

II Foro en VIH/SIDA/ITS en America Latina y el Caribe
2nd Forum on HIV/AIDS/STD in Latin America and the Caribbean
April 7-12, 2003, Havana, Cuba

Conference report by Paulo Longo, NSWP

The Conference was held in La Habana, Cuba, from April 7th to 12th. The first Latin-American conference happened in Rio de Janeiro on 2000. Cuba was chosen because of the low incidence of HIV (lowest in Latin America). Around 39 countries and more than 2000 participants attended the conference. Like always, there was a very low participation of sex workers....

The situation of sex work in Cuba

Sex Work in Cuba is illegal. Men and women can go to jail for sentences up to 12 years and/or pay a penalty up to US\$ 25,000. Every Cuban citizen has a file where notes are taken and if someone is found in sex work more than once this sentence will be applied. People with only one record will have difficulties in finding jobs, mainly on tourism, the growing market in Cuba, where people can make more money. I talked to a girl, 22 years old, who has recorded in her file that she was with a German tourist in "suspicious attitude" and, even speaking a very good English, she was refused to work at a hotel.

In spite of the legal situation, sex workers are everywhere in Havana and other Cuban cities. Some travel guides published in Europe advertise the neighbourhoods where sex workers can be found. Male sex workers work mainly at the tourist area of Habana Vieja (Old Havana), while female work more at the shore avenue (Malecón). There are also some clandestine brothels and people rent rooms in private houses for encounters. Transgenders are much less visible and highly stigmatised.

Sex workers participation at the II Foro

Few little sex work events were organised at the conference and very few sex workers organisations were able to attend. Scholarships were not available and the process of sponsorship, involving the National AIDS Programs was a disaster in most countries, as usual. The Latin American and Caribbean Network of Sex Workers (Red de Trabajadores Sexuales de Latinoamerica e Caribe), although being a co-organiser, got no scholarships and had only funding available for the co-ordinator, Elena Reynaga. NSWP sponsored the attendance of the interim co-ordinator, Paulo Longo. Several organisations managed to get travel expenses from other sources, but the organisers were not flexible in negotiating free registration (it was US\$200!), inaccessible for most people in Latin American countries and impossible for Cuban citizens. Sex workers participation can be resumed to 3 events: one round table, one session of oral presentations and an "informal" satellite meeting, hosted by NSWP. The participation of Elena Reynaga at the closing ceremony, speaking on behalf of the Latin American Networks must also be highlighted.

Round Table

On Friday, April 11th, the round table Sexual Work (as printed at the program) took place. Like always, NO translation was offered and we had to do volunteer translation. The round table was moderated by Guilherme de la Portilla (Cuba) and the secretary was Elena Reynaga (Argentina), president of the Latin American and Caribbean Network of Sex Workers. Speakers were Manuel Velandia (Colombia), Gabriela Leite (Brazil), Dusilley Cannings (Guyana) and Juanita Altenberg (Surinam). It was a very good opportunity to mix organisations from Latin American and Caribbean, as very few events has brought together representatives from the different regions, with very different realities. Speakers presented mostly the work they have been doing in their countries and Gabriela presented the Brazilian Network of Sex Workers, a successful example of partnership with the government. Both Guyana and Surinam presented the situation of migrant sex workers, mainly from Brazil.

As no simultaneous translation was provided, lots of time was lost by doing volunteer translation and no time was available for discussion at the end of the session. Only three interventions and questions from the audience were addressed and the main discussion was about definition on sex work (divided in those who defend the use of terms like "puta" and "meretriz", as a way to de-stigmatise this terms and those who defend the use of the term Sex Work).

Oral presentations

Following the round table, at the same room and still WITHOUT translation, the session on Oral Presentations "Prevention" had 5 presentations (seven were scheduled, two couldn't find resources to attend the conference): Paulo Longo (Brazil), Nicolás Mellado (Chile), Mirian Matinelli (Brazil), Margarita Reyes (Mexico) and Gabriela Leite (Brazil). The session was chaired by Tomás Quintero, from Cuba. As evident, Brazil "dominated" this session, with 3 presentations, and all presenters spoke in Portuguese. It has been a principle for Brazilians, the only country in Latin America, which speaks Portuguese, similar to Spanish, and we believe Spanish speakers can make an effort to understand us, as we do to understand them. Apparently it worked.

Paulo Longo presented the preliminary results of an Horizons research project conducted in Brazil; Mirian presented her project in S. Paulo, a governmental initiative with technical support from the Brazilian Network; Nicolás presented his beautiful project with rent boys in Santiago and Margarita presented the work developed for several years in Mexico City.

As two speakers were not present, lots of time was given for discussion and it was very interesting. One of the first speakers was a man from the audience, Cuban citizen, who said that "it is very interesting to see all this projects in other countries, but it does not apply to the Cuban reality as we extinguished prostitution after the revolution". Paulo Longo reacted immediately, saying that in the first hours in Cuba, walking along the beach avenue, the first people he saw and interacted were sex workers, that most travel guides announce sex workers venues and it is visible everywhere. A very important reaction to this was that a young guy stood up and said: "For the first time in public I want to say that I am a sex worker. I know I will have consequences on being so opened, but we can not hide the reality anymore". In my opinion it was the highlight of the afternoon (if not from the whole conference) and he was invited to attend our informal satellite meeting.

