



Press Releases

Kolkata leading the way for the freedom of Sex Workers

Kolkata, 19 July 2012: With over 550 representatives of Sex Workers Collectives from across the world arriving for the first-ever Global Hub of the International AIDS Conference hosted and co-hosted by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, Global Network of Sex Workers (NWSP) and All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW) respectively, “the time has come to deliberate the many violations and privations the sex workers community is facing in different parts of the world” stated Dr Jana, the chair. “This Conference which has been, for the last 25 years, a three-way dialogue between the scientists/planners, the people living with HIV and the most at risk communities has been thwarted for the first time by the U.S. Government,” he added.

Andrew Hunter, the President of NWSP, the Global Sex Workers Network said, “with the US now leading the fight for Lesbian, Gay and transgender equality we are extremely disappointed that they refuse to revise their restrictions on sex workers and refuse to recognize that we are human beings with basic rights.”

Ruth Morgan Thomas, the Global Coordinator of NSWP said “it is essential that sex workers be able to self organize in order to stop the AIDS epidemic and yet again the US Government prohibits funds being given to sex worker organizations, the most effective HIV prevention strategy, through the anti-prostitution pledge included in all donor contracts.”

Affirming this, M Bhagyalakshmi, president of the All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW) stated that “the 5-day Global Hub will deliberate on the “Seven Freedoms” –the right to move, work, access to healthcare, participate, organize, be free of violence and discrimination - without which the community of sex workers cannot reduce their vulnerability to HIV.”

“The Sex Workers will strive to release the Kolkata Declaration which will be a platform that enables us to reclaim the rights that are due to us,” she added.

.....



Kolkata, 21 July 2012: The six-day Alternative International AIDS Conference, dubbed as the Global Hub kicked off today with a pre-event gathering of sex workers from over 43 countries who swamped Swabhumi in vibrant and colourful attires after a short walk through the streets of Salt Lake on Saturday shouting slogans like "Sex work is work".

The XIX International AIDS Conference which begins in Washington DC on Sunday will have a live digital link with the Indian hub overlapping for a few hours after 6pm. Titled as Sex Workers Freedom Festival, the unique event is being hosted and co-hosted by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) and All Indian Network of Sex Workers (AINSW) respectively.

"Travel restrictions are not just for the conference time. Sex workers are permanently denied visas to enter US for work or for residence. They cannot join partners who are US residents and so this is a much bigger issue," said Andrew Hunter, president of NSWP.

"Being the most vulnerable population, sex workers wanted to be a part of the US conference to fight the challenge of HIV across the world but were denied visas," said Bharati Dey, co-chair and secretary of DMSC, which represents sex workers in Kolkata. Sonagachi model, where sex workers were in the forefront of HIV prevention has been a successful model in the world and the project is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. Community led intervention is a key strategy used by India which reduced new HIV infections in the last 7 years by 40 to 50 per cent by scaling up preventive education campaigns among high risk groups like sex workers, men who have sex with men and injecting drug users.

The Kolkata meeting will deliberate on the "Seven Freedoms" -- the right to move, work, have access to healthcare, participate, organise, be free of violence and discrimination -- without which sex workers say they cannot reduce their vulnerability to HIV.

"We hope this conference will make sex workers' voices louder and stronger," Dr. Jana, Chair, Global Hub said on the sidelines today. Held every two years, the International AIDS Conference is returning to the United States for the first time since 1990, after being kept away by laws that barred people with HIV from travelling to the country.

"It is time to neutralize the evil within us. We have to be realistic while dealing with the challenges of minor and other trafficking so that these issues do not hurt our work and further criminalize sex work," added Andrew Hunter, president of the Global Network of Sex Work Projects.

Khartini Slamah, who is spearheading the Malaysian Sex Workers movement led the pre-conference meeting appreciated the Kolkata Hub as this is the first time that transgender sex workers have been given a platform to speak up and join the wider campaign for safeguarding the rights of all sex workers-female, male and transgender. "Two years back the Vienna Conference took many decisions on the rights of sex workers. But they have yet



to be implemented and to do that the communities have to be involved at every level including the decision making level," she concluded.

.....

"I am so inspired by the Sex Workers Freedom Festival; stated UNAIDS Head, Mr. Sidibe

Kolkata, 22 July, 2012: In his message to the International AIDS Conference (Global Hub) Mr. Michele Sidibe, Executive Director, UNAIDS stated that he was extremely "inspired by the Freedom Festival" as " it is a wonderful example of people who face stigma and discrimination speaking out and taking control of their own destinies."

