

Occupational Health and Safety for the Sex Industry

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Many people do not think of prostitution as work and so when one mentions that the various parts of the sex industry should be guided by occupational health and safety (OH&S) laws and that guidelines or codes of practice should be developed to cover this, they are left dumbfounded. But for those of us who work in the industry and who have experienced the difference between illegal non-regulated industries and decriminalised, regulated systems know how important it is to fight for these rights.

In Australia, the Scarlet Alliance which is the national sex workers rights organisation felt that this was a really important issue for us and if we were going to wait for legislators to deal with the issue we would be waiting forever, so we decided to develop model guidelines for occupational health and safety for the sex industry.

Australia, like India is a federation of states and it is the states that have power to regulate the sex industry and OH&S. Unlike India, we don't have national laws on sex work, which means that every state and territory has different laws, so that in some places the industry is decriminalised and regulated, whereas in others it is illegal.

In one territory, the ACT, the sex worker organisation has been successful in pushing for a code of practice on OH&S which was recently adopted and in another state (NSW) a number of local councils have developed guidelines. In the others it is hoped that the guidelines that Scarlet has developed will facilitate the decriminalisation of sex work laws if we can get the industry to themselves adopt the guidelines as a self-regulatory practice.

So, what sorts of issues do we as sex workers feel is important to be covered by these guidelines?

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 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 (like 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.

In Solidarity

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