

MEDIA RELEASE

Friday, May 30, 2003

Network of Sex Work Projects calls on G8 to support sex work projects

CAPE TOWN — On May 21, the US House gave the final congressional approval to a bill that provides funding for a five-year US\$15bn plan to fight HIV/Aids around the world. The bill now proceeds to President Bush for his signature. It is expected that he will urge other states at the G8 meeting early next month to follow the US lead in committing significant funds to fighting HIV/AIDS.

The Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) shares the mixed sentiments of the global AIDS community regarding the US bill. The NSWP applauds the US for the scale of the commitment to the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS globally. However, the NSWP is concerned that the bill contains much that is counter-productive to effective HIV/AIDS prevention programs world-wide. The bill sets aside one-third of all prevention funding for abstinence programs, and it includes a "conscience clause" that ensures that religious groups have access to funding even if they oppose condom distribution. In particular, the NSWP strongly condemns those measures in the bill that will limit funding for HIV prevention among sex workers.

The bill introduces a "purity test" that projects must pass in order to qualify for funds. It stipulates that all projects applying for funds must have a "policy explicitly opposing trafficking and prostitution". "This measure could have potentially devastating effects on sex workers, their families, and the wider communities in which they live," says Paulo Longo, long-time AIDS activist and co-ordinator of the NSWP. "Projects working with sex workers throughout the world do not 'promote' sex work as a 'lifestyle'. Especially in poor countries, projects work with the twin aims of empowering sex workers to protect themselves from HIV, while at the same time helping sex workers to discover other means of generating income. These projects have a proven track record when it comes to reducing HIV among sex workers. Denying them funding is likely to have serious impact on infection rates among the poorest and most vulnerable."

Behind this "purity test" is an unlikely alliance of pro-abstinence, anti-abortionist Christian conservatives and radical feminists such as Prof. Donna Hughes of the University of Rhode Island. "These feminists are not interested in the realities of life on the ground for sex workers in poor countries" explains Longo. "The 'rescue' policies that they advocate have been condemned by international human rights organisations as a major cause of violence against sex workers. That they actively promote these abusive measures shows that they are more concerned with exporting radical American feminist ideology than with preventing HIV."

The G8 summit is the chance for other wealthy countries to match the US commitment to funding the fight against AIDS, while at the same time resisting the substitution of ideology for effective prevention. The NSWP urges the G8 nations to support initiatives that help sex workers protect themselves and their families against HIV through the proven methods of self-organisation and peer education.