

## **UNGASS - High Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS**

New York  
10-11 June 2008

Last update: June 15, 2008

### **Overview**

The United Nations held a High Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS in New York, 10-11 June 2008. Sex workers and advocates distributed a statement that "[Sex Workers Thank UN Secretary General for His Support](#)" during the opening plenary.

On March 26, 2008, the Report of the Commission on AIDS in Asia was released with a statement from the Secretary General. This excellent report calls for the decriminalization of sex work, and counsels governments and other actors to, "Avoid programmes that accentuate AIDS-related stigma and can be counterproductive. Such programmes may include 'crack-downs' on red-light areas and arrest of sex workers." Realistic efforts to include affected populations including sex workers are critical to combat the spread of HIV — in fact, sex workers are generally leaders in sexual health when their human rights are respected. The report further promotes the needs of marginalized populations including drug users for efficacious and ethical solutions, such as harm reduction methodologies, to the HIV epidemic. The report further promotes the needs of marginalized populations including drug users for efficacious and ethical solutions, such as harm reduction methodologies, to the HIV epidemic.

On 10 June 2008, a two-hours informal interactive civil society hearing, with the theme of Action For Universal Access 2010: Myths and Realities, was run in High-Level Meeting on AIDS (General Assembly, United Nations, New York). High level representatives of UN Member States and Observers took part in this hearing, during which the views of a diverse group of people from civil society were highlighted. This is a part of the official proceedings of the United Nations 2008 Comprehensive Review of the progress achieved in realizing the 2001 Declaration of Commitment in HIV/AIDS and the 2006 Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS. The civil society speakers brought frontline experience to the session, addressed the challenges issues underlying the spread of epidemic, stressed the importance of accountability and communities' meaningful involvement. The outcomes of the hearing will be documented and will contribute to the summary document of the President of the General Assembly.

Photographs of sex worker activities during the Meeting are available on the [gallery page](#).

### **Sex Work and HIV in High Level Meeting**

A four-minute speech on Sex Work and HIV was prepared by Alejandra Gil of Asociacion en PRO Apoyo a Servidores (Mexico) and Gulnara Kurmanova of Tais Plus NGO (Kyrgyz Republic). Gulnara Kurmanova presented the speech during the civil society hearing, with a special request to include the contributions about sex work and HIV in the summary report of the meeting. Key issues addressed in this speech were:

Decriminalization of sex work; Sex workers human rights; and Stigma and Discrimination. Governments, UN Agencies and international community as whole was called to stop violence against sex workers, to recognize sex work as a legitimate one, and to include sex workers into all decision making processes which directly affected their lives. The speech highlighted recent human rights abuses of sex workers in Cambodia as an example of the ways discriminatory legislation leads to rights violations of sex workers.

We acknowledge gratefully the technical and financial support of this action provided by [ICASO](#).

### **Sex workers speak to the press**

Meena Seshu and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi spoke during a press conference highlighting exclusion and inclusion of women. Meena Seshu said:

"Sex workers thank United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon for his support of their efforts to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The statement from the Secretary General calls for decriminalisation of sex work, and counsels Governments and other actors to 'Avoid programmes that accentuate AIDS related stigma can be counter productive. Such programmes may include crack downs on red light areas and arrest of sex workers.' Unfortunately Governments are now changing all laws related to sex work to accommodate the US governments ant prostitution pledge and policy through PEPFAR legislation that conflates sex work and trafficking. This leads to discrimination, exclusion and violence against people in sex work.

"Trafficking is not sexwork and conflating a criminal offence, i.e. trafficking, to adult consensual exchange of sexual services for money is not acceptable. For instance the Cambodian government has passed a law against sex work and since march sex workers have been raided, arrested, detained, denied medical services, beaten and raped by police. We as sexwork rights advocates condemn the brutal acts by state authorities in Cambodia.

"I would also take this opportunity as a women's rights activist to draw attention to the fact that Governments are not backing their promises on women's rights through concrete programee and resources. Women and girls are not mere instruments in the fight against HIV/AIDS."

### **Sex workers and rights advocates protest human rights violations in Cambodia**

Sex workers and human rights advocates condemned police brutality against sex workers in a protest at the Permanent Mission of the Royal Kingdom of Cambodia to the United Nations on the afternoon of 11 June, 2008.



Sex workers and activists presented a [letter signed by activists and advocates](#) from around the world to Cambodia's ambassador to the United Nations. You can sign on to the letter by writing to secretariat at nswp dot org.

Many Dy, of the Cambodian Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS, called for Justice for Sex Workers in Cambodia at community events during the UNHLM. She said:

"As a result of the anti human trafficking law adopted in January 2008, sex workers across Cambodia are now facing shocking levels of violence, rape and discrimination.

"Because of this many sex workers are no longer going to STD clinics or accessing HIV treatment and care services. So while Cambodia is proud of its success story in the fight against AIDS, we as women living with HIV are concerned that this success is now being undone by this violation of the rights of sex workers. Please join us, Cambodian civil society, in calling on the Cambodian government to repeal the anti trafficking law and take immediate steps to end the violence and discrimination of sex workers including by the police and local authorities. We also call for the government to charge the perpetrators of this violence and rape — sex workers deserve justice now. Finally we urge the government to ensure that sex workers have access to all HIV services — including prevention, treatment and care."

### **Background to Cambodia protest**

The Cambodian Government under the influence of the US has passed a law against sex work. Since March, sex workers have been rounded up in raids, arrested, detained, denied medical services, beaten and raped by police. At least three sex workers have died in police custody. Others are being denied life-saving medicines. Earlier this year, Cambodia passed an extremely punitive law criminalizing sex work. We have evidence of grievous human rights violations committed against sex workers. One sex worker said, "I was put on the van and brought to the center but they told me not to get down

when we reached the center. Four of them raped me one after another and then they allowed me to get away from the place." Police and detention centre guards openly abuse the women. Their money, jewelry, and other valuables such as phones are routinely stolen by the police. HIV-positive people who are put into the center cannot have the regular ARVs they are required to take everyday. Some women have already fallen ill as a result of the abuses and the violence committed by the security guards. No care or medical treatment has been made available to any women for their injuries or medical conditions. Dy Many of the Cambodian Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS said, "So while Cambodia is proud of its success story in the fight against AIDS, we as women living with HIV are concerned that this success is now being undone by this violation of the rights of sex workers."

A [14-minute video](#) from Women's Network for Unity, Cambodia's union of sex workers, and the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers has first-hand accounts of the rights violations experienced by sex workers.

### **Other activity**

Sex workers successfully advocated for the inclusion of sex workers in the documents prepared by civil society. These include the general statement from civil society, and another about women entitled "[Women Demand Action and Accountability Now](#)". One of the demands made condemns violence against sex workers:

"Articulate or refine a clear policy framework that gives priority to violence against women and girls, HIV/AIDS and their inter-linkages. This should ensure that violence against women and girls, including sex workers, lesbians, transgender women, etc, is addressed across the HIV prevention, treatment and care spectrum and that these policies are translated into action plans and assessments and programming. These policies must result in programs and services to prevent violence and to support survivors of violence."

Another demand is to:

Promote and protect the human rights of sex workers and drug users, prevent all forms of violence against people in sex work and people who use drugs. All laws, policies and programmes must clearly distinguish between sex work and trafficking. Ensure adequate resources and supportive policy frameworks that decriminalization of sex work. Additionally, we condemn the human rights abuses committed against sex workers in Cambodia. We support the sex workers of Cambodia in their fight for livelihood and justice."