HIV/AIDS and Women in the Sex Sector: Facing Challenges and Finding Solutions

Background

Sex workers have a right to health, including access to humane HIV prevention and treatment programs. Sex workers have also proven that they can be essential to reducing HIV/AIDS transmission within societies. However, their right to health and their power to decrease HIV transmission are largely overlooked by policy makers.

Methodology

Sex worker advocates from Brazil, Mali, Cambodia, India and the United States came together last year to discuss the challenges to successful HIV/AIDS programming among sex workers, and the advantages of approaches that actively involve sex workers themselves. As a result of this exchange, these advocates developed policy recommendations and shared effective models of engaging sex workers in HIV prevention.

Cambodia’s Law Leads to Rights Violations

Enforcement hurts HIV prevention among sex workers

Background on the Law:
• In February 2008, the Kingdom of Cambodia passed the Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation.
• Eight of its 52 articles refer to the direct criminalization of adult prostitution, or aspects of adult prostitution.

Implementation of the Law:
• Government conducts raids of brothels and mass arrests of sex workers in attempt to show that it is acting against trafficking
• NGOs also participate in “rescues,” and are sometimes reluctant to release those who report being willingly involved in sex work.
• Women report frequent and serious rights violations in government detention centers, including denial of ARVs

Impact of the Law
• Police use condom possession as evidence of prostitution, making condom promotion efforts more difficult
• Some venues have banned condoms in attempt to avoid raids

Anti-Prostitution Loyalty Oath Continues to Cripple PEPFAR

Provision embedded in law lacks clarity and reinforces stigma

APLO Background
• Under U.S. law, any organization receiving HIV/AIDS funding must have a policy “opposing prostitution.”
• This policy must apply to everything the organization does—including activities funded by other donors. No guidance to help groups understand what is allowed.

Reaction to APLO
• Needlessly introduces politics into what is a public health matter.
• Some groups chose not to sign the pledge and lost U.S. funding.
• Most developed a written policy, trying to work within the bounds of the law.

APLO Impact
• Chilling effect on services provided to sex workers
• Creates a climate of insecurity for the groups running programs
• Some focus on condom distribution and treatment and avoid questions of human rights, discrimination, and legal status
• Some groups avoid engaging with sex workers altogether—and focus instead on other populations.
• Partnerships disrupted among groups with a range of views on sex work

Content by Zoe Baird, Senior Policy Analyst, Open Society Institute
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Solution:
Empower Sex Workers

Davida: Brazil’s Sex Workers Find Power and Combat Stigma

**About Davida**
- Strengthens sex worker rights and mobilizes around public policy reform on behalf of sex workers
- Helped define the occupation of sex work, which is officially recognized by the Brazilian government
- Organizes creative events such as fashion shows, cabarets, and theater to raise awareness of sex worker rights and combat stigma

**Impact of Davida**
- Transformed Brazilian health policy by refusing to accept sex workers’ treatment as disease vectors and insisting on being partners in developing HIV/AIDS solutions
- Works closely with Brazilian National AIDS Program, and helped form the Sex Worker Steering Committee that evaluates government health and research initiatives affecting sex workers
- One Davida project resulted in 74% of sex workers using condoms with clients, as opposed to 40% of sex workers not in the project
- Fashion line Daspu has organized 29 fashion shows, with sex workers and activists modeling clothes. Sales of Daspu clothes support Davida’s work.

_Scenarios by Gabriela Leite_

**Sanghamitra: Joining Forces for Health and Rights in India**

**About Sanghamitra**
- A vibrant, democratic collective of 3,000 sex workers in Mumbai
- Objectives (defined by the members): effect change, combat HIV, and promote healthy behavior
- Provides services to members including banking, health promotion, support for those living with HIV, childcare, and legal advocacy

**Impact of Sanghamitra**
- Promotion of condom use among sex workers has reduced their incidence of HIV from 35% in 2007 to 25% in 2008
- Sanghamitra plays a key role helping minors and trafficked women to leave sex work—more effective than a law enforcement approach because they know the women they work with
- Children of sex workers now able to access education, health care, and other services
- Bank includes 3,000 account holders who add to their savings daily. Also starting microcredit projects.
- Won prestigious Red Ribbon Award from UNAIDS in 2008

_Scenarios by Dr. Shilpa Merchant_

**DANAYA SO: Building Community Among Mali’s Sex Workers**

**About DANAYA SO**
- A democratically-organized sex workers’ association in Mali created in 1992
- Nationwide reach, with presence in five towns
- Success led to formation of LAKANA SO, which aids the children of sex workers
- Organizes health care access, vocational training, health insurance, HIV education, and literacy programs

**Impact of DANAYA SO**
- In 1995, only 25% of sex workers sought medical care when sick; today almost all members get care thanks to DANAYA SO offering free medical care at their centers
- In 1992, the percentage of HIV positive sex workers in brothels in Mali was 74 percent and by 1999 it had dramatically dropped to 30 percent
- LAKANA SO successfully changed regulations to allow sex workers to get birth certificates for their children, essential to enrolling them in school. Helped get more than 2,400 birth certificates so far
- LAKANA SO helps minors leave prostitution by connecting them with other ways to make money.

_Scenarios by Sylvia Mollet Sangare_

**Recommendations**
- The U.S. government should eliminate the APLO from existing law and clarify that public health best practices among sex workers, such as empowerment programs, are eligible for U.S. funding
- The U.S. should also include sex worker groups in the design, implementation, and evaluation of PEPFAR-funded HIV prevention programs
- National governments should focus less on criminalizing sex workers and more on pursuing and prosecuting traffickers. They should monitor for and prosecute rights violations against sex workers.
- Donors should fill the gaps left by the U.S. APLO restrictions, ensuring that best practices are funded and replicated.
- The media should report accurately on trafficking issues, avoiding confusion between trafficking and sex work

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