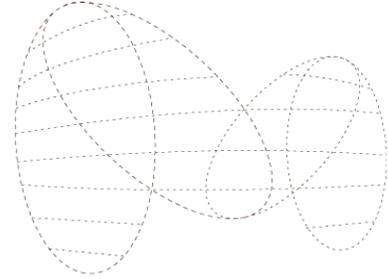


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Sex Worker Health and Rights Advocates use of Information and Communications Technologies Report

Compiled by Tactical Tech in collaboration with Melissa Gira. Commissioned by the Open Society Institute's Sexual Health and Rights Project (SHARP).

July 17th, 2007

Sex Worker Advocacy Websites from Around the World

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to explore the ways in which sex worker health and rights advocacy groups currently use information and communications technology, and to discover how they could benefit from technology and training in the future.

Part of this needs assessment was carried out by survey: 37 groups responded to surveys, including three that responded by telephone interview. The majority of surveys received were from Central and Eastern Europe, along with a significant number from Australia, Europe and the US. We were sorry to find that we had very few responses from the global South (only 20% of total respondents).

We were also able to formally and informally interview sex worker advocates during SHARP's April 2007 meeting in Cambodia, "Advancing Global Advocacy on Sex Workers' Health and Human Rights." During the meeting in Cambodia, discussions led to the conclusion that information communications technologies (ICTs) could be better used in the sex worker rights community to:

- reinforce participation from the community so that they may comment, take part in advocacy directly, and express unmediated opinions
- increase the weight of advocacy and campaigning efforts, through collecting more hard evidence and/or producing more powerful communications (e.g. video).
- strengthen the exchange of information between rights advocates regionally and internationally, facilitating co-ordination on particular campaigns, or co-ordination in reaction to challenges faced (for example, local or international systematic abuses or policy changes).

Summary of findings

Sex worker health and rights advocates are using information and communications technology in four main ways;

- To communicate with and mobilise their constituents (sex workers).
- To increase participation in advocacy by their constituents.
- For regional and international networking.
- To support national advocacy campaigns.

Our key findings from the needs assessment are:

- **Mobile phones** are used by advocacy groups for outreach to sex workers, this will be a key technology when considering how to organise and increase participation by constituents.
- **Web and e-mail** is used predominantly for advocacy work and to a limited extent for international solidarity networking.
- As most organisations stated they have **reliable access to the Internet**, the biggest barriers to international networking are language and content creation.
- Sex workers' groups demonstrate a **general flair** and often use technologies such as photographs, power point, videos, karaoke and audio in **innovative ways**. This could be due partly to cultural and literacy barriers, but is also due to the creative nature of the community.
- Sex worker advocates, particularly in more developed countries, have related experience in **using ICT tools** to promote their sex work, which helps support their use of ICT in their advocacy work.
- **Privacy** is a concern for a number of groups; some groups reported knowing that they were under surveillance and, although many are using informal ways of protecting themselves, none of the groups are using digital security technologies. Privacy issues are also a significant barrier for sex workers wanting to use on-line services.
- Many organisations rely on a staff member who is an **"accidental techie"**, someone who is handling the organisation's ICT demands not because it is in their job description, but because they have some expertise, often self-taught. In other cases technical assistance and support may come from young volunteers and friends, or from people who help the organisation in other roles, for example translators.
- The biggest barrier to accessing technology, as cited by respondents, is **cost**.
- There is an enormous **disparity in computer skills** between organisations

from different regions. While this may sometimes reflect larger disparities, for example those between the global North and global South, it also depends more generally on access to financial resources and expertise. It is essential that those wanting to co-ordinate a global advocacy campaign analyse and understand the variety of different obstacles to ICT use in each area.

Advocacy Targets and Themes

Nearly all the groups that we contacted are conducting outreach work directly with sex workers, while also engaging in other activities, which vary from one organisation to the next. Some of the groups are involved explicitly in political organising and nearly all say they have specific advocacy goals.

Common themes are:

- An end to discrimination against and stigmatisation of sex workers;
- Labour rights for sex workers, including safe working conditions; and
- The inclusion of sex workers in policy and law reform.

A few organisations also responded with additional goals, for example:

- harm reduction;
- advocating for migrant sex workers;
- HIV/STD prevention;
- law reform;
- ensuring that research into aspects of sex work by medical and academic institutions remains as objective and non-political as possible;
- working with the media

Nearly all the groups we interviewed said that the main target for their advocacy work is government officials and policy-makers, who are approached through direct meetings and through the media. A few other groups stated that their advocacy targets are NGOs providing services to sex workers; others are also targeting the clients of sex workers. Most are conducting this advocacy via face-to-face meetings and demonstrations, but some also use e-mail alerts and websites. Some groups have also started using audio and video as advocacy tools.