NSWP "informal" satellite meeting

For several months NSWP tried to contact the conference organizers to book a room for this meeting and to rent a booth to divulge our activities. We were not successful, as no messages were replied. The only possibility was to invite all sex workers/sex work organisations present at the conference to meet at the exhibition centre, at a booth with chairs and tables (Café de la salud), after the closing of the exhibition. The proposed agenda include an update on the international movement and a proposal for action. Paulo Longo chaired the meeting and gave an update on the recent events involving international funding and the decrease of investment in projects that empower sex workers. Also gave a brief at the recent UNAIDS meeting, in Geneva. Participants are listed bellow. Unfortunately the organisations from Guyana and Suriname were not able to attend.

A draft of a letter named Carta de Cuba (Letter from Cuba) was presented and discussed with the participants and some topics were added and re-phrased. The letter is available in Portuguese, Spanish and English and a plan for distribution is being discussed by e-mail. The letter is attached to this report. It's important to stress that this initiative from NSWP was the first one in the region, widely affected by international policies and very dependent on international funding.

A very informal social event was hosted by NSWP at the swimming pool of the hotel at the conference centre after this meeting.

Participation of Elena Reynaga at the closing ceremony

Elena Reynaga was invited by the seven Latin American Networks to speak at the closing ceremony of the II Foro. She was not particularly representing sex workers, but started her speech saying: "My name is Elena. I am not a puta or meretriz or prostituta or giletera. I am a female worker. A sex worker." It caused a very enthusiastic reaction from the audience and the table participants, including President Fidel Castro (who always denies the existence of sex work in Cuba and is the main responsible for the repression laws). It was a particularly important week for the Cuban government, as three youngsters who kidnapped a boat trying to escape from Cuba were executed and international reactions were massive, including a motion at the UN Human Rights Commission. A very important moment was when Elena asked to the audience to stand up in a minute of silence, but not mentioning the reason. Evidently it was a protest to the executions and constant human rights abuse in the country. No need to say that Elena Reynaga was the best speaker (followed by Fidel speaking for more than two hours!) and we are all very proud of her.

P. Longo, NSWP, May/2003

Appendix/Annexure

Carta de Cuba

As Organizações de trabalhadoras e trabalhadores sexuais ou que desenvolvem projetos com trabalhadoras (es) sexuais na América Latina e Caribe reunidas na cidade de Havana, Cuba, no mês de abril de 2003, tornam público que:

- Os organismos internacionais DEVEM apoiar projetos que promovam a organização, integração e mobilização social de profissionais do sexo;
- Os organismos internacionais DEVEM apoiar projetos que empoderem profissionais do sexo e desenvolvam parcerias legítimas para o trabalho conjunto;
- NENHUMA pesquisa junto a profissionais do sexo deverá ser desenvolvida na América Latina e Caribe sem a participação dos mesmos (as);
- NÃO se deve apoiar projetos que incentivem o trabalho infantil, principalmente a prostituição infantil;
- DEVE-SE eliminar a obrigatoriedade de testes, exames e políticas de controle sanitário e incentivar políticas de saúde voluntária.
- Tornamos público e EXIGIMOS que sejam cumpridos estes princípios.

Letter from Cuba

Latin American and Caribbean sex workers organisations or organisations working with sex workers in the region, reunited at Havana City, Cuba, in April, 2003, want to make public that:

- International organisations MUST support projects that promote sex workers social organisation, integration and mobilisation;
- International organisations MUST support projects that empower sex workers and establish legitimate partnerships;
- NO research with sex workers must be developed in Latin America and Caribbean without the participation of sex workers in the whole process;
- NO projects related to child labour must be supported, including children's sex work;
- Compulsory testing, medical checks and health control policies MUST be eliminated and volunteer health policies and activities must be incentivated.

Hereby we make it public and demand that these principles are fulfilled.

Havana, Cuba, Abril de 2003/April 2003

- Paulo Longo, Network of Sex Work Projects
- Gabriela Silva Leite, Rede Brasileira de Profissionais do Sexo
- Dayron Rendon, trabajador sexual cubano
- Eliana Dentone, Sindicato independiente de trabajadores sexuales "Angela Lina", Chile
- Karina C. Aparacio, Asociación de Trabajadoras sexuales Miluska Vida y Dignidad, Peru
- Red de Trabajadoras Sexuales de Latino America y el Caribe
- Alejandra Gil, Aproasse, México
- Margarita Lara, Aproasse, México
- Cynthia Mauante, Aproasse, México
- Nicolas R. Mellado, Equipo de prevención Nums, Chile
- Kimirina, Equador
- Modemu, Republica Dominicana
- Coin, Republica Dominicana