Mr. Sidibe went on to add that a "major obstacle to reducing HIV is the fact that sex workers and People who use drugs are systematically discriminated against and criminalised..." and there is NO evidence to suggest that such laws reduce demand for sex or (reduce) the number of sex workers"

As s Special Envoy to the Secretary General Mr JVR Prasad Rao said: "I welcome the conference and we would like to see a greater integration and exchange between the main conference and the Global Hub. We would like the sex workers to be heard and their concerns raised here to be aired at the main conference."

This spirit of freedom was further signified by the representatives of sex workers from across the world demanding the seven freedoms to enable them to "create a global platform for sex workers' rights and meaningfully participate in the fight to end AIDS," stated Andrew Hunter, President, Global Network of Sex Workers Project.

"We are often seen but not heard" stated Dr. Smarjit Jana, Chair, International AIDS Conference, Global Hub. Across the world, the governments must affirm the fundamental right of the sex worker community to be recognized under the law and extended legal protection and support to make HIV programmes effective and useful," he added

The freedom to access quality healthcare is under jeopardy in Africa, stated John Mathenge of Kenya. "One government agency exhorts us to practice safe sex and use condoms in every single sexual encounter and another agency confiscates condoms on the ground that we are indulging in immoral practice" and it is not surprising that across Africa the infection rate among sex workers is as high as 14 to 17%," he added.

Appreciating the role of India, Ms. KayThi Win of Myanmar, Burma stated the "Indian Government is treating us like anybody else and that is what we appreciate most."

In the light of the US ban on sex workers, one major freedom that was unanimously demanded for was freedom of movement and to migrate. Speaking about the many fall outs of the US visa restriction Anna Pickering of New Zealand stated that "recently a high level



meeting on sex workers was held in the US and no sex worker could attend the meeting that took many decisions on behalf of the community.”

“Every day and in every milieu, we have to battle against stigma and discrimination against PLHIVs and sex workers and the right to be free from it must be safeguarded by a dedicated law,” stated Akram Pasha, Mysore.

“Without the right to organize and unionize the sex worker community cannot advance its rights,” stated Bharati Dey, co-chair and Secretary of All India Network of Sex Workers

Prior to the inaugural session a panel of senior journalists from India addressed the gathering on Media Responses to Sex Workers Issues and Concerns. In his keynote the well known media commentator and expert, Mr. Paranjay Guha Thakurta emphasized that the media needs to play a pivotal role in the larger struggle for greater inclusion of marginal communities and democratization of society. Other senior journalists Ms. Nupur Basu, Ms. Monideepa Banerjee, Indrajit Chowdhury, Mr. Subir Bhowmik, Mr. D. Umapathy and Chandrashekar Bhattacharya also addressed the gathering.

.....

Sex Workers are not criminals: Devashish Kumar, Mayor in Council, Parks Garden & Square

Kolkata, 23 July 2012: In his inaugural address, Madan Mitra, the Minister of Sports and Transport extended full support to the Sex Workers Freedom Festival and made it clear that sex workers are entitled to their fundamental rights. He went on to add that the “more you deny issues related to sexuality, there are more chances of facing problems and difficulties.”

Taking this forward, Devasish Kumar, Mayor in Council Parks Gardens & Square, said that sex workers are not criminals and he has seen them being “unduly and unfairly harassed” and urged that such criminalization of sex work should stop.

In her keynote address on Health Policy and development paradigm for sex workers, Ms Sujatha Rao, former Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Director General, National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO), stressed that all mainstream development programmes should recognise the realities of sex work and that realise that every sex worker is coerced or trafficked. Hence the thrust should not be to penalise the sex workers or their clients.

Mr. Goutam Ghosh, the noted filmmaker, stated emphatically that the “model of self regulatory board being set up by many sex workers collectives from Bengal, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh to stop minor and coercive trafficking is the only way to deal with this ever-increasing problem.”



The video link with the main International AIDS Conference being held at Washington got established with sex workers both sides focusing on the right of sex workers to be free from arbitrary arrest and police violence.

At Washington, Pye Jacobson, a former sex worker from Sweden spoke about the Swedish model, which makes buying sex illegal being pushed by US and Swedish governments onto other governments around the world. “The Swedish governments’ model is a failure. It has not reduced sex work it has just made us more vulnerable and has made us move into more risky and dangerous workplaces in order to get clients often far away from the prying eyes of the police,” she emphasized.

Agreeing with this, Ms. Marianne Jonker from the Netherlands spoke about the hostile legal environment that sex workers across Eastern Europe and Central Asia are facing. “Ideally speaking we should seek the protection of the law like all other citizens but instead we are scared of seeking protection given the attitude of the police towards us,” she added.

