

MEDIA RELEASE

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Health and human rights advocates denounce Gates Foundation's support of raids on sex workers

Advocates gather in Toronto to promote rights and safety of groups vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.

TORONTO — The international Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) and other human rights NGOs applaud this week's commitment by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to commit \$500 million to the Global Fund for HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment efforts. At the same time, however, the Gates Foundation has bowed to conservative pressure in the United States by funding groups that conduct and assist police raids on sex workers in countries like Cambodia and Thailand. These raids are infamous for further endangering vulnerable women.

For example, the Gates Foundation has recently given \$5 million to the International Justice Mission (IJM), a conservative Christian organization notorious for its facilitation of dangerous and counter-productive raids. However, *"while trafficked persons often need help escaping their captors, those seeking to 'rescue' sex workers through police raids often do more harm than good,"* stated Melissa Ditmore, Coordinator of the NSWP. *"In fact, most women who are subjects of these raids are merely arrested and deported back to their countries without receiving any help at all."*

Human rights advocates underscore that sex workers, like every other human being on the planet, have the basic human right to self-determination, and the rights to freedom from violence and coercion including freedom from violence by the authorities. They are also critical partners in efforts to combat the spread of HIV. *"As sex workers, we are seen as a problem to be solved and not as a vital resource. This leads to important people like Bill and Melinda Gates ignoring our own views on what kind of help we need,"* says a spokesperson from Empower, an internationally-recognized organization of sex workers that was a crucial partner in Thailand's successful campaign to prevent HIV in the early 1990s.

Twenty-eight members of Empower were wrongly identified as trafficked and then arrested in a 2003 NGO-assisted police raid in Chiang Mai. The women were deposited in a guarded shelter where they were detained for over a month, and were routinely interrogated and were not allowed to make phone calls. Empower states that *"under the process employed by IJM, migrant sex workers become evidence and our bodies become crime scenes, and are treated as such. Labeled, bagged and kept until the court case."*

In Cambodia, where government efforts that support partnership with sex workers have led to a dramatic decrease in HIV infection rates, IJM's raids are denounced by human rights activists. In a 2002 raid on a Phnom Penh brothel, IJM "rescued" Vietnamese women who were then turned over to immigration officials. These women were eventually released, possibly to their brothel owners. This means that no significant change or help had been given to them. This is a common result of such raids: women presumed to be trafficked are offered no real help and are placed

at risk for deportation, and they are less trustful of police and NGO workers after the experience.

The Gates Foundation has supported innovative strategies to promote the health and rights of sex workers, such as the renowned DMSC Project in India. However, with the funding to IJM, its strategy appears to have shifted. *"We are outraged that Gates is backtracking from supporting evidence-based projects that allow for genuine community-based solutions to HIV and trafficking by empowering sex workers,"* said Andrew Hunter of Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers. For example, *"NGOs like the DMSC have educated sex workers to identify and help trafficked persons. Trafficked persons would be better served if Gates supported these types of programs without also funding raids, which have a proven record of violating human rights,"* explains Hunter.

Meena Seshu, Secretary General of SANGRAM, a group in India that works to protect the human rights of sex workers, said:

"The solution to trafficking must be multi-faceted. We must address the official corruption, indifference and fraud that allow traffickers to move people across borders and sell their services without repercussions. We must also address the root causes of human trafficking: the low social status, poverty and lack of education or other options that traffickers exploit when they trick people into forced labour situations. We must also recognize that many persons become involved in sex work because they live in conditions of poverty and discrimination, and it is the only way they can support their families. Tactics and strategies that further undermine their rights increase their marginalization, rather than allowing them to seek their own solutions."

The NSWP and other human rights groups call on the Gates Foundation to fund and promote rights-based approaches to assisting trafficked persons and addressing the needs and concerns of sex workers.