Information and Communications

Organisations use information and communications technology in three distinct ways, according to their intended audience:

- **For their constituents** - where advocates are communicating with and mobilising their constituents, predominantly sex workers, locally. Most of these communications happen face-to-face via meetings or verbally over mobile phones. SMS (short messaging service) texting via mobile phones is, of course, common in areas where literacy is not an issue; in areas with low literacy, symbols combined with text shorthand are being used. The types of information being disseminated include information about sex workers' rights, news about services, and logistical information about actions and demonstrations. Technology is also being used to facilitate organising; for example AMAS/Redtrasex, in Argentina, are using mobile phones to mobilise members for political demonstrations. Empower, a sex worker organisation of several thousand members based in Thailand, is also successfully mobilising demonstrations based on group SMS texting. Empower members present at the Cambodia meeting were interested in using SMS to poll their membership, which would require mass texting capability.

- For their allies - advocates are communicating with other organisations working in the fields of sex worker health and rights advocacy at the local, national, or international level, typically via face-to-face meetings, post, telephone and the Internet. They share information covering education about sex worker issues, reports, policy developments, and information about actions and demonstrations. The Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers' website (www.apnsw.org) is used to bring together, from many sources, materials and documents which support advocacy positions. It is also used to educate allies on subjects such as the 100%

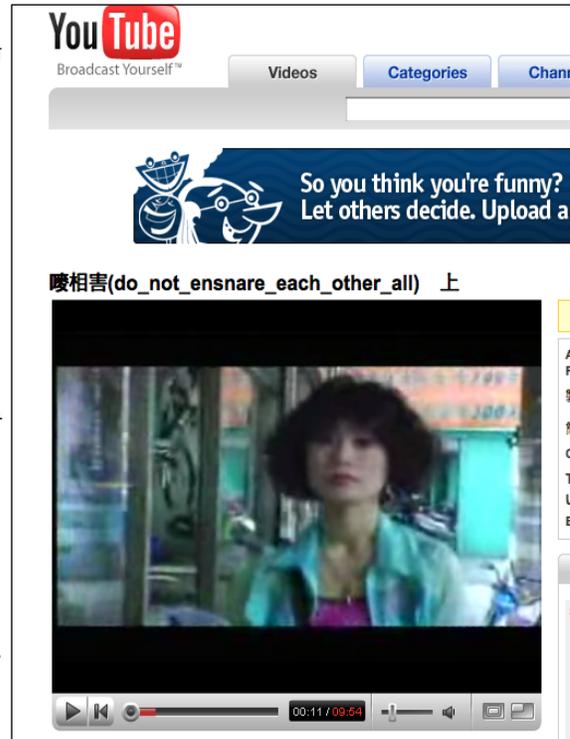


- For their advocacy targets - advocates are providing information, including reports containing details of the impact of government policies, to government officials and policy-makers, the media, and other NGOs (generally local and national) working on sex-worker-related issues. Communication is via face-to-face meetings, mail, telephone, the Internet and through the media. Information distributed to the media includes press releases as well as information about reports, actions, and demonstrations. A number of organisations are using technology to increase their constituents' participation in advocacy. For example SCOT Pep in Scotland uses an e-mail list to inform constituents about relevant bills going through parliament and to "...encourage them to make their views known". The Best Practices Policy Project in the US would like to "...give small payments to community members to write policy analysis and legislative updates that speak to local representatives and get these out via e-mail." They are also interested in the idea of "very community-driven journalism [which] would be great if it was in the hands of many...". AMMAR is using digital photography as means to ensure accountability, by documenting their meetings with public officials in Argentina.

▪ **Advocacy and Organizing**

Video and audio content is being created by a minority of groups who are publishing their work online on video-sharing websites such as YouTube and Blip. One organisation, COSWAS (Taipei), is also producing audio podcasts. A few organisations are storing audio testimony privately as oral history, or to play at demonstrations and public events. Online photo albums are in use by some groups, such as COSWAS, who document their meetings with digital photos.

A prominent feature of the interviews with Redtralsex in Buenos Aires and COSWAS was their interest in digital documentation. Redtralsex is using digital photography to document their demonstrations. We didn't find any examples of digital photographs being collected for documenting abuses, but there was a lot of interest from the attendees in Cambodia in the possibilities of using digital photos for advocacy and aggregating them via photo-sharing websites like Flickr.



COSWAS is using digital audio to record the stories of sex workers, particularly in instances where the sex worker does not wish their face to be shown. These recordings are used as testimony in public hearings, as well as during actions, parades, and meetings. COSWAS has also produced an excellent video narrative that is being shared on YouTube and can be watched at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBAZ4RxPxDM> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKndBqiQLho>

APNSW has produced a Karaoke video featuring a protest-song used to promote a global advocacy message. This video was used as a public education piece at the XVI International AIDS Conference in Toronto, and is also being shared on YouTube and on Blip at: <http://www.blip.tv/file/199048/>

▪ **Data Collection**

Sex worker organisations collect a variety of information. In most cases the

information they collect about their constituents is stored on paper, though organisations are careful about the extent of such information and how they store it, for reasons of security and privacy. A few better-resourced groups are keeping information in digital databases.



