

Respect Sex Workers' Human Rights: Stop All Violence Against Sex Workers

Sex workers mark the 3rd International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers with a protest at the 6th World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference in Hong Kong. [See photos](#) by A. Hunter.

Saturday, December 17, 2005

December 17 is the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers and each year sex-worker organizations in different parts of the world organize different activities to commemorate the sex workers who have been abused and/or killed, and urge the public to respect sex workers' human rights. Just in time for the 6th World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference (MC6) held in Hong Kong, sex-worker organizations from all over the world (Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Japan, Australia, Thailand, Cambodia) marched and held exhibitions to help the public understand more about the situation of sex workers, and to eliminate violence against sex workers.

It is estimated that more than 20 million people worldwide work as sex workers. Despite the large numbers, sex workers have never been accepted by society, making their work environment extremely difficult and vulnerable to various threats of violence. Both male and female sex workers are exposed to different types of violence everyday and their human rights are severely violated. Thousands of sex workers are killed every year in the world, even more are raped and beaten.

For example, more than 500 sex workers are killed every year in Mainland China; 97 per cent of 1,000 Cambodia sex workers had been raped; and the 'Green River killer,' who raped and killed more than 60 sex workers in the U.S., has claimed that, '*he does not need to take any responsibility for killing sex workers.*'

Instead of protecting the safety of sex workers, laws and law enforcement agencies are more often the tools of persecution. Social discrimination is also a kind of violence against sex workers, because it marginalizes them and renders them isolated and defenseless.

Violence against Sex workers

These are the threats of violence commonly faced by sex workers:

1. Violence by customers (including verbal abuse, robbery, harassment from gangsters, rape and murder, etc.)
2. Arrests and prosecutions resulted from legal loopholes, even though sex work is not against the law.
3. Abuse of power by members of the police, who often arrest sex workers for unfounded charges (getting free sex service, strip-searching, physical assault, forcing sex workers to sign testimonies, forbidding them to make phone calls, etc.)
4. Insult and harassment caused by social discrimination, which also

excludes them from any labor or social protection.

Sex Workers' Complaints Against Police Sept. 2004 - Sept. 2005	
Type of Complaint	No. of Cases
Violation of legal rights	110
Abuse of power during inspection	62
Taking free sexual services	48
Masturbation	32
Forced to give testimony	31
Forbidden to make phone calls	28
Strip searched	25
Forced to relocate	17
Sexual intercourse (oral, vaginal, etc.)	16
Driving away customers	16
Verbal insults	13
Forced to produce a lease	11
Charged with fraudulent evidence	10
Deterred from seeing a lawyer	5
Forbidden to change clothes	5
Forced to have photos taken	4
Unfair incarceration	3
Forbidden to eat or drink	3
Theft	1
Total No. of Cases	220

International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers

On the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers (December 17), Zi Teng (an organization that deals with sex-workers' concerns) marched from Wanchai with different overseas sex worker organizations, to demonstrate the solidarity and unity among sex workers, to urge to stop any kind of violence against sex workers.

We call upon the public to:

1. Stop all violence against sex workers;
2. Eliminate discrimination against sex workers;
3. Decriminalize sex work;
4. Recognize sex work as a profession, and respect the human rights

of sex workers.

Joint Declaration by:

Zi Teng (Hong Kong organization that deals with sex workers' concerns), Women's Network for Unity (Cambodia), COSWAS (Taiwan), SWEETY (Japan), Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers, Network of Sex Work Projects

Background: A Day to End Violence

The International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers was inaugurated two years ago on December 17. It was conceived by the Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP) based in California (U.S.A.), and was held shortly after the conviction of Gary Ridgeway — the Green River Killer — who murdered at least 48 prostitutes in the U.S., and whose statements to the police sparked the organizers. Ridgeway admitted, "I picked prostitutes because I thought I could kill as many of them as I wanted without getting caught." Many more violent crimes against prostitutes remain uninvestigated by law authorities.

Sex workers are hesitant to report physical and sexual violence to the police because police do not always take their complaints seriously and investigate the crimes committed against sex workers. "The assault, battery, rape and murder of sex workers has got to end. This is allowing violent criminals to prowl our streets with impunity," says Robyn Few, executive director of the Sex Workers Outreach Project, U.S.A.

Sex-worker organizations in different parts of the world organize different activities every year to commemorate the sex workers who were abused and killed; to urge the public to respect sex workers' human rights.

Zi Teng (Hong Kong), Women's Network for Unity (Cambodia), COSWAS (Taiwan), SWEETY (Japan), and other participants are part of the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers — a unified international sex-workers' rights movement, consisting of thousands of members who have organized to demand their basic human rights. So far, this activism has resulted in the decriminalization of prostitution in Australia, New Zealand, and the Netherlands, with very strong movements in other countries. In India and Taiwan, tens of thousands of workers have demonstrated for prostitutes' rights.

Other cities in which memorial events are planned include New York, San Francisco and Boston (U.S.A.); Manchester (U.K.); Montreal and Vancouver (Canada); and Cape Town (South Africa).

We call for concerted action: please send our statement to sbenq@sb.gov.hk to show your support on sex workers.

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We believe that everyone, regardless of his/her profession, social status, religion, sexual orientation or gender, is entitled to have human rights. We should all be treated fairly by the legal system and other social institutions without being oppressed or menaced by violence.

Stories From Sex Workers

Violence against sex workers by customers

- *Shao-Lin came to Hong Kong from Mainland China. Being a sex worker, she was constantly threatened by all kinds of violence from her customers, such as not paying after receiving service, robbery, rape, and even physical assault from an eighty-year-old man. She was eventually murdered.*

Violence against sex workers by society

- *Tsing-Yee worked in a massage parlor. When the parlor closed down, all other employees were compensated. Tsing-Yee and all the other masseuses, however, were not regarded as employees and therefore not compensated at all. She was also frequently harassed by her neighbors, such as verbal abuse, vandalizing, or even splashing feces on her door.*

Violence against sex workers by the legal system

Although sex work is not illegal, various criminal ordinances related to sex work make it difficult for sex workers to survive and they often become victims of unfair prosecutions.

- *Mei-lin was walking on the street when a police officer approached her and asked for sex service. She was arrested and falsely charged with soliciting for an immoral purpose. Eventually she was convicted because the judge did not believe her testimony since she was a sex worker.*
- *Man Man was charged by the police for "advertising prostitution" as She put a "Welcome" sign on the door.*

Violence against sex workers by police

- *Li Yuen-Yee provided sex service to a police officer (oral sex).*

Instead of paying the agreed \$3000, the officer only paid \$500. Yee was then beaten and the condom she used as evidence was discarded by a female officer. Yee was later charged with blackmail and assaulting police officer. In the end she committed suicide out of anger and frustration.

- *A police officer asked Ah Ming (male sex worker) to provide sex service. Since the police operation guideline allows "limited bodily contact," the officer arrested Ah Ming after enjoying masturbation.*