peer based services to sex workers along with groups or networks of sex workers with a philosophy that matches ours. We have an affirmative action policy which ensures that our membership is made up of sex workers and that the level of input from sex workers is high.

1. Members of Scarlet Alliance attended the AIDS conference in Bangkok in July. Could you tell us about what you got up to while you were there?

The XVth World Aids Conference was a rare opportunity for us to meet up with sex workers from over 20 countries. Not surprisingly, we found that we shared many issues in common. In fact, at a symposium put together by APNSW (Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers), all the sex workers present developed a list of the three major issues affecting our communities. They are: Police- harassment, violence, condoms used as evidence etc
Anti-trafficking lobby - and its abolitionist agenda, its impact on sex worker rights and funding to sex worker projects through the US and beyond.
Research - the high level of unethical research on sex workers and the low level of research aimed at improving conditions or addressing discrimination.

There was also a shared call for decriminalisation of sex work and sex workers.

As we were involved in twelve different sessions, including workshops, oral presentations, poster presentations, performances etc for Scarlet Alliance members the week long conference was go, go, go. We had a pretty high profile with lots of media attention, including a feature on a Philippines television station so we definitely raised awareness about sex workers in Australia and around the world.

The Scarlet Alliance workshop included role play presentation of the first few minutes of an interaction between a sex worker and client. The worker negotiates price, service, and condom use; establishes boundaries and performs a visual STI check of the client. This was very popular with media. Each of the 80 workshop participants were given a check list and asked to identify skills the sex worker used. They noted a broad range of skills with many understanding for the first time sex work within the context of work.

Migration of sex workers was another high profile issue for us at the conference. Sex worker groups raised their concerns about the impact of surveillance and punitive responses in many countries. It seems the anti-trafficking lobby has been internationally hi-jacked by the abolitionist movement. Their agenda is to end the sex industry globally rather than showing interest in the women who are knowingly trafficked for the purpose of migrating to work in another country where their earning potential is increased. This approach has conflated a series of complex issues and has done nothing to support persons who are trafficked against their will. Once again the losers are sex workers and the women who need support and protection.

2. It seems the Debby's made an appearance at the AIDS conference. Could you tell us something about what the Debby's do and how they were received?

The Debbys are a collaboration of sex worker activists, artists and performers, who came together as a group in Western Australia with seven members but have toured nationally picking up members along the way. There are now 20 Debbys critiquing the misinformation about sex work, putting forward an alternative voice and maintaining agency of their individual experiences and reflections.

There is no avoiding the high level of discrimination and stigmatization of sex workers in society, so adopting a Debby name allows sex workers who may not be 'out' to participate whilst maintaining control over their identity and who knows what. Most sex workers adopt a working name so in true sex work style we now have Debby Diamante Dildo -harness, Decriminalize Debby, Debby Bed-head, Debby Discredited, Drag Debby, Difficult Debby, Debby Daredevil and others, spread all over Australia.

The performance and works are fun and confronting and real - challenging the idea of sex workers as unskilled, without agency or forced. Many of the Debbys are artists in their own right so have tapped into these skills as well as sex work skills to develop characters like Mr Big Pants, everyone's favourite politician, polarizing sex workers and residents views (as if the two groups are exclusive) to win the local election; Olympic Whore who shows the athletic feats of a sex worker providing extras on a massage table and Belly Debby who belly bumps and shoulder shimmies her way through the ten steps to seducing a client and putting a smile on his face....and hers.

3. It seems as though humour and play is central to the Debby project. I would imagine that part of the motivation of the project is to provide a space in which to discuss issues relating to sex work outside of the moralistic and legalistic frameworks that often seem to dominate discussions around sex work (even though these issues may be dealt with by the Debby's). Is this an accurate assumption to make?

Yes, there is much humour some black and some bright, but it's more than just finding a space to discuss these issues - it's about the perspective and the voice. Sex Worker issues are discussed and researched heavily by those outside the industry but we rarely experience or participate in an unedited version from the perspective of the sex worker. The sex worker voice is often hidden under layers of stigma and myth.

4. The US Government holds the line that abstinence is the best way to avoid HIV infection and has linked AIDS prevention/treatment funding to the promotion of this idea. The US' stance was one of the many focal points for protest during the Bangkok conference. Can you tell us about Scarlet Alliance's response to this line from the US and also the reaction by groups representing sex workers from overseas that you have been involved with?

I think when you consider the ABC approach (abstinence, be faithful and use condoms) you can understand why sex workers see such messages as irrelevant. As a prevention strategy for sex workers this concept really equates to 'abstain from working, abstain from earning a living'. It's simply not realistic. Abstinence is a very different concept when you are asking people to abstain from sex compared to asking people to abstain from working - but equally illogical.

Unfortunately the impact of US government decisions on sex workers is worse than just the ABC approach to prevention. In May, 2003, the US government passed the 'Leadership Against

HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria Act of 2003', which outlines the areas and support that the US administration is prepared to endorse in the fight against these diseases. The act includes the limitation that "No funds made available to carry out this Act . . . may be used to provide assistance to any group or organization that does not have a policy explicitly opposing prostitution and sex trafficking."

This means some of our sister organisations in South East Asia that receive this funding have had to make a decision to either adopt a new position and oppose sex work, risking distancing their community, or reject their funding.

It will result in a growth of organisations which are not effective because they do not engage with the communities they are working with.

