



## Open Letter to the Icelandic Foreign minister minister Lilja Dögg Alfreðasdóttir regarding the Icelandic representatives to the 2016 High-Level Meeting on Ending AIDS

**“If access to health care is considered a human right, who is considered human enough to have that right?” – Dr. Paul Farmer**

We often say that words hold power, and as such they have to be carefully considered. On some occasions, this is truer than on others, and this is one of those occasions. World leaders, government representatives, HIV programme implementers and civil society organizations are currently preparing for the 2016 United Nations General Assembly High-Level Meeting on Ending AIDS. They should be focusing on the future of the AIDS response. Instead, there have been intense negotiations on which words should be used to describe the global agenda during the next 5-year period.

Words describing human rights are often stated as a matter of fact, but without a real understanding of how it is to be denied those rights. For some of us, however, discrimination, violence and other human rights abuses are reoccurring reminders that not all lives are valued equally, despite all the words assuring us of the opposite. We are frequently criminalised and stigmatised, and sometimes, we are not seen as humans at all. Words are also used to systematically discriminate against us, sometimes through blatant hate speech, sometimes by much subtler means, and above all by silencing us. The most recent example is that of a number of community-led organisations being blocked from attending the High Level Meeting, often by countries in their very own region.

During last week’s negotiations and lobbying in New York, the Icelandic representatives focused a lot on words, specifically *two* words – sex work – which they wanted removed from the outcome document and exchanged with the phrase “people who sell sex”. This might sound pretty harmless, but words do hold power. In this particular situation, these words come with some very specific powers of their own. Some people say the term “sex work” is only used to legitimise and normalise the sale of sexual services. Others will even go as far as to claim that this terminology is purely pushed by pimps and traffickers trying to increase their profit. Words have the power to mislead, which happens to be the case here. For those of us who sell sex, “sex work” is the preferred way to describe our work, and the term comes from our own community. To us, there is magic behind this term, as it holds the possibility of accessing labour rights. This would mean accessing a whole added layer of rights, including protection against unjust working conditions, exploitation and forced labour – the very same rights violations that those arguing “selling sex” should not be called work claim they want to protect us from.

Sex work is widely accepted as a term that contributes towards rooting out violence, oppression, exploitation, stigma and discrimination of persons engaged in sex work, which is why not only sex workers but also UNAIDS, UNDP, the ILO, the WHO, UN Women, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch use the term sex work to describe what we do.



The International Labour Organization has on a number of occasions discussed sex work in the context of recommendation 200, the first international labour standard on HIV and AIDS in the world of work, which is also applicable to the informal labour market where sex work often takes place. At the most recent AIDS conference held in 2014, the Lancet published research highlighting the decriminalisation of sex work as the single most effective measure to address HIV among sex workers, averting an estimated 33-46% of new cases. Removing the word “work” from an important key document means removing our avenues to access labour rights.

Some countries want to remove the mentioning of key populations from UN documents altogether. Some disagree with key populations’ health being a priority or think our lives are not worth investing in, others deny our communities even exist. Iceland’s recent actions may be based on good intentions, the national discourse on sex work and an approved ideological stance. However, it feeds into an agenda of hatred, oppression and discrimination. That is especially true for key populations in low and middle income countries that are depending on these documents to access funding to advocate for their rights, as well as funding to ensure adequate health care, a situation made more urgent by a number of donor countries cutting down their contributions to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Among them are Sweden and Denmark.

To you it might just be about two words you don’t like, but to us it is so much more than that. You don’t have to like them, this is not an ideological debate where we are arguing who is right and who is wrong. However, insisting on the use of problematic terminology does nothing to improve the lives of sex workers or end AIDS. In fact, it will do quite the opposite.

**We, the undersigned, sincerely urge Iceland to recognize that protecting sex workers’ and other key populations’ human rights are what should be prioritized, not pushing national agendas that jeopardize universal access to HIV treatment, care, prevention and support needed to achieve the two words that we should be focusing on – ending AIDS.**

Rose Alliance, Sweden

NSWP – the Global Network of Sex Work Projects

APNSW – the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers

ASWA – African Sex Worker Alliance

Caribbean Sex Work Coalition

ICRSE – the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe

SWAN – Sex Workers’ Rights Advocacy Network in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia

RedTraSex (Red de Mujeres Trabajadoras Sexuales de Latinoamerica y El Caribe)

All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW), India

ANAPFEH, Haiti

Asociación Civil Ángel Azul, Peru

Asociación de Mujeres Buscando Libertad - ASMUBULI, Colombia

Asociación para el Mejoramiento de la Calidad de Vida de Trabajadoras y Extrabajadoras Sexuales - LA SALA, Costa Rica

