

Scarlet Alliance

REVIEW OF THE 4TH NATIONAL HIV/AIDS STRATEGY

Scarlet Alliance: National forum for sex worker organisations

Scarlet Alliance through its objectives, policies and programs aims to achieve equality, social, legal, political, cultural and economic justice for past and present workers in the sex industry, in order for sex workers to be self-determining agents, building their own alliances and choosing where and how they work.

Scarlet Alliance is the Australian peak body of sex worker organisations
Formed in 1989

Membership includes:

QLD: SQUISI
VIC: Rhed (associate member)
WA: Phoenix, SWOPWA
ACT: ACTSWOP (associate member)
NT: NTSWOP
SA: SA SIN
NSW: Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP),
Quewu –Queer and Esoteric Workers Union

The objects for which Scarlet is established are:

- (a) To promote the civil rights of past and present sex workers and to work towards ending all forms of discrimination against them;
- (b) To lobby for legal and administrative frameworks which do not discriminate against sex workers;
- (c) To challenge any government at any time when and where it implements legislation, regulations, rules, policies or law enforcement practices which are discriminatory and/or repressive to the rights and autonomy of sex workers;
- (d) To actively promote the right of all sex workers to work in whatever area of their chosen occupation, including street, brothel, escort, private and opportunistic work.
- (e) To actively work towards guaranteeing the right of all sex workers to optimum occupational health and safety provisions. This will promote conditions where safe sex and general health knowledge can be converted to safe work practices. Furthermore, challenge any legislation, policy or process which does not so promote the rights of the worker;
- (f) To strive to eradicate sex worker stereotypes and stigmatisation in the popular consciousness and to communicate the diversity of ideas, opinions and aspirations of past and present sex workers;
- (g) To liaise with international sex worker rights groups in the development of regional and international networks, programs and objectives;
- (h) To support sex workers and sex worker organisations to become more politically active.
- (i) To gather and disseminate sex industry related information to members.

I.1. The State of the Epidemic

Sex workers: from where we lie it doesn't look good

Australia is acknowledged as having the lowest rate of HIV amongst sex workers in the world. This has been achieved through the bipartisan support given over the last 20 years to the National HIV/AIDS Strategy as a mechanism for reducing the impact of the epidemic here; with one of the priority groups for education and prevention programs being sex workers. The 4 strategies could, on this fact alone, be said to be highly effective. Scarlet Alliance argues that due to Australia's unique success with this vulnerable group, there should be a distinct attempt now at consolidation and even stronger resolve to act, in order to deal better with the challenges ahead. It is imperative to continue such a strategy.

A lack of a coordinated approach

Sex worker organisations continue to provide well attended, accessible programs and appropriate resources to sex workers. However, our state-based organisations are operating in a virtual vacuum, with little opportunity for synergy. Recently, the NSW and QLD organisations launched virtually identical resources within weeks of one another, unaware of the other's efforts. Better resourcing of Scarlet Alliance would enable greater sharing of resources and expertise to increase outcomes.

The "disabling environment"

Year in, year out our tiny organisations battle with political giants to gain law reform, often burning out whole generations of staff and community members in the process. The strategy has failed sex workers particularly in relation to the "enabling environment". In fact Scarlet Alliance has described the current regulatory framework as a "disabling environment", particularly in the impact it has on sex workers' health and safety, and on their organisations' work. The results of this lack of reform will be seen in increased cases of HIV amongst sex workers, their clients and families, right across Australia.

Sex workers are doing most of the work

Sex workers themselves have been insistent upon safer sex practices in the commercial setting, and vigilant in monitoring their own sexual health. It is clients who pose a health threat to sex workers. The constant stream of clients requesting unsafe sex continues unabated, as do owners/managers of sex industry businesses who attempt to coerce sex workers into providing unsafe services. It is a combination of peer solidarity, and support services giving the same message that has held the line in the sex industry. Despite the efforts of sex workers, who have "protected" the community (from themselves), the broader community has ignored their calls for law reform. There have been few rewards for or acknowledgments of this extraordinary achievement.

Sex workers are always vulnerable to HIV.

