

NATIONAL AIDS

# BULLETIN

A MONTHLY DIGEST OF NEWS, INFORMATION & COMMENT



*"Geisha in Bath" by Japanese printmaker Masami Teraoka*

## Sex Workers and AIDS

in this issue:

- Male sex workers and HIV
- Who's in bed with whom?
- The law and safer sex practices
- Demarcating Whores

**AFAO**

Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations Inc.

ISSN 1030-5289

Volume 4 Number 5

June 1990 \$4.00



## Sex workers and AIDS

### Who's in bed with whom?

*Andi Sebastian*

Close relationships between AIDS organisations (Councils and AFAO), and Sex Worker Rights Organisations have become a striking feature of the Australian strategy for HIV prevention. These relationships appear to have evolved through necessity rather than as a result of a grand plan, and little examination has been paid to them. With WA, SA, NSW the ACT and the national bodies formally entwined, and NT and Tasmania likely to do so in the future, it is high time we noted and discussed this ad hoc process.

In 1987 the WA AIDS Council employed Stella Sharland to collaborate with them on the production of a condom comic pamphlet for distribution to the local sex industry. From this project, Stella formed the group which became SIERA, and after a variety of small funded projects and much unpaid time, earned SIERA credibility and attention. SIERA is now an independently constituted Sex Worker Rights Organisation, with its own funding and premises.

In 1988 independent funding to PASA (Prostitutes Association of South Australia) ceased and, in the face of a State government election, was not likely to be renewed. As PASA had been running a highly successful health outreach program for the past year, we negotiated with the AIDS Council for salaries to maintain it. That deal formally began in 1989 as a sex industry project within the AIDS Council and operated for a year, with PASA maintaining a low profile. Negotiations continued between the two organisations and this year, on the basis of a report commissioned by ACSA and written by a consultant from PASA, an agreement is being drafted which acknowledges PASA's full presence and contribution within ACSA. When PASA incorporates, ACSA will support our bid for independent funding. In the meantime, PASA workers are accountable to an industry based working party and have, within ACSA, a high degree of autonomy in projects and programs.

In 1989 AFAO offered the Scarlet Alliance interim representation at its meetings and an agreement was drafted which established the

principles of operation between the two national bodies. These are autonomy of policy and programs for the Alliance and AFAO's responsibility for all finance coming to the Scarlet Alliance through the auspices of AFAO. As the Commonwealth Government had made it clear that any funding to the Scarlet Alliance would be through AFAO, this agreement was a vital starting point not only to the relationship between the organisations, but to the Alliance. Scarlet Alliance delegates first attended an AFAO meeting in April 1989 and at the April meeting in 1990, the Scarlet Alliance was accepted as a full member of AFAO along with AIVL and NPLWAC.

Also in 1989, WISE began in the ACT with support from the AIDS Action Council. Support took the form of use of resources and skills-sharing, and an agreement of operating principles was drawn up similar to other described above. WISE now receives limited funding through AAC, with which they employ 2 part-time workers and rent office space and equipment from AAC. Much of the outreach work is still conducted on a voluntary basis. WISE is independent of the AAC in policy and program decisions, and looks forward to increased funding and independence.

In 1990 ACON received funding to establish SWOP - Sex Worker Outreach Project. The government preferred to give the money to ACON because it was not convinced that either or both the two Sex Worker Rights Organisations - PROS and SWANS - could satisfactorily provide outreach services to the sex industry. This hesitation on the part of the Government is attributed to the demise of the Australian Prostitutes Collective (NSW) and the factional splits that occurred within it. So SWOP is the compromise project which has to get on and do the job of providing effective HIV education to the local sex industry without involving itself in any advocacy issues. This detail marks a significant departure from the precedents

---

*Andi Sebastian has been involved in the creation of Scarlet Alliance and is a member of the Prostitutes Association of South Australia.*

---

outlined elsewhere in Australia where autonomy of operation and recognition of the need for broad-based programs, which include general advocacy, have been the cornerstone of effective outreach programs. Interesting as this fact will be to observe, it is nevertheless admirable that ACON is so clear in its desire to not intrude on the territory of existing sex worker rights organisations. Already the edges are blurring, with the expertise for SWOP's operations being provided by members of PROS and SWANS.

In the Northern Territory, the AIDS Council has offered assistance and support to PANTHER which is a relatively new group not yet incorporated or receiving funding in its own right. While it is not clear what form this assistance will take, it is reasonable to suppose it will be modelled on one of the above.

In Tasmania, where there is as yet no sex worker rights organisation, the AIDS Council is extending messages of support to the local sex industry with a view to creating a health program for sex workers.

While these relationships have evolved largely out of government timidity and reluctance to fund sex worker rights organisations in their own names, they have nevertheless, benefits to both parties. The most obvious benefits for sex worker rights organisations include:

- the opportunity for the groups to become established.
- the chance to develop peer education programs on a successful and continuing basis.
- recognition of the broad base of the programs necessary for AIDS education to the sex industry to be effective.

For AIDS Councils and AFAO, the prime benefits include:

- the chance to support effective peer education programs for the sex industry
- extension of AIDS education programs into the heterosexual community
- reflected credit for some of the most innovative and successful AIDS education programs developed in the western world.

While in most instances an agreement has been drafted which usually provides the SWRO with autonomy of policy and program decision making, and financial control and accountability to the AIDS organisation, the area of least clarity is staffing. Often the staff are members of the local SWRO, and in situations such as NSW where advocacy is specifically forbidden for SWOP workers, this is

certain to cause problems. Elsewhere, staff are technically often employed by the AIDS organisation and expected to meet certain staff criteria. This means some workers are employed by two separate organisations to which they are accountable and which each have expectations of them. Industrially this scenario has a nightmarish quality and means some of our agreements may be operating on very shaky ground. Dennis Altman points out in his article on "Community-based organisations and the future" (NAB February 1990) that "elected Boards do not necessarily have the conceptual skills necessary to cope with the demands of overseeing large agencies...". I would add to that the fact that we frequently have two such elected Boards, grappling with the practical and conceptual difficulties of amalgamating two different organisations at different stages of growth to meet funding requirements set by a third party.

It is to the credit of all concerned that we have made successes of it thus far and dodged the disasters possible.

Questions which must concern us in the future include:

- the industrial rights of our workers.
- the response of members of sex worker groups to the disappearance of their organisational identity with an AIDS service structure
- long term strategies for achieving independent funding and location for sex worker rights organisations
- the need for training in values clarification, community organisation growth and industrial practices for management committees and staff in both organisations
- the response of staff, volunteers and members of AIDS Councils to the influx of 'outsiders', particularly sex workers and IV user groups
- the need to share information between all states and territories participating in these relationships.

Dennis Altman's research on the role played by community based organisations in combating AIDS may well provide us with some of the answers and some strategic options. Sex worker rights organisations must continue to ask questions, however, as we have several agendas which stretch before and beyond the impact of HIV. What happens to those agendas in these new relationships which allow us to exist as funded organisations? Unless we ask the questions now, we may find those agendas and concerns swallowed up in our desire to continue as funded organisations providing health outreach programs.