Asoupevu, Burundi



ASPASIE, Switzerland  
BAYSWAN – Bay Area Sex Worker Advocacy Network, USA  
Best Practice Policy Project, USA  
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Kisauni peer Educators, Kenya  
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Maggies'd Toronto Sex Workers' Action Project, Canada  
Movimiento de Mujeres Orquídeas del Mar, El Salvador  
MUSKAN, India  
Nigeria Sex Workers Association, Nigeria  
NNSW, National Network of Sex Workers, India  
NZCP - New Zealand Collective of Prostitutes, New Zealand  
ONAEM, Bolivia  
Philippine Sex Worker Collective, Philippines  
PION, Norway  
PONY, USA  
POWER, Canada  
Public Association 'Amelia'  
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Red Umbrella Sexual Health and Human Rights Association, Turkey  
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Scarlet Alliance – Australian Sex Workers Association, Australia  
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Sisters from ME & MY WORLD, India  
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Stella, Canada  
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Surinam Coalition of Sexworkers (SUCOS)  
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SWEAT - The Sex Worker and Education and Advocacy Taskforce, South Africa  
SWOP ACT, Australia  
SWOP Las Vegas, USA  
SWOP NSW, Australia  
SWOP NT, Australia  
SWOP Sacramento  
SWOP USA, USA  
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The Association of Sex Workers Women (WSW), Paraguay  
The Sex Work Association of Jamaica, Jamaica  
Tikkun Olam Belize - a ngo for sex workers in Belize  
"Together with hope" (UNES), Paraguay  
Transgender Equality, Uganda  
Triple-X Workers' Solidarity Association of British Columbia, Canada  
UKMO (Uttara Karnataka Mahila Okkuta), India  
UTSOPI, Belgium  
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VAMP, India  
VNSW, Vietnam Network of sex Workers, Vietnam  
Wonetha, Uganda  
Zi Teng, Hong Kong

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Global Action for Trans\* Equality (GATE)  
Health GAP (Global Access Project)  
HRI - Harm Reduction International  
IAS – International AIDS Society  
ICASO  
International Civil Society Support.  
International Community of Women Living with HIV (ICW Global).  
INWUD - the Internation Network of Women who Use Drugs  
IRGT: A Global Network of Trans Women and HIV  
IWHC - International Women's Health Coalition  
More Peace Less Aids fundacion



MSMGF (Global Forum on MSM & HIV)  
The Coalition for Children Affected by AIDS  
The Global Network of People Living with HIV (GNP+)  
The International HIV/AIDS Alliance  
The International Indigenous Working Group on HIV and AIDS  
Pangaea Global AIDS  
ITPC-LATCA, International Treatment Preparedness Coalition Latin America and The Caribbean  
African Services Committee  
AID FOR AIDS  
AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa (ARASA)  
AIDS Healthcare Foundation Latin American  
APCASO - Asia Pacific Council of AIDS Organizations  
APCOM  
Asia Catalyst  
Asia Pacific Alliance for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (APA)  
Asia Pacific Transgender Network  
Coalition of Asia-Pacific Regional Networks on HIV/AIDS (7 sisters)  
ENPUD – Euroasian Network of People who Use Drugs  
European AIDS Treatment Group (EATG)  
INA (Māori, Indigenous & South Pacific) HIV/AIDS Foundation  
International Treatment Preparedness Coalition West Africa (ITPC West Africa).  
LACCASO – LAC - Latin American and Caribbean Council of AIDS Service Organizations  
MENA Rosa (group of WLHIV in the MENA Region)  
REDLACTRANS  
Southern African AIDS Trust  
Youth Voices Count (YVC)  
ACO Positive Women, Ukraine  
Action against AIDS, Germany  
Action for Health Initiatives, Inc., Philippines  
AFAO- Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations  
Afstaða - Iceland's association of prisoners and supporters of penal reform, Iceland  
AHF Argentina  
AHF Brazil  
AHF Dominican Republic  
AHF Guatemala  
AHF Haiti  
AHF Jamaica  
AHF Mexico  
AHF Peru  
AIDES, France  
Aids Fonds, Netherlands  
AIDS-Fondet, Denmark  
AIVL- Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League



Akahatá Equipo de trabajo en sexualidades y géneros, Argentina  
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APDES, Portugal  
Asia Catalyst  
Asociación Civil No Lucrativa Proyecto Vida, Guatemala  
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AVAC, USA  
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Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, Canada  
Canadian Positive People Network/Réseau canadien des personnes séropositives (RCPS), Canada  
Carousel Association, Romania  
C-NET+ - Collaborative Network for Persons Living with HIV, Belize  
DAMJ Association pour la justice et l'égalité  
Desmond Tutu HIV Foundation, South Africa  
Double Positive Foundation, Surinam  
EANNASO, Tanzania  
FFS – Feminists For Solidarity, Sweden  
FPA, United Kingdom  
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Positive Women's Network, USA  
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Safe Harbour Outreach Project (S.H.O.P.), Candada



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Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center, USA  
Shanghai CSW&MSM Center, China  
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South India AIDS Action Programme (SIAAP), member of NNSW, India  
Stepping Stone Association, Canada  
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SWexpertise21.nl, Netherlands  
The Make A Difference (MAD) Trust, United Kingdom  
The People living with HIV Stigma Index, United Kingdom  
The Sexual Rights Centre, Zimbabwe  
The Street Lawyers - Gadejuristen, Denmark  
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Women's health and Human rights Network Antigua  
Women's Initiatives (WINS)

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