

## **OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY**

### **A Sex Worker Initiative**

Australia is a federation of states and territories and prostitution laws are covered under state and territory jurisdiction and as a result they vary dramatically from state to state.

Whilst some governments have been very progressive in legalisation or decriminalising areas of the industry, in many states it is highly illegal and strongly controlled by police arrests and harassment, high levels of societal discrimination, including the judiciary.

Even those governments that have been brave enough to reform sex work laws have not paid very much attention to developing and supporting industrial rights and particularly occupational health and safety codes of practice.

As a result as sex workers we took the initiative of developing them ourselves. Some of the issues which we have considered important include:

Of course, safe sex is at the top of the list and so we feel that if governments are serious about safety in the industry, then they should fund sex worker organisations to provide resources and information on safe sex practices. This includes various materials, from videos to documents in different languages to outreach visits to sex workers (brothels, street, escort, private), to newsletters aimed at sex workers as well as clients. We feel that brothel and escort agency employers should also have an onus to provide this information to sex workers and clients and we have encouraged owners/madams/employers to adopt compulsory condom usage policies for the workplace. Alongside this we have developed policies on condom slippage and breakage, which are procedures for sex workers to follow as an emergency if a condom breaks. Whilst we don't believe that sex workers should be compulsorily tested for STDs we suggest that as matter of personal responsibility sex workers have regular STD checks.

Some of the other issues, which are covered are checking clients for visible signs of STIs (Sexually Transmitted Infections). Sex workers are shown (through graphic photographs) what to look for (e.g., herpes blisters, discharge, warts, syphilis canchre). In order to do this properly we suggest that brothels make available a very bright light.

We have developed cleansing procedures for tools of the trade (e.g., sex toys, dildos, leather equipment such as whips, gags, etc). We believe employers should provide disinfection fluids (such as hospital grade bleach).

Hygiene controls on bedding and laundering should include washing linen in water which is at least 70.5 C hot. In relation to showers, baths and toilets, they should be cleaned regularly with hospital grade bleach. Used condoms should be disposed of properly and in accordance with standards, which exist in the various states and territories.

We have also developed a set of exercises to strengthen various parts of the body to overcome occupational overuse problem.

In relation to drugs and alcohol we have developed a policy based on harm reduction principles. It should be developed in consultation with sex workers and provide principles on when it is considered appropriate to consume alcohol, acceptable standard of work performance, appropriate use of prescribed drugs and prohibition on being under the influence of illegal substances at work.

Brothel buildings should comply with fire and electrical safety standards and there should be procedures to follow in the case of fire.

We believe that female sex workers who are pregnant have special needs, which may include working shorter shifts, having longer breaks between clients and exemptions from performing certain duties such as heavy lifting. They should also be entitled to maternity leave just as other employees in other industries are.

All or some of the above may or may not be relevant to our colleagues in the Asia Pacific region, depending on how we work and the access that we have to the issues listed above. Of course all of the above are impossible to implement unless there is a commitment from legislators to acknowledge that what we do is “work”, supportive employers and education and training on these issues for sex workers.

These model guidelines on oh&s will be utilised in a number of ways:

In those states and territories where elements of the sex industry are legal we will use the guidelines to lobby governments to adopt them as a legally binding code of practice. This has been particularly successfully achieved in the ACT, where there is a sex industry consultative group which provides advice to the government on sex – work issues. It has sex worker representation and through that representative driving the agenda on this issue, a code of practice has been recently adopted.

In those states where sex work is legal, it will be utilised by the sex industry as a lobbying tool to get governments to include these types of concerns in any reform of legislation that they consider.

This project has shown that unless sex workers are empowered to develop and push their own issues, that is issues which are important to us, -we –will forever be ignored or worse have the agenda about our livelihoods determined by researchers who seem more interested in doing numerous condom and genitally focussed studies, in isolation of the wider issues that concern sex workers.

As a sex worker who has been attending many of the sex work presentations at this conference and others it amazes me that so many presentations which conclude that the lowest STI prevalences are found in projects that involve sex worker empowerment and peer education, that we see so few workers speaking for themselves at this conference.

I would like to end with a thought that I would like you all to take with you. And that is, that if you truly believe in what you are saying then at the next conference bring sex workers so that they can speak for themselves. I would also like the conference organisers to take special note of this and ensure that money is available to sponsor those sex workers and that attempts are made to ensure that things like visa discrimination does not become an impediment to sex workers being able to participate.