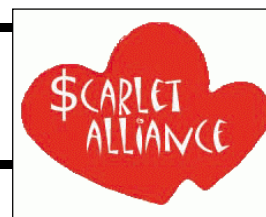


## National Forum for Sex Worker Organisations & Projects

P. O. Box 2072, Canberra ACT 2601  
Mobile: 0411 985 135  
[president@scarletalliance.org.au](mailto:president@scarletalliance.org.au)  
[www.scarletalliance.org.au](http://www.scarletalliance.org.au)



### August 2004 HIV Australia article written by Janelle Fawkes, President.

*While the week was filled to overload with community marches, poster halls, art, performance, demonstrations, workshops, oral presentations, and images of sex workers used by media to bring colour and life to their pages, the resounding experience of sex workers attending Bangkok was one of disparity between governments, researchers, policy makers and the experiences of the individuals who work in the sex industry of the 20 countries represented.*

**Bangkok's** XVth World Aids Conference opened with Thai Prime Minister Thaksin attributing a reduction in the rates of HIV/AIDS amongst Thai sex workers to the contentious 100% CUP (condom use policy). Within days of opening however the Thai sex worker organisation, Empower, was under attack by the media in what was clearly a misrepresentation of their 'A-go-go bar', and the work of sex worker peer educators demonstrating condom and dam use amongst their many skills.

It struck many sex workers in attendance how, not for the first or last time, the most successful HIV/AIDS prevention strategies - those more likely to have resulted in a reduction in new HIV infections- were not acknowledged and rather were under attack in the media and by Government.

Clearly organisations like Empower are highly successful in the delivery of a prevention strategy. They have mastered the ability of transferring a complex set of messages into a variety of modes relevant to workplaces and work practices of sex workers.

Their message is clear because its delivery is tailored to sex workers and the context of their work. The delivery is loud, exciting and doesn't need a quiet room with a whiteboard or a computer and is suitable for the bars of Pat Pong or Chiang Mai.

It's a great concern when successful peer education strategies are ignored, but it is more concerning that Prime Minister Thaksin endorsed the current misled 100% CUP, which at best is ignored by sex industry management and not known of by sex workers, and at worse results in increased divides between sex workers and authorities as Thai sex workers tell of their experience of police taking them forcibly for HIV testing to ensure adherence to the policy.

Many similar stories surfaced over the week as sex workers from around the world met, sharing a rare opportunity to create new and revive old networks.

A highlight was the Symposium organized by APNSW (Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers) where sex workers from over twenty countries spoke of the major issues affecting their sex worker communities. This session clearly identified the following three issues as those shared by the majority:

1. Police- harassment, entrapment, condoms as evidence, bashings, assaults and corruption.
2. Anti-Trafficking lobby and its impact on the funding of services and sex worker rights globally.

3. Research – the lack of research which aims to improve the conditions and health of sex workers and the unacceptable level of unethical research on sex workers. eg. forced testing.

The session ended with a shared call for decriminalization of the sex industry as the legal model which most clearly supports HIV/AIDS prevention and the improvement of occupational health & safety and safer workplaces for all sex workers.

The conference would not have been complete without the creative presence of the migrant sex workers. The ‘women without documents’ created a silent, but incredibly powerful reminder of those sex workers, some of whom are HIV positive, but who have no access to health services or treatment. 220 Burmese sex workers in Thailand made a paper mache representation of themselves. Their migration is illegal, so they have no documents, no papers and no right to healthcare whilst in Thailand. The inequity of access to the conference, health care and treatment for these workers combined with the misplaced good intentions of policy like 100% CUP means little to the illegal workers who are far less empowered to enforce safe sex exposes one of the many contradictions in sex industry policy around the world.

A number of groups were involved with direct action within the conference halls, sex workers and AIDS activists took to the podium during the Gilead satellite symposium, drawing widespread attention to the Cambodian PREP trial. Representatives from Womyns Network for Unity, an unfunded group of Cambodian sex workers, utilized the opportunity to draw attention to their complaints about lack of on-going health care offered to participants of the trial. As an outcome of the protest Gilead agreed to meet with the women but then unfortunately did not attend the agreed meeting.

Unethical research on sex workers was identified as a key issue affecting most of the twenty sex worker communities represented at the conference, and many examples were provided of research conducted on sex workers which does not seek to either improve conditions for sex workers or respect those involved. In particular, examples of studies in India which include the forced testing of sex workers contribute the communities feeling of mistrust and vulnerability.

Scarlet Alliance members were involved in more than twelve presentations, performances, workshops, poster presentations and an exhibition. As such we maintained a high profile throughout the conference. Our input was reflected in this response from the organisers: *“Your workshop was, by and far, the hit of the Skills Building program.....You and your team are amazing, highly skilled trainers who deserve recognition for your talents.....”* Paul Causey, Skills Building Program Coordinator, Community Program Committee, XV International AIDS Conference.

