

Different perspectives on the epidemic

This panel will explore perspectives which are different from the “mainstream” experience of HIV in Australia ie: the experience of gay men and of AIDS organisations. The presenters on this panel will each outline their perspective, then we will pick up key themes and issues which emerge, for a cross panel discussion. The discussion may well lead to developing some directions for the future, based on what we’ve learnt from these past experiences.

Now, I’ll ask the panel members to briefly introduce themselves, before we move into the four 10 minute presentations.

Our panel members are Bev Greet, Kirsty Machon and Kathy Triffit. Chair – Sue Metzenrath

Presentation – Sue Metzenrath

The story of sex workers and HIV in Australia is peculiarly clouded by myths and misunderstandings, which seem never to be eradicated.

The struggle for a voice and representation:

Despite the existence of sex worker organisations for over 20 years, particularly in the major cities, and the emergence of Scarlet Alliance in the late 1980’s as a coherent voice, sex workers are still denied their place in debates of concern to their lives and work.

The reason for this is that sex workers experience enormous barriers to being “out” in society. Also, their organisations remain under-resourced, such that a coherent movement and therefore the ability to set and lead any agenda on the issues is constantly breaking down. In addition, sex workers may only identify as such during their time in the industry, which averages 3 years for female workers, so continuity and connection is easily lost, along with the skills and experience gained. This inconsistent representation, combined with the myths creates a wall of stigmatisation and discrimination which leaves us unheard, unsupported and therefore silenced. Often it is simply that no-one thinks to include the sex workers or their representatives in debates, or they may even be actively denied such opportunities.

You might think I’m referring here to the distant past, however, even in the last 12 months, state and federal governments have conducted enquires into aspects of prostitution, and subsequently developed legislation, without formally involving sex worker representation in the process.

Myths about sex workers and health risk: Sex workers and the sex industry are still thought of as the “pools of infection..”

The greatest misunderstandings about sex workers in relation to HIV are about the source of risk in their work. Rather than the sex workers, it is *their clients* who pose the single greatest source of risk. For example, Male Sex workers report over 7% of their clients request unsafe anal sex, even though 50% of these clients self identify as gay.

Sex workers are tired of being seen as the “vector” in STD and HIV transmission, **when in fact they have borne all of the responsibility of behaviour change and are providing the safe sex education to these men(clients), at some risk to themselves every time.**

If there is such a phenomenon of “safe sex burnout” in the gay community, imagine how strong that sense is in the sex worker community, where clients continue to ask for unsafe services night after night, and it’s the individual sex worker who’s left with the role of negotiator, educator, and sexual service provider all at once. Unlike with the role that AIDS Councils and gay educators can play, sex worker organisations are only seeing one party in the sexual encounter. With, for example female brothel workers seeing an average 30 clients per week, there’s a whole lot of people involved as clients in the sex industry who may ONLY get their

education and information within the encounter itself, which they are seeking to control to fit their own sexual needs and fantasies. (and.....There is still no sign of condoms in straight porn either...)

Yet, with new people entering the sex industry every day, these clients know it's a matter of luck – they will be able to manipulate less experienced sex workers into unsafe services quite regularly, and even boast about it to other sex workers, and clients.

Community...(????)

The question of what constitutes a community makes a key point of difference between our experience and the mainstream experience of HIV. Our “community” doesn't necessarily have cohesion or continuity. We are not building layer upon layer of education, and cultural meaning, even identity with our community. Rather, we may be constantly starting from the very beginning with new sex workers, new owners and operators, with no sense of belonging to a community, **or of wishing to! Our organisations may be the only places where sex workers can be “out” and claim this identity, and yet they may feel little or no attachment our organisations, especially after leaving sex work.**

Creating an enabling environment – a key role for our organisations

The sex worker organisations main role in HIV education prevention is to support sex workers in developing the knowledge and skills needed to work safely, and to ensure that the environment –legislative and regulatory- that influences their workplaces is evolving, not deteriorating. Initiatives such as occupational health and safety programs run by the state authorities are one step towards this enabling environment for sex workers. The sex worker organisations have put enormous efforts into this work, as it offers an opportunity to increase the range of inputs creating health outcomes.

Unfinished business

Sex industry law reform is a major component of the unfinished business of sex worker organisations at 20 years into the epidemic. We have seen progress, then experienced regression, with amendments and regulation clawing back the ground we thought we'd won. I know that many AIDS activists are probably tired of hearing about sex industry law reform, however, ours is one of the only communities to be left so unprotected from the HIV epidemic. There are only 20,000 sex workers in Australia at any one time, and yet at both state and federal level, there are volumes of law created to regulate them, with very little understanding of how even the slightest change can increase HIV risk for workers. The recommendations of the IGCA report remain poorly implemented. Meanwhile, the sex worker organisations in 7 states and territories struggle to provide the local legal education for their particular set of laws, all within a nation that claims to have an homogenous morality.

The winners are yet again the clients, who can pick up on sex workers fears of being “outside the law” offering opportunities for manipulation and violence.

Our organisations hope to influence law reform to create a level playing field between sex workers and their clients, because after all, the only thing that's different about their sexual encounter is that one of them pays the other, and that should not in itself offer such an enormous imbalance of power that the sex worker is in effect robbed of their rights with every encounter.