Open Letter to the Icelandic Foreign minister minister Lilja Dógg 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
Carribean 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

Rose Alliance, c/o Hiv-Sverige, Tjurbergsgatan 29, 118 56 Stockholm, SWEDEN
ASPASIE, Switzerland
BAYSWAN – Bay Area Sex Worker Advocacy Network, USA
Best Practice Policy Project, USA
Butterfly - Asian and migrant sex workers support network, Canada
CoyoteRI, USA
Desiree Alliance, USA
Durbar Mahila Samanawya Committee, India
El Sindicato de Mujeres Trabajadoras Sexuales de Colombia - SINTRASEXCO, Colombia
Empower, Thailand
FIRST Decriminalize Sex Work, Canada
Friends Frangipani, Papua New Guinea
Guyana Sex Work Coalition, Guyana
HETAIRA, Spain
HIPS, USA
HIV/AIDS Research and Welfare Centre (HARC), Bangladesh
HOYMAS, Kenya
HPLGBT, Ukraine
Kisauuni peer Educators, Kenya
LEFÖ/TAMPEP, Austria
Legalife-Ukraine
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’
Red de Trabajadoras Sexuales de Honduras
Red Umbrella Sexual Health and Human Rights Association, Turkey
RedTraSex – Perú, Peru
Reseau Solidalite pour le Droit des Travailleuses de Sexe, Burundi
Respect Inc. Queensland, Australia
SANGRAM, India
Scarlet Alliance – Australian Sex Workers Association, Australia
Scot-Pep, United Kingdom
Sex Professionals of Canada
SIN, Australia
Sisonke, South Africa
Sisters from ME & MY WORLD, India
Star-Star, Macedonia
Stella, Canada
STRASS, France
Surinam Coalition of Sexworkers (SUCOS)
SWAGGERR, Australia
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
SWOP-Chicago, USA
SWOU, United Kingdom
Tais Plus, Kyrgyzstan
Tamaulipas Diversidad VIHDA Trans A.C, Mexico
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
Vadamalar Federation of Sex workers, India
VAMP, India
VNSW, Vietnam Network of sex Workers, Vietnam
Wonetha, Uganda
Zi Teng, Hong Kong

Supporters
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 America
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
Alliance for Public Health, Ukraine
APDES, Portugal
Asia Catalyst
Asociación Civil No Lucrativa Proyecto Vida, Guatemala
Associacaoo Existências, Portugal
ATP+ Tunisian Association of Positive Prevention
AVAC, USA
Buddism for Social Development Action (BSDA), Cambodia
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
Fundación Huésped
Fundación Salud por Derecho
Gestos-Brazil
Ghapro vzw – Health care and support to sex workers, Belgium
GrenCHAP Inc., Grenada
Grupo Este Amor, Dominican Republic
Hiv-Iceland, Iceland
HIV-Sweden
India HIV/AIDS Alliance
Kaana Foundation for Outreach Programs (KAFOP), Uganda
Lambeth Service User Council, United Kingdom
LGBT Platform, Surinam
MANGO Key population network
Mrs. Laufey, Iceland's Harm reduction Association, Iceland
NAPWHA- National Association of People with HIV Australia
ONG Nepyru, Paraguay
Our Circle
Pembe Hayat LGBTT Solidarity Association, Turkey
Positiiviset ry, Hiv-Finland
Positive Vibes, Namibia
Positive Women's Network, USA
Pro-tukipiste ry, Finland
REPSSI, South Africa
Safe Harbour Outreach Project (S.H.O.P.), Canada
Salud por Derecho, Spain
Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center, USA
Shanghai CSW&MSM Center, China
Snarrótin - Iceland’s Civil Liberties Union, Iceland
South India AIDS Action Programme (SIAAP), member of NNSW, India
Stepping Stone Association, Canada
STOPAIDS, United Kingdom
StopVIH, Venezuela
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
Trans In Action
Ukrainian Association of Substitution Treatment Advocates, Ukraine
Women’s health and Human rights Network Antigua
Women’s Initiatives (WINS)

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