

Network of Sex Work Projects Meeting

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 16-19 July 2006

Background

The Network of Sex Work Projects held a meeting in Rio de Janeiro, 16-19 July 2006.

The meeting had two goals:

- To identify priority issues for global advocacy, and
- To review the role and structure of the NSWP and make recommendations about ways to improve or reform it.

The outcome of the meeting is this document that sets out possible ways forward on advocacy issues and the structure and governance of the NSWP that were discussed. The people who were present at the meeting undertook to share this information within their region or country and prepare feedback. Rather than make decisions, the agenda was to draft proposals for network structure, criteria for membership and a mission. These are to be offered for others to comment upon and for suggestions and further input.

The ultimate goal is to craft a structure with input from sex workers and allies around the world that will support and foster strong advocacy. This process is detailed below. Additionally, common issues were discussed in order to consider how sex workers and allies can support each other, particularly within regional networks.

Financial support for the meeting was provided by the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS and the local host organization was Davida, Rio de Janeiro. The meeting was held after a meeting of UNFPA to which people from 14 networks and sex work organizations were invited. Participants in the NSWP meeting were those who could stay back after the UNFPA meeting and extra people from Africa and Europe who were under represented.

History of the NSWP

The meeting began with a history of the NSWP. The NSWP was founded in 1992 as a network of HIV prevention projects that involved sex workers. Most founding organisations were sex workers rights groups that had recently taken on HIV prevention work. At that time, the main mission of the NSWP was to ensure that sex workers were involved in a response to HIV that respects the rights of sex workers. It was never the intention that the NSWP be the global voice of sex workers. The role of a network of sex work projects was considered complimentary to that of the International Committee on Prostitutes Rights (ICPR), a committee of prostitutes and feminists. This duality was discussed and agreed upon at a joint meeting in Amsterdam in 1992. The ICPR stopped operating soon after and the NSWP became known as the global organisation on and of male, female and transgender sex workers. Fifteen years later, the environment has changed. There are now thousands of HIV/AIDS funded sex work projects. Few such projects meaningfully involve sex workers, while some harm and stigmatise sex workers.

The NSWP operated without core funding for its first 10 years. Instead funds were obtained for individual projects such as publishing Making Sex Work Safe and participating in global fora. These funds were always channeled through sex worker groups. In 1999, Shane Petzer was appointed (unpaid) coordinator and a board was formed. The NSWP was registered in South Africa in 2002 prior to receiving core funding (from the Gates Foundation). This funding was withdrawn in 2004 as a result of US government policy. Shane became very ill in early 2004 and the board asked Paulo Longo to travel to South Africa to wind up the office there and begin the process of registering in Brazil. That was underway when Paulo died later in 2004. Since October 2004 the NSWP has not had an office and Melissa Ditmore has been (unpaid) acting coordinator. A review will take place in 2006 after a meeting of representatives of networks from all regions. Some of the NSWP activities from October 2004 to July 2006 were:

- a website and listserv
- meetings of sex work projects in Africa and Asia
- representation on UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board
- representation at Beijing +10
- representation at UN high-level meeting on AIDS
- representation on the Global Coalition of Women and AIDS
- representation at UNFPA Global Consultation on Sex Work and HIV
- publication of *Research for Sex Work*
- fundraising and planning this global meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- fundraising and planning for the International Conference on AIDS in Toronto.

Membership of the NSWP has always been open to any organization or individual who supports the NSWP goals. The process is for a potential new member to be nominated to the NSWP list by an existing member who can confirm that the organization or person is bona fide and for the nomination to be seconded. Once on the list the organization or individual is able to use the NSWP name to conduct activities that contribute to the mission of the NSWP, to post information and opinions to the NSWP list, and to attend events organized or promoted by the NSWP.

The issues

A brainstorming session produced the following list of priority issues that all regions share:

- Sex work is work — need for recognition of sex work as a legitimate occupation
- Violence — particularly state-sponsored violence
- Law reform — global opposition to the criminalisation of sex work and our clients,
- Working conditions
- Lack of access to Social Security and social benefit programs
- Reducing stigma and discrimination against male, female and transgender sex workers, clients and the sex industry
- Unethical research
- Building alliances with the labour movement (trade unions) and with migrants organisations
- Access to general health care, reproductive and sexual health, and antiretroviral medications (ARVs)

- Resources and US policy — US funding policy that means that the only programmes for sex workers in much of the workers are limited to public health. This is not just money, but also access to condoms and information (education about rights).
- Rehabilitation/rescue/prison (very related to US policy). The conflation of sex work with trafficking and sexual exploitation of children is used to prevent appropriate responses to the sex industry and to deny sex workers rights.
- Migration and mobility of sex workers and the links with human trafficking that are exaggerated and distorted. Migration status further compounds many other issues.
- Migration and citizenship policies that affect the movement of people, and anti-trafficking efforts that adversely affect sex workers.
- Criminalisation of purchasing sex — "the Swedish model" — is a threat to the conditions and rights of sex workers.
- Lack of access to condoms and personal lubricant
- Conceptual and programmatic separation of men and transgender sex workers from female sex workers. Transgenders are not "men who have sex with men" and all people who sell sex have issues in common.
- The right to family is routinely violated. Children of sex workers are sometimes taken into state custody, are undocumented and have no right to go to school.
- Sharing information with limited resources — who has internet access, how can they share; communication in places with many languages (Europe, Asia); and working across venues.

