



## Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers letter to UN Women regarding “e-consultation”

16 October 2016

Dear UN Women,

With regard to the “Consultation seeking views on UN Women approach to sex work, the sex trade and prostitution” please find attached a submission on behalf of the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW).

APNSW is a regional network working to promote and protect the health and human rights of female, male and transgender sex workers in Asia and the Pacific. APNSW is a membership-based organisation with 34 members in 22 countries, who range in size from small community-based organisations to national networks representing hundreds of thousands of sex workers.

On receiving the consultation document on 8<sup>th</sup> September, APNSW learned with some surprise that UN Women “*has been meeting with various organizations on their analysis of sex work and prostitution for the past few years.*”

Precisely which organisations with whom UN Women have been meeting remains a mystery. APNSW are unaware of any major consultations with sex workers in Asia and the Pacific organised by UN Women in recent years.

This stands in marked contrast with the “[Regional Consultation on HIV and Sex Work](#)” held in Pattaya, Thailand in 2010. At this event - also known as the “Pattaya Consultation” - APNSW, UNAIDS and UNFPA invited around 150 delegates from eight countries to meet and discuss approaches to HIV in the region directly with sex workers. Participants included government officials, police officers, UN staff and representatives of international NGOs. Sex worker groups and projects came from Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Thailand, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Cambodia, China, and Australia.

The challenges of such a consultation were significant in terms of time, money, translation/interpretation, and the imbalances of power between privileged policy makers and marginalised sex workers. However, the event marked a turning point in regional policy makers’ understanding of sex workers’ perspectives, needs, and human rights.

In spite of the financial constraints within which UN Women must currently operate, it is astonishing to see less than six weeks of time being given to an online-only consultation. This also seems to be the first significant opportunity for those who will be most affected by this policy – sex workers themselves – to contribute. While an online only approach is bad enough, the invitation is not even addressed directly to sex workers. Sex workers are invited to contribute alongside “*anyone who so wishes to contribute, no matter your analysis.*” (!)



APNSW notes that UN Women also state “*Our work on policy positioning will include hearing from ... sex workers/sex worker groups.*” APNSW hopes this means that plans and funding proposals are underway in order to engage in meaningful consultations with sex workers above and beyond this online consultation. This must include face-to-face meetings between a diverse range of sex workers and the UN Women staff/consultants responsible for drafting the policy position, in addition to wider participatory processes.

If UN Women hope to publish a policy paper in 2017 but are only now beginning to engage with sex workers, the urgency of this task cannot be underestimated. For comparison: the worldwide consultation process undertaken by the Global Network of Sex Work Projects in producing the “[Consensus Statement on Sex Work, Human Rights, and the Law](#)” took eighteen months and was community-led throughout. When Amnesty International developed their [policy on protecting sex workers’ human rights](#) they conducted new research in four countries, in addition to other consultations. How does UN Women plan to make sex workers voices central to their policy on sex work without in depth consultations with sex workers?

Many sex worker groups in Asia and the Pacific are working in highly constrained environments due to the criminalisation of sex work and the stigma and discrimination sex workers face. Many are operating with minimal funding, many do not speak any of the official UN languages, and all are dealing with the day-to-day urgent priorities of supporting sex workers.

To expect these sex worker groups to turn around and reply – in English “*where possible*” - to a highly structured proposal using language relating to high level international legal concepts, suggests at best a lack of foresight, and at worst a deliberate desire to exclude sex workers’ voices.

APNSW hopes this is not the case, and would be happy to assist UN Women in any way possible in facilitating meaningful consultations with sex workers across the region.

In the meantime, APNSW would like to take this opportunity to draw the attention of UN Women to the wide range of documents, research, and policy positions that have already been developed by or in consultation with sex workers within a human rights framework. In the absence of time and resources for new consultations, these must form the basis of any new UN Women policy position on sex work. Please see the attached consultation response for further details.

APNSW is also a member of Global NSWP and endorses the [letter](#) and [draft framework](#) submitted on 21<sup>st</sup> September.

Regards,

APNSW Management Committee and Secretariat