Similarly the sex worker delegates from Africa pointed out that many sex workers’ organizations which have adopted the anti-prostitution oath either limit or avoid working with sex workers entirely for fear of losing critical U.S. funding.

Meanwhile, representatives from sex workers organizations from six continents resolved that media regulatory bodies across the world should safeguard the rights of the community to ensure that media does not violate their rights and maintain the highest professional standards of sensitivity and inclusiveness. This Declaration seeking accountability and sensitivity from the media was signed by nearly 450 delegates, 360 from India and over 90 from sex workers representatives from countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and Thailand.

.....

Huge Sex Workers’ Rally marks Global Day of Action to end AIDS

Kolkata, 24 July 2012: The third day of the International AIDS Conference hub here was marked by a Global Day of Action for Economic and Social Justice to end AIDS.

At the Sex Worker Freedom Festival here, the occasion was marked by a mass rally where over 5000 sex workers marched from Sonagachi to College Square and culminated in celebrating the 20 Years of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee.

Talking about the Global Day for Action, Dr Smarajit Jana, Conference Chair, said that “all that the sex workers have done over the last decade to bring down the HIV epidemic by over 50% cannot be sustained unless sex work is decriminalized and the Positive Sex Workers are given the full range of services from STI treatment to ARV medication without any discrimination.”



“Unless pension becomes universal, there is no chance for HIV positive sex workers like me from north-east to avail the social entitlement,” said Mashi, a female sex worker from Garden of Hope, Manipur.

Taking this forward, Ms. Meena Seshu, representing VAMP, a sex workers collective from Maharashtra, asserted that: “There is now indisputable evidence across many parts of the world that sex workers have been in the forefront of the fight against AIDS and can end it.”

Andrew Hunter, President, Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers declared: “today is a Day of Action for Economic and Social Justice to end AIDS. The action will begin in Kolkata and will be led by Positive Sex Workers from Sonagachi and around the world.”

The rally assumed different significance for sex workers from Bangladesh. Ms. Jaya, President of Sex Workers Network, Bangladesh stated that despite support from the government the sex workers are extremely anxious about the backlash from the fundamentalists. “During the month of Ramzan all the fundamentalists come together and in the name of religion threaten to evict us and deny us our rights.”

In keeping with the theme of the day, a cross section of policy makers and opinion leaders addressed the delegates. In a video message to the Conference, the Minister for Women and Child Development Smt. Krishna Tirath affirmed that we must address the many concerns that socially vulnerable community of women faced. She went on to emphasize that: “Every section of society has a right to live a life of dignity, free from stigma, discrimination and violence. We do recognize that women with multiple vulnerabilities experience social ostracism leading to their further marginalization. It condemns them and their children to a life of uncertainties, lack of entitlements, violence and exploitation. We need to look for solutions that enable social transformation and mainstreaming of such women.”

Ms. Rashmi Singh, Executive Director, National Resource Centre for Women, Ministry of Women and Child Development urged all sex workers to access the schemes and programs earmarked for women facing social vulnerabilities and marginalization..

In the inaugural address, Shri Nikhil Dey, a well known social activist and Shri Baba Adhav, a prominent champion of unorganized workers, extended full support to the demand of Sex Workers to be given all the rights due to unorganized workers.

Mr. Nikhil Dey exhorted the “sex workers to join the Campaign for Universal Pension and in partnership with all marginal communities work for the fulfilment of their demand for pension and other social entitlements to lead a life of dignity and security.”

“All the sex workers and transgender persons should unite with the larger rights groups and movements to fight for the social entitlements which we deserve like any other citizen,” stated Shri Baba Adhav.



Nearly 15 representatives of sex workers collectives from West Bengal, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Manipur, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan and Gujarat spoke at the Conference demanding the right for social and economic justice.

.....

“Sex workers can end AIDS!” resolved 600 sex workers at the International AIDS Conference, Kolkata

Kolkata, 26 July, 2012: On the fifth and penultimate day of the International AIDS Conference Hub in Kolkata, sex workers from 46 countries released the **Kolkata Platform of Action**, to take forward the “fight against exclusion” and “discriminatory practices against sex workers and other most at risk communities.” The Kolkata Platform of Action was formally released by Ms. Bharati Dey, President, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) and Mr. Andrew Hunter, President, Asia Pacific Network of Sex Worker (APNSW)

Launching the Kolkata Platform of Action at the Sex Workers Freedom Festival here, Mr. Andrew Hunter, President, Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) stated that “the sex workers organizations around the world are affirming their faith in three core values.”