The following is a list of issues that vary significantly from region to region:

- Abuse, exploitation and stigmatization of sex workers by NGOs and development agencies that run nongovernmental organization (NGO) programmes for HIV prevention and care. It may be important to learn from the areas in which this is less of a problem.
- The role of drugs and substance abuse by sex workers. Some regions see this as important while a group from one country strongly expressed the view that any emphasis on drugs and sex work further stigmatizes sex workers.
- The donor-driven HIV/AIDS-related agenda has overwhelmed the voices for labour organising in many places due to the control that the HIV organisations exert over sex-worker organizing.

Governance of the NSWP

There was much discussion about the amorphous nature of the NSWP as a network without an official board since 2004 and the coordinator was appointed rather than elected. There were also concerns that people who attend global policy forums as the NSWP do not feed back enough information to the NSWP list or put reports on the website. It was agreed by everyone that this period without a functional structure has presented difficulties for the NSWP. Some people felt that the NSWP had never been sufficiently democratic while others saw this as a reflection of the governance of most of sex work organizations and many NGOs. However, a consensus was reached to take this opportunity to discuss not what the NSWP has been and is now, but to learn, move forward and focus on what we

want a global network to be for the future.

A variety of views about the way the NSWP should be governed in the future were put forward. Some people felt that there should be no global network at all, while others felt that there should be a strong, formal and accountable network.

There are various views about whether the NSWP can or should be global voice for sex workers. Some people felt that the potential for the NSWP to perform a much-needed broader role is limited by its history in HIV and human rights activism and its membership of individuals, NGOs and sex workers organisations. This would suggest a new network exclusively of sex workers and sex worker rights groups. After much discussion about this, a consensus emerged that organizing must take place locally and the national and regional organizations that form in each region should be able to choose which alliances or networks they join. In other words, a top down approach to defining membership was not considered appropriate. It was also pointed out that it is not feasible to judge what is a genuine sex worker organization in many places or from afar. From this the suggestion emerged that the NSWP become a network of existing networks that agree with a shared mission statement. This is reflected in the proposals below.

We need a structure flexible enough to include any qualifying networks from those sub-regions that emerge and also for networks of transgender or male sex workers. Network structure should be flexible enough to adequately accommodate networks and organisations in Asia, which has one-third of the total world population, including two countries of more than one billion people. The networks of networks proposed are intended to enable this high level of variety.

It was recognised that a global network of and for sex workers and sex work projects cannot be truly democratic and there should be no pretense that we are proposing a democratic structure for the global network.

To be or not to be — the NSWP?

The issue of whether to abolish the NSWP and begin a new and different network was discussed. We also discussed the value of changing the name of the NSWP. As everyone present valued global networking and advocacy, discussion focused on whether to adapt the mission of the NSWP and retain the name, or to create a new network with a new mission and a new name. This is reflected in the proposals below.

Arguments for keeping the name included the recognized 'brand' NSWP, the fact that in 15 years the NSWP has achieved a great deal for the inclusion of sex workers voices at high level international fora, and supported sex workers and sex work projects who seek support in their local contexts (e.g. efforts to prevent unethical research with sex workers in Cambodia and Cameroon). We should capitalise on these achievements and the recognition of the NSWP — if the name is lost then we may also lose the place NSWP has won in the international policy arena and it may give the abolitionists, rehabilitation programmes and rescuers an opportunity to replace sex workers' voices in the international

policy arena as there may be difficulty in maintaining the place held by NSWP.

Arguments against keeping the name were the problematic history of the NSWP and that many sense a lack of transparency in the NSWP. There was additionally the perception that the word "projects" does not reflect the membership and the goals of those present. This was of particular concern to the Brazilian participants.

Ultimately, at this time, it was felt by most participants that the name NSWP should be kept at this time. However, participants are expected to consult and report back from their regions and networks about the name of the global network. Discussion of whether to call the global network NSWP is reflected in proposals 2 and 3.

The proposals

The aim of the structural discussions was to create a structure that would enable a global network to be both transparent and accountable to its membership while allowing regions to maintain their autonomy.

