



For Immediate Release

Sex Workers Group Wins HIV and Rights Award

Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers Honored at AIDS Conference

(Mexico City, August 6, 2008) – The Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW) is the recipient of the 2008 international Award for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights, the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and Human Rights Watch announced today. The award, which recognizes outstanding individuals and organizations that protect the rights and dignity of people living with or affected by HIV/AIDS, was presented in Mexico City on August 6, 2008, at the XVII International AIDS Conference.

“Sex workers routinely face human rights abuses, including the discriminatory denial of health services, arbitrary detention by police, harassment, and sexual and physical violence,” said Richard Elliott, executive director of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (www.aidslaw.ca). “This award recognizes the extraordinary contribution of the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers in the struggle for sex workers’ rights.”

Since 1994, APNSW has represented sex workers in various policy and educational forums, promoting the participation of sex workers in HIV/AIDS programs and supporting dialogue between nongovernmental organizations, governments, and activists. The group has challenged the increasing criminalization of all forms of sex work and unethical drug trials with sex workers as subjects.

APNSW has shaped policy at the global and regional levels, and built the capacity of local grassroots sex worker organizations, including by creating a network of transgender activists. Throughout Asia, the network has been challenging gender-based violence, promoting access to health care for sex workers, and advocating for the decriminalization of sex work.

“I am honored to accept this award on behalf of the Asia Pacific Network for Sex Workers,” said Andrew Hunter, the network’s policy director. “International recognition of sex workers’ human rights is vital to curb the HIV pandemic. Governments and UN agencies need to promote sustainable, comprehensive HIV prevention and care initiatives for sex workers that are community-led and protect their human rights.”

The stigmatization, social exclusion, and legal marginalization of sex workers contribute to human rights violations, and can exacerbate their risk of HIV infection. Increasingly, according to APNSW, anti-trafficking efforts and laws criminalizing transactional sex have resulted in violence and human rights abuses against sex workers at the hands of police. The organization pointed to new anti-trafficking legislation in Cambodia, where sex workers have been sent to “rehabilitation” centers and subjected to sexual violence and beatings, and had little access to health care or food.

“Being a part of APNSW – working in solidarity with tens of thousands of sex workers in the region – has allowed us to challenge the way the authorities have applied this law in Cambodia, and to gain strength to bring this issue to international attention,” said Kao Tha of the Women’s Network for Unity, a sex worker rights organization in Cambodia.

“The International AIDS Conference presents a forum to focus worldwide attention on the epidemic and our global response,” said Joe Amon, director of the HIV/AIDS program at Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org/hiv aids). “Unfortunately, too often that response has been tainted by prejudice and misinformation. Only by ensuring the health and human rights of sex workers will governments, UN agencies, donors and nongovernmental groups be effective at reducing the vulnerability of sex workers to HIV infection. The Asia Pacific Network’s work epitomizes this.”

The Awards for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights were established in 2002 by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and Human Rights Watch. An award is presented annually to one Canadian and one international recipient. This year’s Canadian recipient was Peter Collins, a prisoner and health activist in Ontario, Canada.

To learn more about the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers, please visit:

- APNSW website: <http://apnsw.org/apnsw.htm>
- APNSW video on HIV/AIDS and sex workers’ human rights: <http://sexworkerspresent.blip.tv/#9772333>

To see past recipients of the Award for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights, please visit:

- Human Rights Watch website: www.hrw.org/campaigns/hiv aids/Awards_for_Action/past_recipients.htm
- Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network website: www.aidslaw.ca/awards

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AWARDS FOR ACTION ON HIV/AIDS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The Awards for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights were established in 2002 by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and Human Rights Watch.

The Awards highlight outstanding contributions that decrease vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and protect the rights and dignity of those infected and affected.

Recipients of the award are nominated by their peers in recognition of their excellence and long-term commitment to work having a direct impact on HIV/AIDS and human rights issues — in particular work relevant to marginalized individuals and communities. The award selection committee consists of past recipients and representatives of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and Human Rights Watch.

The Awards are presented annually to one Canadian and one international recipient — either an individual or an organization.

The international award will be announced on August 6, 2008 at the XVII International AIDS Conference in Mexico City.

Past recipients

2008 **Peter Collins** — Canadian prisoner and health activist

2007 **Ruth Carey** — lawyer and AIDS advocate

2007 **HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic (Ontario)** — legal service for low-income people living with HIV/AIDS in Ontario

2006 **Stella** — Montréal-based sex workers' rights organization

2006 **Gareth Williams** — leading Jamaican AIDS activist

2005 **Al McNutt** — Canadian AIDS educator, gay rights activist and founder of Truro AIDS Outreach, Nova Scotia

2005 **Humanitarian Action** — health services and advocacy for sex workers, street children and people who use drugs in St. Petersburg, Russia

2004 **Megan Oleson** — Vancouver street nurse and activist

2004 **Pivot Legal Society** — legal advocacy organization in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

2004 **Thai Drug Users' Network** — drug user organization active in all four regions of Thailand

2003 **Laurence Stocking** — Canadian prisoner and AIDS activist (awarded posthumously)
2003 **AIDS Law Project** — South African legal advocacy organization
2002 **Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users** — one of the largest drug user organizations in the world
2002 **Dr. Wan Yanhai** — leading Chinese AIDS and human rights activist

Visit www.aidslaw.ca/awards for biographical information on past recipients.

