



Urban Justice Center

123 William Street, 16th floor, New York, NY 10038

Tel: (646) 602-5600 • Fax: (212) 533-4598

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PRESS STATEMENT

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Contact: Sapna Patel, SWP, 646/602.5626, spatel@urbanjustice.org
Juhu Thukral, SWP, 646/602.5690, jthukral@urbanjustice.org

SEX WORKERS' LEADERSHIP CRITICAL THEME FOR WORLD AIDS DAY

(New York City, November 30, 2007) – The Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center joins organizations and individuals in the U.S. and around the world to observe World AIDS Day on December 1, 2007. The theme for World AIDS Day 2007 is *Leadership*. This theme highlights the fact that sex workers are imperative in the fight to prevent and treat HIV/AIDS and must be at the forefront as leaders in local, national and international efforts to stop the spread of the disease.

Sex work is universal and any successful effort to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS must not only incorporate sex workers, but also place them in leadership positions as educators and decision-makers in their communities. Unfortunately, bias against sex workers the world over often means that instead of being engaged as part of the solution to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, sex workers are treated as part of the problem. They are then punished rather than enlisted to help in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment programs. For example, the U.S. Anti-Prostitution Pledge requires that health care and social service providers receiving HIV/AIDS and anti-trafficking funding denounce prostitution. This policy has been used to deny sex workers around the world the health services they need to survive, the safe-sex education that could protect them and their communities from HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, and the programs such as education and job training that could give them more control over their lives.

The organizations with the most effective HIV-prevention programs build their efforts on a sophisticated understanding of the social and personal dynamics faced by sex workers, and start by building trust and credibility among these groups. They recognize that it is necessary to provide social, legal and health services to men and women in sex work without judging them. Basically, the Anti-Prostitution Pledge requires groups to express the government's viewpoint on a controversial subject in order to remain eligible for funding. It even restricts the way organizations use their own private funds. The language is so confusing that organizations are unsure how to comply with it and government officials are unsure how to enforce it. The Anti-Prostitution Pledge unfairly vilifies sex workers and also forces organizations that treat vulnerable people to take sides – either to condemn the people who need their help or risk losing the funds that make their crucial work possible.

Sex workers are often more knowledgeable about sexual health – and practice safe sex more often – than the general population. They often act as sexual health educators for their clients and should be mobilized, not demonized, in the struggle to control HIV/AIDS. An approach that recognizes sex workers' human rights, addresses their needs, promotes safer behavior and improves their access to health and social services can empower them to overcome stigma and discrimination so they can insist upon condom use by clients and also fight for safer working conditions. This approach will attract sex workers' support and achieve the goal of helping to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Sex workers are individuals whose reasons for engaging in sex work – and leaving it – are personal, economic and social – as complex as anyone's reasons for involvement in any type of work. Sex workers who have the knowledge and necessary tools are able to protect themselves and their clients. When they have the power to negotiate, sex workers are leaders in practicing safer-sex methods. We call on States and non-governmental partners to place sex workers in the forefront as leaders in this fight.

The Network of Sex Work Projects has produced a 13-minute video about the effects of the pledge. Watch *Taking the Pledge* at <http://sexworkerspresent.blip.tv/file/181155> or at <http://www.sexworkersproject.org>.

The Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center provides legal services, legal training, documentation, and policy advocacy for sex workers in New York City. For more information, please visit our website at:

<http://www.sexworkersproject.org>.

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