With an average of 20 clients per week, brothel workers are negotiating safer sex services with less knowledgeable individuals an average of 4 times a day. Where sex workers are operating illegally, new to the work, have added workplace pressure, lack peer support, have drug or alcohol issues, are non-English speaking, have experienced violence, or experience low self esteem.... vulnerability to HIV increases. Our community is made up of a constantly changing set of individuals, with an average stay of 3 years, operating in very fluid circumstances. Our communities are not static.

For this reason alone, resources must continue to be put into peer based sex worker organisation programs, via the National Strategy.

Scarlet Alliance remains unfunded 23 years on.....

At a time when the world is asking us “How have you done it?”, Scarlet Alliance has no secretariat funding to enable our organisations to provide answers. We are, and have been for over twenty years, running on “goodwill” and the energy of volunteer staff when it comes to Scarlet Alliance’s work.

Scarlet Alliance should be functioning as the sex worker organisation’s capacity building, coordinating, policy making and mentoring “centre”. Instead we have a team of voluntary, and elected individuals struggling to keep the organisation functioning, with no office, staff or infrastructure, whilst being expected to respond to an increasingly complex epidemic.

Most of Scarlet’s people have been working in the sex industry HIV prevention field for over a decade, and yet our expertise remains under utilised, our achievements are not well documented and our peak organisation remains unfunded. It begs the question, after Australia’s “success” with HIV in the sex industry, which is the envy of many countries, why the funding has never flowed to assist the very organisations that achieved this success.

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Building capacity in the region

The Asia Pacific has the potential to become the region worst affected by HIV in the coming years. There are over 7 million people living with HIV in the region at present, within an epidemic which has progressed differently from the Australian epidemic, particularly in terms of modes of transmission. Heterosexual transmission and Injecting Drug Use have exposed sex workers in the region to the virus. Sex workers, as is well documented, are extremely vulnerable to HIV, particularly where they are operating illegally, as is the case in most countries in the region.

Sex Workers in the region have already responded by forming organisations and a Network, of which Scarlet Alliance is a member. Yet, ironically in Australia, one of the richest countries in the region, the Scarlet Alliance lacks the capacity to share our own technical expertise, resources and ideas in a practical manner, and is struggling for survival at a time when our neighbours most need us to be strong for them. Such international capacity building and sharing does occur, but in an ad hoc fashion, with a lack of consistency of content.

We argue that the Scarlet Alliance should receive some secretariat funding, to be housed within one of our member organisations. This would enable both the Australian response to HIV in the sex industry to be enhanced, and partnership work with sex worker organisations in the Asia/Pacific region to be more successful.

Comments within the Terms of Reference

1. Creating an enabling environment

The legislative reforms regarding sex industry legislation, outlined in the 1992 report of the IGCA Legal Working Party on HIV/AIDS, have not been fully implemented.

In some states and territories there has been reform, however, often the changes have not gone far enough, or have been undermined through amendments and regulation.

In some parts of Australia we have seen Bills proposed which further endangered sex workers health and safety.

Street sex workers, the most marginalised and vulnerable of our community, continue to be placed at risk due to a lack of understanding of how decriminalisation would increase access to services, thus reducing harm, and minimising risks for these individuals.

Where street sex work has been legalised, the population of street sex workers has diminished, and the health and safety outcomes have been significant.

Scarlet Alliance notes the following:

- A lack of leadership at any level of government

- A lack of bipartisan understandings and agreements on HIV related reforms, in particular in relation to the sex industry.

- The deprioritising of HIV in a highly “politicised” environment

- A lack of understanding of how this poor environment may impact on health outcomes

- Rights of sex workers are not protected

Health promotion to the general community has been reduced, which includes the clients of sex workers.

A lack of resources at a state level for producing client education resources, combined with the lack of general community messages has made it more difficult for sex workers to educate/persuade clients about safe sex practices.

2. International assistance and cooperation

Australian peer based sex worker organisation programs have been highly successful, and yet this expertise is not being utilised strongly enough in international work.