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ASIA PACIFIC NETWORK OF SEX WORKERS

Human rights-based policy on sex work and HIV: Background Information

Sex Work

- Sex work is commonly defined as the exchange of money or goods for sexual services regardless of whether the sex worker (male, female or transgender) consciously defines such activity as income-generating.
- It is impossible to estimate the number of individuals engaged in sex work worldwide, in large part because of the stigma and criminal sanctions against sex work.
- Stigma and criminalization often lead to human rights violations. Studies of sex workers worldwide show they suffer high rates of violence, often at the hands of authorities who not only fail to protect sex workers' human rights, but, in many instances, also are the abusers.
- In most countries, the majority of sex workers are female, and the majority of their clients are male. But people of all genders, including transgender people, are involved in sex work and are vulnerable to abuse.
- The conflation of sex work (a commercial exchange of sexual services) with human trafficking (coercion into forced labor of all kinds) harms both sex workers and the fight against trafficking. Human trafficking in any form should be opposed, but policies designed to combat trafficking must be properly targeted so as not to harm sex workers.

Policies & Practices

- Poverty, gender inequality, inadequate education and the lack of economically viable job options lead many people into sex work, but these factors are rarely mentioned in public debates and policies. Instead, sex workers are characterized as having degenerate characters, motives, needs and morals.
- For many people, sex work is their best or even their only opportunity to earn enough to support their families. Public policy should ensure access to health care, job training, education, an end to discrimination, and opportunities to make a living wage.

Human Rights

- The rights to life, safety, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, access to information, and access to health and education services are as important to sex workers as to anyone else. No one should lose or be denied these human rights because of the work they do.
- International instruments, including the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, affirm that everyone has the basic human right to "the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health".
- Criminalizing and stigmatizing sexual transactions drives the practice into the shadows where violence, extortion and coercion are more likely to thrive. In situations like these, people do not feel safe in seeking legal protection, out of fear of arrest, abuse or humiliation.
- Society must demand zero tolerance of abuse by authorities of sex workers' human rights and insist instead that authorities protect those rights.

HIV

- Criminalization and stigmatization can increase sex workers' vulnerability to HIV (and risks of onward transmission). Any successful effort to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS must incorporate sex workers.
- Stigma, discrimination, and fear of fines or jail time make sex workers reluctant to get involved with programs and prevent them from receiving information on how to protect themselves and others from HIV.
- Policies which require absolute opposition to sex work run contrary to best practices in public health and are undermining efforts to stem the spread of both HIV and human trafficking.
 - For example, the U.S. has tied its HIV-prevention and anti-trafficking funding to a requirement that health care and social service providers denounce prostitution. This has been used to deny sex workers around the world the health services they need to survive, the safer sex education that could protect them and their communities from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and programs such as education and job training that could give them more control over their lives.

- The “anti-prostitution pledge” unfairly vilifies sex workers and also forces organizations that treat vulnerable people either to condemn the people who need their help or to risk losing the funds that make their crucial work possible.

Example:

The Cambodian Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation

- The law aims to reduce sex trafficking by cracking down on the entire sex industry.
- Potential penalties are very harsh and lack proper limits. They apply broadly and include individuals and organizations that provide safe sex training or other forms of assistance.
- Since the introduction of the law, hundreds of people have been arrested and jailed, resulting in loss of their livelihoods, property and basic human rights protection.
- Abuses by authorities are rampant, including rape, violence, theft and unlawful detention by police, prison guards and NGO staff.
- Suppression of sex work increases HIV because it:
 - Reduces access to information and medical services needed for prevention and treatment;
 - Increases trafficking and mobility as sex workers move to escape police, which in turn alienates sex workers from prevention and care services;
 - Reduces incentives and the ability to carry condoms;
 - Increases sex workers’ vulnerability to demand for unprotected sex;
 - Reduces access to safe places for sexual transactions and breaks down social support systems and protections;
 - Increases poverty because of constraints on income, fines and property confiscation
 - Increases vulnerability to abuses by police, guards, and others

APNSW is working with sex workers to advocate for:

- The decriminalization of all sex work;
- An immediate end to the brothel raids and the arrests and detention of sex workers;
- An end to rape, theft and abuse by police and guards;
- Sustainable, rights-based, community-led HIV initiatives that provide comprehensive integrated prevention and care services to all sex workers;
- A review of anti-trafficking and HIV policies that replaces the current policies with approaches that are effective, coordinated, respectful of human rights and that meaningfully involve sex workers.

Additional Resources & Links

- The Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers, <http://apnsw.org/apnsw.htm>
- UNFPA Factsheet on HIV/AIDS, Gender and Sex Work, http://www.unfpa.org/hiv/docs/hiv%20factsheets/factsheet_genderwork.pdf
- *Implications of U.S. Policy Restrictions for Programs Aimed at Commercial Sex Workers and Victims of Trafficking Worldwide*, Center for Gender Health and Equity, <http://www.genderhealth.org/pubs/ProstitutionOathImplications.pdf>
- *Taking the Pledge*, a 13-minute video in which sex workers and activists explain the negative impact of the Anti-Prostitution Pledge, <http://sexworkerspresent.blip.tv>