



Urban Justice Center

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Working Group on Sex Work and Human Rights

During 2004-2006, the Sex Workers Project (SWP) at the Urban Justice Center convened annual strategic meetings of more than 60 advocates from local, domestic, and international organizations, all of them interested in finding ways to link the debate on sex work and trafficking to a struggle for human rights. These meetings were unique in that participants concentrate on sex work, trafficking, HIV/AIDS, LGBTQ rights, migrants and labor rights, and reproductive rights and health. Participants included service providers, researchers, advocates, donors and sex workers, in recognition of our shared community values. We are all addressing issues related to sexuality, public health, and human rights, and therefore need to develop joint messages and actions to convey rights-based principles to policymakers and the public. Our work includes advocacy in both the domestic and international arenas, involving those who are engaged at the ground level as well those engaged in pressing for policy change. As a result of these annual meetings, the SWP is coordinating a Working Group on Sex Work and Human Rights, to foster shared opportunities for media and policy advocacy among members.

Core Values

Sex workers are human beings with the same human rights that are accorded to all people. Members of this working group on sex work and human rights believe that it is critical to establish rights-based policies for people involved in sex work and for those who have been trafficked. A rights-based approach is essential to ensure full access to appropriate health, legal, and life-skills information, and to programs and policies that meet the needs of sex workers. This approach includes advocating programs to promote public health, combat violence and empower sex workers as well as to protect free speech among sex workers, advocates and service providers. These elements are key to any effort to respect the human rights and health needs of sex workers; to properly assist those who want to leave sex work for other work; and to protect the rights and safety of those who continue in sex work. In this effort, it is critical to include the perspectives and active participation of sex workers.

Areas of Work

- Build the network of allies on sex work and human rights issues, including trafficking, HIV/AIDS, LGBTQ rights, migrants and labor rights, and reproductive rights and health, and draw links to unite our common efforts.
- Provide updates and opportunities for shared activities on key policy and advocacy issues involving sex work and human rights.
- Identify opportunities for advocacy, build shared analyses with multiple entry points for different allies, and engage in joint advocacy, with a special focus on media strategy.

Initial Focus

Our efforts to challenge existing stereotypes focus on movement-building, organizing stakeholders, public education, and media advocacy. We have identified four key areas:

1. *Advocating programs* to promote sex workers' human rights, empower them, improve their health, and prevent violence against them, while monitoring the effects of U.S. government funding policies that require all U.S.-backed programs to denounce sex work;
2. *Educating the public* about the lives, needs and realities of sex workers and of people who have been trafficked; promoting fact-based policies that speak to the needs of these different groups; and challenging the mistaken conflation of prostitution and trafficking in persons;
3. *Advocating policies* that address the complexities surrounding the problem of trafficking in persons. It is also critical to speak to the variety of reasons that many people engage in sex work; and
4. *Advocating capacity-building and leadership programs for sex workers* to ensure their leadership in the debates and dialogues that affect their lives and futures and those of their families.