

XIVth International AIDS Conference Barcelona, Spain 7-12 July 2002

By Shane Petzer

Some 15 000 delegates participated in this bi-annual event. Amongst hundreds of organisations represented at the Conference, the NSWP hosted a number of events and presented work in a variety of forums throughout the duration of the Conference which contributed to the Conferences' overall success.

Booth

Once again the NSWP hosted an exciting booth exhibition at this years AIDS Conference. Many thanks to Scott Hart, this years' Booth Co-ordinator for the excellent job done in setting it all up and in managing volunteers for this event. As the photographs show — the bold and bright colours and dramatic range of posters and banners attest to a new energy and enthusiasm in the NSWP for action around a broad range of issues facing sex workers in a variety of settings around the world.

Red Light District Theme

Our Red Light District theme worked very well. Originally met with resistance from the Conference organisers — we organised for sex work projects from around the world to be placed near the NSWP booth. A collection of light-fittings of "Hookers Handbags" filled with condoms and lipstick and funky lightbulbs made by an HIV/AIDS women's group and a crafters collective in Cape Town linked all the sex work project booths together into a Red Light District.

The Booth attracted about a thousand visitors a day and booth volunteers were sometimes hard pressed to keep up with all the enquiries. The NSWP Booth always manages to attract a stream of supporters, curiosity seekers and always a new activist and face appears on the scene, ready to connect with the broader sex worker rights activist movement.

Volunteers: Volunteers from various sex work projects and networks assisted us in staffing the booth. Much thanks to NSWP Board members who helped with holding the fort as it were and forming the core of the volunteer staff. To newcomers to the international work, it was so great to meet you and to start involving many of you into the network and into some of the actions we held in Barcelona.

Networking

The booth provided an ideal opportunity for delegates to obtain information and material around sex work projects from around the world. NSWP specific resource material such as the latest Spanish version of "Making Sex Work Safe" (Haciendo El Trabajo Sexual Seguro), by Cheryl Overs and Paulo Longo were available for distribution and some 300 copies were handed out from the Booth. In addition sex work organisations from Spain, Canada, India, South Africa, the UK and elsewhere displayed and distributed sex work materials from the booth these included posters, pamphlets and materials developed by sex workers, sex work projects and organisations working in projects with sex workers.

Skills Building Workshop

Sex workers are generally considered a key population in terms of HIV. The Network of Sex Work Projects and others have long advocated that sex workers can assess their own risk, and can plan and manage their own programmes. There is growing evidence supporting the strategy of community development and participation as an effective means of unlocking powerful resources of the community itself to address problems — and that this has an impact on HIV and other health issues affecting sex workers. While programs increasingly acknowledge the value of sex worker empowerment and participation in HIV/AIDS programmes, few know how this can be implemented in practice.

The Skills Building Session highlighted the experience of the Network of Sex Work Projects and its partners in participation and empowerment of sex workers in AIDS prevention. Two case studies were showcased as what has been done to support sex workers in the design and implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programs. Participants were then invited to join breakout groups to work through practical activities which were designed to increase skills in how to implement community development approaches.

Nandinee Banopadhyay, Study Co-ordinator of the Horizons study in Calcutta, India gave a report back of results of sex worker empowerment from the famous Sonagachi Project.

Paulo Longo, Principal Investigator and Chairman of the Board of the NSWP spoke of the Horizons/PIM/SEPED Study which highlighted the importance of empowerment in reducing violence and in improving access to health care for sex workers in Rio, Brazil.

A total of 57 people participated in the Skills Building Session.

Conference Presentations

- Shane Petzer, the Co-ordinator of the Network of Sex Work Projects spoke at an oral session and presented a paper entitled "Private Lives, Public Policy."
- Paulo Longo, chairman of the NSWP Board, presented preliminary results of the Rio Study.
- Dr Penny Saunders and a team of people from the USA presented a workshop on transgendered sex work issue in the US.

Copies of their presentations and reports can be obtained from the Secretariat.

Satellite Meeting

The NSWP Satellite Meeting attracted 123 people. Cheryl Overs, Dr Penelope Saunders, Jo Doezema, Shane Petzer and Dr Carol Jenkins spoke on a panel highlighting issues facing the sex worker rights movement such as mobility and migration, HIV/AIDS and the more recent verbal attacks by anti-sex worker and feminist advocates from the anti-trafficking movement.

Recent developments within the NSWP were highlighted as well as the launch of the new Spanish version of *Making Sex Work Safe*.

Satellite Meeting participants were encouraged by co-ordinator Shane Petzer, insisting that sex workers around the world should be galvanised into action and that law reform and labour rights were at the core of the fight against discrimination and stigmatisation of sex workers. He stated that HIV and AIDS cannot be addressed in the global sex industry without sex workers being afforded industrial rights.

Political Action

The Bi-Annual AIDS Conferences provided an arena, for amongst others, information exchange and networking opportunities. It was also a platform for sex workers, programmes and organisations to showcase much of the valuable work that is undertaken around the world. In some settings the work undertaken by agencies in service delivery focusing on sex workers was counter productive and harmed sex workers in many ways. The NSWP actions in Barcelona highlighted some of the problems encountered when agencies render services to sex workers without proper consultations with sex workers themselves.

Many thanks to the Sonagachi Project in Kolkata, India for the exciting banners which were used at the Booth and at the various protest actions that NSWP activists participated in.

On the 11th July the NSWP staged a demonstration outside the UNAIDS Offices at the Conference to highlight the fundamental problems of the 100% Condom Promotion Programme and its serious flaws in design and implementation. The silent protest outside the office featured prominent sex worker rights activists and our allies with banners and placards. The action then moved to the front entrance of the Conference where chanting and singing activists held their banners high to entranced Conference participants.

Meetings (UNAIDS)

On the 11th July 2002, a successful meeting with UNAIDS staff members and sex workers highlighted the need for greater involvement of sex workers in the fight against AIDS.

Outcomes of UNAIDS Meeting: UNAIDS officials and sex workers agreed that an international consultation was necessary with sex workers both male, female and transgendered. Measures would be put into place to enable meaningful participation from the outset.

In addition it was also agreed that the issue of migration and mobility would need to be addressed in tandem with HIV/AIDS and other health issues. It was suggested that UNAIDS conduct a survey of its sponsoring UN organisations and seek a consolidated position on sex work and migration issues from these organisations.

The next international AIDS Conference is taking place in July 2004 in Bangkok, Thailand.