Membership criteria

Some people at the meeting expressed very strongly that they feel the NSWP should be formalised and accountable to a definite membership while others suggested that regional networks communicating with each other does not require a separate layer of organising. The proposals that emerged are a genuine attempt to resolve these different perspectives in order to move forward.

Proposal 1

To create a new global network of individual sex workers and organisations that are led by sex workers and which advocate on labour rights and the full spectrum of issues around stigma and oppose criminalisation of sex work.

Participants felt that this proposal was too similar to the current NSWP despite a renewed focus on labour rights. It was not discussed further. because it did not offer real structural change or easily provide accountability and transparency. However, it remains as an option.

A network of networks

Representatives from the Asia-Pacific region and from Europe proposed networks of networks. These were distinguished by the European proposal to include social

movements to drive the networks. This is described after proposals 2 and 3.

Proposal 2

Make some changes to the NSW mission statement to replace the reference to human rights in the existing NSW mission statement with a statement about labour rights and a list of human rights (below). Change the membership to regional networks of sex workers, sex-worker rights activists, sex worker organisations and sex work projects. All members would have to agree with, and abide by, the mission statement. Each region would have approximately three to five members from five regions various sub-regions. All genders would be represented. Well-established organisations and nascent networks in Africa and North America, which do not have formal networks, would be invited to join. Membership and criteria to join the regional networks would be determined at regional level.

Proposal 3

Create a new global network with a new mission statement. The membership criteria would be limited to networks of sex workers organisations and sex work projects that represent a social movement and agree with the mission statement. It would have members from all regions and subregions and all genders. The inclusion of individuals in the network members would be addressed by each network.

Proposals 2 and 3 share the draft mission statement and network criteria below.

Membership criteria for networks joining the global network

Member networks must meet the following criteria:

- Accept sex work as work
- Promote the rights, empowerment and organising of sex workers
- Oppose the criminalisation of sex work and support law reform informed by sex workers and in the interest of sex workers
- Sex workers represented in leadership and decision-making positions
- Utilise a human rights framework

Tier Two — a social movement

The second organised tier proposed by the European participants was conceived of as a social movement. The models examined for this proposal included the World Social Forum. This social movement layer of organisation is where national, regional and global grassroots networks may organically emerge, grow and change. The regional networks

should be connected to and driven by this grassroots social movement. The people in the social movement could organically and relationally determine their regional representatives.

Many meeting participants felt that within the social movement there is a need to ensure sex worker-only space can be provided for those wishing it, in addition to opportunities to work with allies on strategy and campaigns. Allies are crucial for all social movements.

Membership criteria for the social movement

Very open criteria was offered for participation in the social movement.

- Recognise sex work as work
- Support sex worker self-organising
- Oppose criminalization of sex work

Commonalities to both proposed networks of networks

Regions in both proposed networks of networks, particularly in geographically expansive and diverse regions like Africa and Asia, may choose to break down into sub-regions or linguistic blocs. Concerns were expressed over representation of sub-regions and the size and compositions of regions, if we are to use the United Nations five regions formula. Sub-regions such as the (non-Spanish-speaking) Caribbean, Central Asia, the Middle East and Pacific Islands may be underrepresented by the 5 regions formula if our regions are not flexible. It was felt important that each region must be able to participate at their current level organisation. Each region will determine its own network structure, with expectations of growth and change over time, learning from the others and adapting what is deemed useful. It is imperative that no structure be imposed upon regions.

Networks should include members that address issues beyond HIV, particularly labour rights, human rights, and migration and mobility. Each region should seek to include sex workers from as diverse backgrounds as possible — male, female, transgender, migrants, different work sectors, and more — it may be necessary to include more than one network from a region to accommodate this. This is for each region to determine.

In some regions, national and regional networks may not exist (North America, Africa) or sex workers feel unable or do not want to organise on their own at present. This was discussed and it was agreed that there are ways of ensuring that sex workers from a recognizable social movement in those regions are represented. Each region must be able to participate at their current level of development and sex worker organisation.

These proposals are not a decided or a definitive list. They are a starting point for more discussion and there may well be other, better, options that people who were not at the meeting may propose.

Everyone at the meeting agreed with the principles set forth in membership criteria for networks and social movements. However, it was noted that the place of law reform and workers' rights advocacy varies from place to place and their needs to be a broad understanding of the cultural, political and religious contexts. Examples of this were given: It is not logical to campaign for decriminalization of sex work where it is not actually illegal or where there is shariah law that criminalizes all adultery. Nor is it reasonable to expect sex workers or NGOs to demand human or workers rights in, for example, Burma. Again, the priority issues must be determined locally. A top down approach from a global network that proscribes an agenda will not work.

In all places it is seen as crucial to separate trafficking from migration and mobility and child sexual abuse from commercial sex involving consenting adults.