Our member organisations often host unfunded visits from representatives of sex worker organisations in the region, or from government level delegations sent out to study the Australian response. A more consistent approach should be supported

1. Exchange /mentoring programs should be supported
2. Joint project work should be encouraged and supported
3. Joint projects with sex worker organisations of countries of origin of sex workers working in Australia (particularly South East Asia) should be prioritised as part of a regional response to HIV/AIDS.
4. Scarlet Alliance should be resourced to act as a clearing house for best practise methodologies, resources and coordination of international study tours of sex worker organisation health education programs

3. Partnership roles and responsibilities

1. There is a lack of consistent approaches across the country. There is no formalised “workplan” or strategy for sex worker programs, nor is there a coordinated approach to resource production or targeting of funds/activities.
2. Some states have allowed sex worker run organisations to dissolve, through lack of support at critical times. This has resulted in a loss of capacity, community networks, acquired knowledge and skills, and profile of sex worker issues in terms of advocacy work.
3. ANCHARD and its working groups do not have a “representative” membership so Scarlet Alliance and sex worker issues are rarely raised, nor is the advice of sex worker representatives sought if such issues do arise.
4. Sex worker organisations are marginalised within the NGO sector. Our member organisations struggle to be consulted, included, supported and involved in NGO processes or activities which may impact on sex workers
5. Researchers have an ad hoc approach to consultation with sex worker organisations, and may or may not involve sex worker representatives in devising research into the sex industry.

A whole of government response is no longer evident.

The primacy of public health outcomes and urgency of HIV prevention has been slipping during the life of this strategy. There has been a loss of awareness and support for appropriate strategies, and a “dumbing down” of responses from all levels of government on HIV issues, particularly where leadership or policy issues arise. Despite the risk of a devastating epidemic in Australia, and within our region, political will is lacking, and the response is at risk of slippage at what may be the most crucial time ever.

4. Links with other strategies

HEP C Strategy

The communities, which the Hep C strategy targets, intersect with the sex worker community. Scarlet Alliance member organisations report an increasing demand for Hep C related services, yet are under-resourced to provide these services.

We note that:

1. The potential for a meaningful, coordinated approach to resource sharing across these strategies has yet to be realised
2. The crossovers especially in health promotion work could be better utilised
3. Key communities for Hep C and HIV strategy programs, such as street sex workers are often accessed by sex worker organisation outreach services. Peer education models used by sex worker organisations may be transferable to Hep C related issues, yet our organisations may be under resourced to do so.
4. The enabling environment needed to advance the work around Hep C is being torn apart, often one NSP at a time, when our communities are most in need of the services.

4. New priorities, gaps and barriers

1. More resources are needed for multicultural health education work with NESB sex workers and their clients, and the owners/managers of the businesses in which they work
2. The sex industry and sex workers continue to be “under siege’ due to a lack of legislative reform, combined with ongoing compliance operations. Whether conducted by police, local councils, taxation or immigration, such operations diminish the ability of sex workers to control their own health and safety in the workplace. This also creates a gap in protecting individuals from violence or discrimination, so diminishing the ability of individuals to maintain safe behaviours.
3. Access and equity issues for sex workers are ongoing
4. Mandatory testing of sex workers continues to be tabled across various jurisdictions from time to time. Scarlet Alliance and its member organisations continue to run battles over this issue, often with little support. (Research could knock this one on the head forever if only someone would do it!)
5. Lack of research conducted in collaboration with sex worker organisations. For example, research into behavioural issues for sex workers and their clients would be most useful in developing education programs and strategies
6. The “disabling environment” constantly undermines the work of sex worker organisations. For example, we deliver condoms, lube and information, which owners then hide, or throw out later, in order to prevent detection in compliance raids. Premises refuse entry, or go underground, especially within NESB communities as another response to this “disabling environment”. Recent Immigration operations in Sydney, for example, have resulted in dozens of sex workers vanishing from contact with key services, as businesses cut off contact with the outside world in order to continue to operate. Australia is looking down the barrel of a new NESB – centred epidemic due to the lack of appropriate regulation of the sex industry, at all levels of government.
7. The federal Sexual Servitude (1999) legislation, in particular, should be repealed for this reason, as it serves no other purpose than to stigmatise further the NESB sex industry, whilst having produced NOT ONE PROSECUTION.
8. The scale and diversity of the NESB sex industry and of their clients is increasing in Australia, as is the complexity and rate of intersection with communities in countries of high HIV prevalence. Business travellers, backpackers, students, family visitors and tourists may all visit sex workers, or become sex workers, either here or abroad.

Australia’s HIV/AIDS Strategy needs to develop a coordinated response, with national resource production to best respond to the education needs of NESB sex workers and clients.