

**NSWP Reports on UNGASS 2006:  
The United Nations General Assembly  
High-Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS**

**United Nations Headquarters, New York, USA  
May 31 - June 2, 2006**

(UN Member States convene to undertake a comprehensive review of the progress achieved in realizing the targets set out in the *Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS* at the 2006 UNGASS Review Meeting.)

**Part 1: NSWP and PONY and Sex Workers Project event for UNGASS**

NSWP had a great event put on with PONY and the Sex Workers Project (SWP) of the Urban Justice Center. Four people spoke and a fabulous film about Forum XXX last year in Montreal was shown.

Anna Louise Crago from Stella in Montreal showed the film which had quotes from people all over the world about sex workers organizing!

She spoke about the work Stella is doing to prosecute cases of violence against sex workers in Montreal. They have accompanied over 50 women to file reports about assaults and they have helped sex workers testify and make statements against people who have assaulted them. Two serial rapists are in court because of the work of Stella!

Meena Seshu spoke about her work in India with sex workers in the small truck-stop town of Sangli. The most distressing news she had was about raids conducted against the sex workers by a US organization. The US based and US funded organization is a "raid and rescue" group. They detained schoolgirls visiting their mothers in the red light district, they detained everyone they thought looked young, and contested the birth certificates that proved to the Indian courts that all but two of the women were minors. The actors involved are affiliated with other organizations conducting similar abuses in Cambodia and Thailand.

Gabriela Leite told the story of how sex workers influenced the Brazilian government to turn down US funding for HIV prevention because of the US policy requiring organizations that receive USAID, PEPFAR and US Global Fund money to have a policy against prostitution. Sex workers have been part of Brazil's response to HIV for over a decade and they would have been excluded in any meaningful way if Brazil adopted such a policy. We applaud Gabriela for her work and the Brazilian government for standing up for sex workers rights!

Martine Ago from Ivory Coast read her statement for the UN General Assembly in which she stated that sex workers rights are human rights and that sex workers are part of the solution. Her speech will be posted to the list once it is available in English.

Everyone hung out after until they kicked us out of the building! It was especially inspiring to have Gabriela tell us all about her work and for us to tell her all about ours!

Thank you to Kristen and Theresa and Antonia for organizing space and food for the event. Thank you to SWP for paying for the food! An enormous thank you to Rusty and Anna-Louise and Ruthie for translating! And thanks to our co-hosts from CUNY and the Center for the Study of Women and Society.

## **Part 2: Martine Ago opens the community program at the UNGASS**

Kofi Annan mentioned sex workers and drug users in his speech, and almost everyone else did, too!

Martine spoke to the General Assembly. When her talk is translated, it will be sent to the lists. She said that sex workers rights are human rights and that sex workers are part of the solution, and was really right on! Martine is very beautiful and spoke beautifully. When she was finished, Kofi Annan shook her hand and left for another meeting we think he came just to see her, not because he's the UN Secretary General! Martine also got a love letter from Peter Piot saying that he was a brother and was involved in setting up Clinique de Confiance, the clinic for sex workers in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. So, Martine, if Kofi Annan and Peter Piot called, who would you prefer to see?

Martine spoke to introduce a film about HIV in four contexts. The part that will most interest NSWP members is that the Thailand section of the film features APNSW All-Stars Dale, Justine, Ting, Prem, Pook and more! The film included a Thai transgender person discussing discrimination, saying that people think sex workers are different but that really, we are just normal people like everyone else.

After Martine spoke, thirteen civil society representatives spoke, and some governments spoke. Allan Clear's remarks were really strong on sex work and will come in another message. APNSW's Meena Seshu talked about women's rights and was fabulous! Jodi Jacobson from CHANGE talked about PEPFAR and US funding restrictions. Elena Reynaga said that we can't rely on governments to protect us from HIV if they don't protect us from violence and murder.

The most exciting moment was when the Mexican delegation gave half of their time to speak to a sex worker from Mexico! We are getting in touch with sex workers here from Peru and Mexico, as well as our NSWP colleagues Noi from Empower (Thailand) and Gabriela from Davida (Brazil) and many strong allies.

*Pictures to come!*

## **Part 3: Sex workers speak at US Mission to the UN during protest**

*Pictures to come!*

Meena Seshu brought a banner for PONY and \$pread, sex workers groups in New York. Members and supporters of PONY and \$pread carried it during the demonstration.

Indian sex workers with VAMP made the banner — it has a gorgeous picture of a woman and it says:

**MY A\$\$ IS MINE**

### **PONY \$PREAD**

The Sex Workers Project bought more than a dozen red umbrellas and we carried them during the rally and march. They got a lot of attention and we were interviewed by Italian television. Please let us know if you see sex workers at UNGASS on television! Most of the people at the march wore the "HIV POSITIVE" shirts first made by South Africa's Treatment Action Campaign for the Durban AIDS Conference.

Some of the signs made by other organizations said:

**BUSH: STOP CONDEMNING SEX WORKERS!  
END THE ILLEGAL PROSTITUTION OATH!**

During the rally, speakers from organizations addressing housing and homelessness, harm reduction, and access to treatment mentioned sex workers in their speeches! Your activism has paid off: People are much more aware of sex work and sex workers' rights than ever before!

Over a thousand people marched! The people went on for blocks! Marchers went to Uganda's mission to the UN, where activists spoke about the policy changes in Uganda and how this is leading to more HIV infection. At India's mission to the UN, Indian activists protested the restrictions on Indian generics.

When we went to the US mission to the UN, Melissa spoke about how the Cambodian sex workers were denied visas to come to the US and explained that the US needs to hear from them because they experience greater stigma and discrimination from NGOs because of the US funding restrictions and the anti-prostitution purity pledge. She also described the sex workers in Thailand being excluded from the new clinic for men who have sex with men in Thailand. She led the protestors in the Cambodian's favorite chant. Everyone chanted "DOWN DOWN USAID". Noi from Empower talked about how everyone likes sex and sex workers want to be able to sell safe sex without fear and without harassment and violence. She was the most fun of all the speakers during the march!

Anna Louise talked about condom shortages in West Africa since the US cut their donations — the US now gives fewer condoms than they did in 1990! Sex workers in West Africa report buying extremely expensive condoms on the black market and not being able to get condoms at all for months at a time.

Thank you to the organizers of the march for offering us the last word! And thank you to the sex workers in Europe who showed us how photogenic red umbrellas make us all!

— *Melissa Ditmore*

- [Intervention by Martine Ago, Ivory Coast](#) — The United Nations General Assembly High-Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS, New York, June 1, 2006