“De-criminalize sex work, accept sex work as work and their right to self organization and self determination,” he added. “Eight freedoms encompassing right to form associations, choose work, move and migrate, be protected by law, be free of violence, abuse and discrimination, access quality healthcare and financial security are necessary pre-conditions to an effective HIV response spearheaded by sex workers worldwide,” asserted Dr. Smarajit Jana, Chair, Global Hub. “These freedoms allow us to meaningfully participate in the fight to end AIDS,” re-emphasized Ms. Bhagyalakshmi, President, All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW).

“This is the first-ever kind of meeting with sex workers from so many countries coming together. We also saw different movements coming together and our own networks getting strengthened. Baba Adav, noted social campaigner of unorganised labour and Nikhil Dey, a well known RTI activist have come here personally to support our cause,” added Swapna Gayen, DMSC

The U.S. policy on sex work and HIV, banning the entry of sex workers and using the anti-prostitution pledge to justify punitive action against sex workers, was encouraging many governments to use anti-trafficking laws to criminalize sex work stated leading social activists Ms. Meena Seshu and Ms. Anna Pickering and New Zealand. “We urge policy makers to ensure that sex workers have the freedom to equal protection under the law, which includes working without criminal laws and penalties,” they affirmed jointly. “In several countries judiciary has taken a lead to re-look at the repressive policies against sex workers and India too should take their example to decriminalize sex work,” added Meena



Seshu. Representatives from Ministry of Health, NACO, Ministry of Women and Child Development and many funding organisations like UNAIDS, HIVOS AIDS Fond and others participated and supported the conference which concludes tomorrow.

Speaking on behalf of Positive Sex workers and People living with HIV about the ongoing negotiations on a free trade agreement (FTA) between India and European Union, Mr. John Mathenge and Ms. Pherister Wamboi, from Kenya expressed concern that this agreement has Intellectual Property Enforcement provision that have been deliberately designed to delay the entry of affordable generic medicines which will adversely affect all people living with HIV as the “medicines will get blocked at the European ports and not reach the patients in Africa and the rest of the world.”

Taking this forward, Jai Prakash, Delhi Network of Positive People stated that, “with India, being the world's biggest exporters of generic medicines, often referred to as the pharmacy of the developing world, the agreement aims at stamping out our access to generic medicines.”

“Without worker solidarity we cannot put an end to exploitation and abuse, not only in the sex industry but in every workplace,” stated Ms. Irina Moslova, Mr. Luca Stevenson and Dr. Smarajit Jana representing sex worker collectives from Russia, France and India respectively and Ms. Ruth Morgan Thomas, Global Coordinator of NSWP. They called upon organizations representing women, labour and trade unions, harm reduction and HIV prevention programmes to “listen to the voice of sex workers and build alliances with us so we can achieve the recognition of sex work as work.”

.....

Sex Workers across the country welcome the invoking of Article 21 by the Court to safeguard their right to a life of dignity

Kolkata, 27 July, 2012: Responding to the Supreme Court Order on the PIL on rehabilitation of sex workers, Ms. Bharati Dey, President, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) thanked the two judge bench profusely for taking a considered view on the case. She went on to explain that she welcomed the Court’s decision to reject the Centre’s plea that DMSC should be removed from the Panel constituted by the Court “The Court has recognized the salient principle we have been raising in every possible forum that no policy for sex workers can be made without consulting the community” she stated . And in recognition of this principle the Court has stated that the presence of DMSC is necessary to act as a “sounding board” for the panel striving to identify rehabilitation schemes, she added

The Supreme Court by modifying one of its order’s on welfare and rehabilitation made it clear that while it is not in any way seeking to “legalize prostitution,” the rehabilitation must be “conducive for sex workers to live with dignity in accordance with the provisions of Article 21 of the Constitution.” Clearly the court by seeking to invoke Article 21 has once



again upheld the supremacy of the Constitution and the sex workers organizations across the country welcomed it.

However, Dr. S. Jana, while lauding the Court for strengthening constitutional safeguards struck a note of caution reminding the sex workers organizations all over the country that the battle is far from over. “We have a lot of work to do to ensure that the safeguard guaranteed under Article 21 becomes a reality for each and every sex worker in the country.”

The 600 sex workers from 42 countries were moved and overjoyed by the small but significant victory registered by sex workers organizations of the country. Commenting on the order, many sex workers from different parts of the world hoped that a pro-active judiciary which is so unique to India could be emulated by other countries from the region and across the world.

.....