In Australia it would equate to a group like Project Respect, which has a clear anti sex work and anti-trafficking position, being seen to represent the interests of sex workers. It is simply not a workable option. Like in Australia the organisations will be accepted by politicians and beaurocrats when they are saying what the Government wants to hear but will have little to no respect amongst sex worker communities.

Rather than organisations which represent the issues affecting sex workers you end up with abolitionists telling sex workers what, in their opinion, sex workers should want – ie to leave the industry. This issue was raised by sex workers from many different countries at the World AIDS Conference but the frustration of this situation was clearest in the banners made by the Indian sex workers from DMSC who were fed up with organisations whose agenda was to get them to leave sex work for jobs in factories etc. "Don't talk to me about sewing machines, talk to me about workers rights"

5. HIV infection rates in Australia amongst sex workers are very low is that correct.

Yes rates of HIV amongst Australian sex workers are extremely low but that shouldn't let us slip into a safety zone on this issue. Firstly, the debate which followed the disbarring of a Victorian GP who gave two HIV+ sex workers certificates to work needs some discussion.

There is a pervasive discourse amongst the medical profession and the general public that a HIV+ person working in the sex industry is unacceptable public health risk.

The arguments are based on either: the misconception that sex workers have more sex and are therefore at more risk of spreading disease; or that condoms break and therefore even safe sex work is not 100% safe; or the assumption that when someone tests positive we then have the right to prevent them from having sex in case they should infect someone else.

What the statistics on sex work in Australia clearly show is that safe sex is the industry standard and as a result there are studies showing lower rates of sexually transmissible infections amongst sex workers when compared to the broader community. If you understand the nature of the negotiation which takes place at the beginning of a sex work interaction this makes sense the communication lines are much clearer as it is devoid of all the complications of sex when it is tied up with ego, intimacy etc. So the idea that more sex equals more risk just doesn't match up in the Australian context.

Many of the arguments on this issue are void when you consider that sex workers provide a whole range of services and not all of them include penetrative sex. So of course, if a positive person is offering a range of services which do not include penetrative sex than the risk of infection is nil.

6. Scarlet Alliance recently made a submission to the Victorian Government objecting to the proposal to increase the prostitution licensing fees on the grounds that raising fees will simply increase the size of illegal sex industry as operators attempt to avoid both increased fees and regulation. Obviously if this occurs it will negatively impact on sex workers as they will have less legal protection and less certainty of decent OHS standards in their work place. Can you tell us if there have been any developments with this issue and where the process is currently situated?

The day the submissions were due we were advised that the submission period was being extended and we haven't been advised what the next phase will be.

Many of the arguments used to indicate the need for increased fees and an increase in compliance staff actually highlight flaws in licensing as an effective model of sex industry legislation. What has been created in Victoria is a two tiered industry whereby some work legally but a much larger percentage of the industry operates illegally. When there is little incentive to participate in legal sector then licensing fee hikes are not going to address the problems.

There are two other concerns worth raising. One was the way in which the proposal used the issue of trafficking to argue for a need for more compliance officers at a time when the key recommendation of the Parliamentary Joint Committee Report on trafficking suggests the need shift away from this kind of attention on the industry to a more targeted approach on how traffickers are circumventing the current immigration processes.

Also, the proposal suggested a need for more compliance officers when a comparison was drawn between the number of compliance officers per legal brothel in Queensland compared to Victoria. What the proposal fails to point out is even with more compliance officers the *'illegal sex industry in Queensland remains alive and well.'* according to the *Prostitution Licensing Authority Annual Report*. The report also suggests "It needs to be understood that the policing of the illegal sex industry is time-consuming and difficult, and that detection and prosecution are not always the most effective tools in curbing the incidence of illegal prostitution."

7. Even after many years of lobbying, street based sex work in Victoria remains illegal. Do you predict any change to this situation in the near or medium future?

I hope that as a community we recognise the real impact of criminalizing the street based sex work community. That by turning a blind eye to criminalisation we endorse the notion that street based sex workers should have less rights to civil liberties, human rights, less access to victim support services, less rights to expect to be safe and lessened ability to report crime. As a community we are creating an underclass and saying that's ok – once we do this for one part of our community it's only a matter of time until we think it's ok to do this to more sectors of society.

There are many reasons some workers choose street sex work rather than brothel work, including greater control over who they see as clients, what services they provide and working hours. The culture of street sex work has changed as laws aimed at making it easy for police to make arrests have been introduced. Skills and strategies street based sex workers have developed to negotiate with clients, establish boundaries and reduce risk etc have been taken away as sex workers attempt to avoid detection by police. Street based sex workers deserve to be protected by law in the same way as the rest of the community.

Victoria had the opportunity to make some positive changes to legislation as part of the City of Port Phillips AGSPAG (Attorney Generals Street Prostitution Advisory Group) recommendations. AGSPAG included representatives from many sectors of the community who after a long process developed a shared response to the street based sex industry issues their area. Unfortunately the government refused to adopt two of the key recommendations rendering the outcomes largely superficial.

I think we have forgotten that street based sex workers are part of the community and this level of stigmatization is unacceptable. When did you last hear a positive comment about street based sex workers in the media?

We have forgotten in the 80s Sydney street based sex workers were enforcing the use of condoms with clients way before condoms were being used in brothels. Brothel management were initially against condoms thinking it would keep the clients away. Street based sex workers have a high level of control over their work practices and this is reflected in adoption of new technologies before other sectors of the sex industry (such as condoms and mobile phones).