*Our skill share workshop was 'Whorigami - The art of towel rolling, folding and shaping.* This workshop drew on the common theme of the towels, often used as a decorative element in the work places of brothel and massage based sex workers in the Australian sex industry, to highlight the range of OH &S issues which impact on a sex workers ability to negotiate safe sex and in their role as HIV/AIDS and STI educators with clients. The title was chosen to draw out discussion and debate over the tension which can occur when education prevention strategies tailored to the workplace and practices of sex workers are seen by funders as ‘too risky’.

The workshop opened with a role play between ‘sex worker’ and ‘client’. It covered the first few minutes of their meeting where a sex worker negotiates a price, service, and condom use; establishes boundaries; performs a STI check; and makes a risk assessment. Each of the 80 workshop participants was asked to identify skills utilized by the sex worker in a lively role-play with a client.

The participants noted a broad range of skills with many understanding for the first time sex work within the context of work . This lead into a discussion about different work settings, how these skills are transferable and most importantly factors which act as barriers to sex workers implementing condom use negotiation strategies etc e.g. criminalisation.

The ways sex workers share skills and the role of sex worker HIV/AIDS organisations were identified along with other key factors of creating an enabling environment. Peer education as the best practice model of service delivery was discussed, and participants talked about problems which have arisen in their own sex worker HIV/AIDS strategies (most of which were not peer driven). The workshop concluded that for a strategy to be successful, sex workers must be involved on all levels.

One of the few papers accepted for oral presentation from the Australian HIV/AIDS community sector, was from Rachel Wotton, SWOP employee and the elected Scarlet Alliance International spokesperson. Her paper, 'The relationship between street-based sex workers and the police in the effectiveness of HIV prevention strategies' was highly relevant considering that treatment by police was identified by all of the sex worker communities at the conference as creating barriers to sex workers working safely. The paper was not only timely but offered a clearly articulated model to be utilized by sex worker organisations in promoting improved relationships between police and sex workers, and the critical bridge building work sex worker organisations must do to create an enabling environment for HIV/AIDS prevention work.

*Few of the 19,000 attendees at the conference would have missed 'Debby doesn't do it for free!'*, A collaborative effort by 15 Australian sex work activist and artists. The work incorporated a range of mediums including installation, film, soundscape, mixed media, textiles as well as a range of performances. The contributors offered the public an insight into the lives of sex workers and their experiences, offering an alternative to the portrayal of sex workers in mainstream media.

The placement of the exhibition in a main hall, outside of the commercial and NGO areas, created a level of visibility most could only wish for. Those attending the conference were able to engage with sex workers and the issues affecting their health in a unique environment and Scarlet Alliance members and the artists themselves used the opportunity to network with and provide community education to thousands of participants over the week.

Each work explored the complex myths and stereotypes surrounding sex work. A sculpture constructed of dams and condoms drew a high level of interest with participants reflecting on how whilst condoms and dams create a barrier to disease sex workers are not protected from the equally important stigma and discrimination.

'Debby doesn't do it for free!', performed the safe working practices of sex workers and the exploitation sex workers feel at the hands of some politicians. There was also a powerful critique of the portrayal of sex workers as vectors of disease and skits acknowledging the extremely important role sex workers play as educators of their clients, an often untargeted sector of the community who often do not consider themselves to be at risk of HIV/AIDS or STIs.

Poster presentations by Porn Pornpit (Empower, Thailand), Melissa Ditmore (Network of Sex Work Projects) and Maria McMahon's (SWOP, NSW/Scarlet Alliance, vice-president) ***'Migratory sex workers: anti-trafficking measures and public health outcomes on the transnational superhighway'*** drew on the sex worker communities shared experience of negative impacts from anti-trafficking responses to the lives of migrant sex workers and the subsequent impact on HIV prevention strategies for these groups.

All three posters highlighted the importance of sex worker organizations and governments working together on this issue to counteract the hi-jacking of the anti-trafficking lobby by abolitionists and resultant policies and change to legislation driven by an abolitionist agenda.

The sentiment underlying abolitionist debates on sex work were evident in varying degrees throughout the conference. Of concern to international sex worker communities were some statements within a paper delivered by Dennis Altman<sup>1</sup>. Although the paper has value for many reasons, it fails, as many do, to acknowledge sex work as a legitimate form of employment, and in summary offers the notion that the answer to HIV/AIDS in sex work communities is alternative forms of employment.

This notion is clearly not the rhetoric of sex work communities and ignores what our communities have defined as the necessary political, social and environmental change to support our global fight to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

In the words of the DMSC (Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee) an Indian sex worker organisation 'Don't talk to us about sewing machines, talk to us about sex worker rights.'



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<sup>1</sup> 'Rights Matter: structural interventions and vulnerable communities', Jonathon Mann Memorial Lecture Bangkok, XVth World AIDS Conference, July 14, 2004.