In many places hundreds of thousands of male, female and transgender sex workers are being mobilized by NGOs, such as in China and India. It is important that the regional and global networks and social movements work in ways that enable them to advocate for their human and work rights not just the right to "use a condom 100% of the time". This is challenging in view of the domination by the HIV agencies and NGOs they work for.

Draft Mission Statement

The verb "uphold" was chosen because "promote" translates poorly for our purposes into romance languages.

Two versions have been proposed — the first during the meeting, the second by email after the meeting:

Version 1

The Global NSWP exists to connect regional networks advocating for the rights of sex workers and to uphold the voice of sex workers globally.

The rights that we claim include:

1. The right to work, to free choice of employment including sex work, and to just and favourable conditions of work, and the recognition of sex workers' labour rights.

Version 2

The Global NSWP exists to connect regional networks advocating for the rights of female, male and transgender sex workers, including the right to work and the recognition of sex workers' labour rights, and to uphold the voice of sex workers globally.

The rights men, transgenders and women selling sexual services claim include:

1. The right to work, to free choice of employment, and to just and favourable conditions of work.

The rest of the rights are the same for both options.

1. The right to life, liberty and security of person
2. The right to be free from arbitrary interference with one's private and family life, home or correspondence and from attacks on honour and reputation
3. The right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health
4. The right to freedom of movement and residence
5. The right to be free from slavery, forced labour and servitude
6. The right to equal protection of the law and protection against discrimination and any incitement to discrimination under any of the varied and intersecting status of gender, race, citizenship, sexual orientation etc.
7. The right to marry and found a family
8. The right to peaceful assembly and association
9. The right to leave any country, including one's own, and to return to one's own country
10. The right to seek asylum and to non-refoulement
11. The right to participate in the cultural and public life of society

The ICRSE Declaration was borrowed for the fact that the legal rights listed are recognised internationally. (The ICRSE Declaration is online at <http://www.sexworkereurope.org/website/declaration.htm>.) However, there was one change from the Declaration of the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe - the right to work sentence. This was number 8 in the original list of rights, and was moved up to emphasise the importance of labour rights for sex workers.

Everyone present agreed that sex work is work, but there was considerable discussion of how to address this in the mission statement. Some people felt that this should be added to existing parts of the NSWP mission statement, others felt it should replace it. Although it is acceptable as a draft, the mission statement is limited to "claiming", "advocating" and "upholding". Aims and objectives and then a constitution will need more detail about what actions the network will (and will not?) take to forward this agenda once the global structure and mission statement have been agreed.

Next steps

It was acknowledged that lack of follow-up and local consultation by regional delegates after previous NSWP meetings contributed significantly to the NSWP being seen as unrepresentative. It is disturbing that although several new representatives of organizations that co-founded the NSWP were present at this meeting, few had been informed of the role their organization had played in the NSWP. It is also a concern that some delegates who have not had sufficient access to the information they need to participate, are not subscribed to the NSWP list. There was a strong sense therefore that for the sex workers rights movement to be strengthened and for solidarity and understanding to increase, an

open and participatory process needs to take place and responsibility for taking that forward lies with the meeting participants.

The delegates to this meeting agreed to consult on these proposals in their regions and share other information from this meeting with sex workers and sex workers organizations in their area and to feed it back to a group that was nominated at the meeting which will reconvene by e-mail. This group will consist of one representative from each network, usually a coordinator from that network:

- Asia-Pacific — APNSW
- Latin America — Redtrabsex
- Europe — ICRSE
- Africa — Sisonke
- North America — PONY

Melissa Ditmore (USA) was initially responsible for collecting feedback from each region, but she will now collect input from North America for PONY, which is taking this on as there is no formal network in North America.

The meeting acknowledged that these networks and their leaders do not "represent" every sex worker or sex work project in their regions. This has held back past consultations and led to the group of volunteers after a meeting being seen as unauthorized. It was decided that it is in the interests of transparency and solidarity that any sex work projects in the region channel their comments to this group, who everyone acknowledges does not have a representative mandate.

Participants

Africa

- Germaine, Madagascar
- NicolŽ, SWEAT, South Africa
- Tsepho, SisonkŽ, South Africa

Asia and the Pacific

- Cheryl, APNSW, UK
- Chutchai, APNSW, Thailand
- Khartini, APNSW, Malaysia
- Pornpit, Empower, Thailand

Europe

- Petra, ICRSE, The Netherlands
- Ruth, ICRSE, Scotland

Latin America

- Dorothy, Davida, Brazil
- Elizabeth, Redtrabsex, Ecuador
- Fatima, Brazil
- Flavio ,Davida, Brazil
- Freddie, Davida, Brazil
- Gabriella, Davida, Brazil
- Lucia, Brazil

North America

- Anna-Louise Craigo, Stella, Canada
- Melissa, PONY, USA