

With thousands of delegates and probably just as many possible sessions to attend, it was a difficult task to decide just what to see and experience at the AIDS 2014 Conference. Of course, it was also an incredible privilege to have the choice and opportunity to attend at all. As many people as were there for the week of talks, forums and impromptu protests, one couldn't help but be aware of the thousands more from Key Affected Populations (or KAPs - the term used by the HIV sector for those of us who fall into the categories whom HIV affects most) that could have been there to benefit from the wealth of information, as well as the incredible sense of community.

So, under the burden of this difficulty and with some bewilderment, I left my experience mostly up to chance, with a little help from the meticulous run-sheet of sessions that were chaired by or included sex workers, prepared by Australia's national sex worker organisation, the Scarlet Alliance. With chance and Scarlet Alliance program in hand, I was lucky enough to meet sex workers from Papua New Guinea, Japan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh, the USA and Europe, as well as sex workers from other Australian states and territories. All of us with incredibly different, and yet similar, lived experiences as sex workers.

I attended sessions about the changing landscape of male sex workers, as well as the lived experience of trans sex workers in Malaysia and Japan. I learnt about the coalition of community organisations campaigning to end the use of condoms as evidence (a practice that still happens in South Australia) in the state of New York. I saw a heated debate in the Women's Networking Zone about the dangerous anti-sex worker laws in Sweden and the problematic conflation of sex work with human trafficking. I also attended a session about sex worker-operated clinical programs in southern India.



*AIDS 2014 Venue: Melbourne
Convention and Exhibition Centre*

Participants and stake-holders in this last session presented at 7.30am, about half way through the week-long conference. The handful of people who saw this were weary-eyed, many with coffee in hand. Sex workers involved spoke about and demonstrated that empowering sex workers to direct and control their own services leads to positive results in terms of STI prevention and health promotion. At a presentation of such positive work, one wonders why more people weren't there. Or, why it wasn't given a bigger room, or a more amenable hour. Of course, at such a large conference, someone has to draw the short straw. This is where the sex worker chip-on-my-shoulder wonders why it always has to be us? Thankfully, the session ended with a doctor and sex worker ally, asking why we were having the same discussions sex workers have been articulating for decades. Surely, he said, we need to start supporting sex workers in the fight for decriminalisation, immediately.

My favourite part of the conference, though, and what still gives me chills when I watch some of the mountains of online footage that is now available, was the way sex workers were welcomed when we 'outed' ourselves.



"My name is... And I am a sex worker."

In whatever type of session it was, this statement was followed by applause, cheering and whooping. Usually, the person would pause, accept this, smile and continue with what they were about to say.

The unusualness of this response; the desire to openly, publicly and joyously validate a sex worker who 'outs' themselves, strikes at the heart of the problems that sex workers face on a daily basis, and seemed to be a recurring theme at the conference: stigma kills sex workers and directly hampers any attempt to stop HIV. It also tells us that sex workers need to be welcomed to the microphone (or later in the conference, during a march through the streets of Melbourne, welcomed to the megaphone) because often we are not asked to speak, or worse, others speak on our behalf.

Again and again, from all parts of the world, from sex workers and their allies, from those who crunch the numbers and those who do the research, and most importantly, from those with the lived experience: parlour workers, private workers, street workers, male workers, trans workers, migrant workers, we heard that discrimination, misinformation and denying sex workers agency and human rights, directly contributes to danger, lack of safety, and negative health outcomes. While there was much discussion around the scientific and clinical aspects of HIV prevention and health promotion, the most poignant statements, for me, seemed to be the ones that addressed and gave voice to the cultural and social factors that seem to consistently impede scientific and clinical success.

In the huge conference space, there was one bathroom that I liked to visit. This was because someone had vandalised the walls with a sticker: DECRIMINALISE SEX WORK FOR OUR HEALTH, SAFETY & RIGHTS. Like the sex workers who outted themselves and were welcomed, it brought a smile to my face. In my life, I can walk around without seeing anything positive or affirming about the work that I do for weeks on end, but for one week in Melbourne I saw this message and many like it, endlessly.

The sticker's message is clear, but in that space it said many other things, too. It said that sex workers won't be silent, even when they aren't given the main stage. It said that we are everywhere, even if we can't be 'out'. And, from my experience, it says that non-sex workers support our cause too.

Personing the stall at the Sex Worker Networking Zone in the Global Village (the only free-space for those who didn't or couldn't pay the \$1000 to register for the conference, and arguably the most interesting and informative area) I handed out dozens of these stickers, explaining the message and engaging with people around law reform, health and safety, and the global sex worker consensus on several topics, including emerging technologies, like PrEP. Being in that space, former and current sex workers outted themselves to me, even though for much of the rest of the conference they couldn't. Non-sex workers from the HIV sector talked about their experience with the sex work community, how they wanted to know more. One person who enquired after what our stall was, sneered, turned and kept walking; a reminder that even in the 'safe' space of AIDS2014, there is still a lot of work to do. A reminder that often, our biggest barrier to health and safety, is not the absence of a piece of

latex, or lack of access to medication, but the failure of non-sex workers to understand and an unwillingness to put aside judgement and have respect for the lives and choices of other human beings.

I take heart from the fact that anyone may have put that sticker up in the bathroom; a colleague of mine who was feeling radical, or non-sex worker I engaged with at our stall and who may have changed their mind about what decriminalisation means. Regardless, I look forward to seeing more around and continuing to engage, educate and learn, well beyond AIDS2014 in Melbourne.

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