A good example of this is Lefo in Austria, which uses paper register cards to store information about sex workers but has a computer database for

information about allies. They have recently received funding to develop a database to provide certain statistics to their government ministry. Lefo is considering using this database to record some sensitive information but they are concerned about data security.

None of the organisations surveyed were systematically recording or monitoring rights abuses, but ANSWP does have plans to implement such a documentation project in the near future.

- **Sharing Information**

Respondents from organisations that are acting as hubs for networks are concerned with finding out from partners and peers the information that is relevant to them, and then disseminating it. SWAN, a sex worker rights advocacy network in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, also cited in its phone interview a need to be automatically alerted of updates to websites run by members of their network. For groups trying to aggregate information from a coalition or network, the ability to use RSS (a way of automatically keeping track of new content on selected websites), would be an enormous help.

Many of the networks currently rely on mass e-mails to disseminate information about the progress of campaigns and to co-ordinate actions, but problems with this approach were identified. International networks which use e-mail lists extensively, such as APNSW and NSWP, expressed concerns about having large e-mail lists which have existed for so long that keeping communications secure has become a challenge. Finding social solutions, such as creating community guidelines on mailing-list confidentiality and privacy, were important to these networks.

Most organisations have their own websites that reach a primary audience of other organisations, NGOs, the media and public officials. A few groups are using blogs, including sex worker networks such as ICRSE (www.sexworkeurope.org) and SWAN (www.swannet.org), and individual organisations like COSWAS (www.coswas.org); these allow for quick updating of critical information. We found no examples of organisations using wikis (see below for definition) but there was interest expressed in using them for co-ordinating campaigns across networks, such as for the campaign centered around the upcoming International AIDS Conference in Mexico City.

Focus on technology use

Most of the groups who responded to the survey said they connect to the Internet through a high-speed connection at their home or office, using a desktop or laptop computer. A very few, perhaps surprisingly in the global North, said they have access to the Internet via dial-up. Their constituents (sex workers) rarely have access to the Internet, and when they do it is typically via Internet cafes. Mobile phones are therefore widely used to reach constituents.

Because of limited funds and space, access to computers is mostly only available to the organisations' staff and volunteers. In a few instances, computer access is offered to sex workers and/or community members, but in these cases, very few sex workers use the computers.

Respondents cited expense as the primary obstacle to organisations' use of, and constituents' access to, technology. The second barrier cited is

language, because software is not translated for many localities. Lack of skills is the third problem mentioned. It is clear that the groups that can overcome the barriers of cost and language then face a lack of expertise which prevents them making optimum use of technology. In other words, the skills gap is important even though it is a challenge that is only faced after other problems have been overcome. This is best exemplified by the organisation in Southeast Asia that received a gift of a computer via an international funding source but ended up giving it away to another group because they did not have the expertise to use it.

Nearly all the organisations surveyed are relying on self-taught staff, friends, or volunteers for computer support. For example, Women's Network for Unity, in Cambodia, has one member of staff who is teaching himself English and computer skills, and has become the primary technology user and support provider in the group, creating, amongst other things, PowerPoint presentations for use by the rest of the organisation. Organisations, and sometimes members of the community as well, are relying on a small number of skilled staff to provide technology support. These people expressed a desire to increase their own expertise and also wanted to learn how to train others within their organisations in order to share work and responsibility more equitably and more effectively.

Most of the groups surveyed said that they have access to printers, CD/DVD burners, and digital cameras, and a number use digital video and audio equipment as well. The amount and variety of equipment they have is in a direct ratio to the size of their budgets.

Roughly half of the respondents are aware of electronic privacy issues and of information and communications security vulnerabilities. The groups that are aware of these problems suspect that the police are listening to their phone calls and/or reading their e-mail. In discussions at the Cambodia meeting about sex worker health and rights advocates, we discovered that it is common practice for the police to take mobile phones when they arrest people, to the extent that those arrested have begun to expect the data on their phones to go missing. Organisations are interested in being able to utilise "short numbers" so sex workers can easily notify them via mobile phones if they are arrested. Organisations also expressed concerns about inadvertently revealing the identity of sex workers, who live and work under the constant fear of legal and social repercussions. None of the groups surveyed seem to be taking many steps to address security and privacy issues, though one or two organisations use password protection on their computer logins. Empower Foundation, Thailand, simply said "Phone and e-mails are tapped by Intelligence for many years now...there is little real interference so we don't think about it very often". There were differing expectations and attitudes regarding invasion of privacy; some groups have learned to expect that they will have no privacy and that it is futile to attempt to preserve it.

Interest in using ICTs

Interest in ICTs varied by region and according to the type of tools that organisations already use.

In Australasia, the Scarlet Alliance already uses mobile phones for collecting photographs, and the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective Christchurch Branch "has initiated a ProTXT project, where sex workers can communicate with each other regarding safer sex, bad clients, and other issues of importance" (NZPC). Groups in this region were also interested in

improving databases and mailing lists and in learning how to create and maintain easily-updated websites using software that makes it simpler for anyone to publish content on to a website, such as Content Management Systems (CMS) and blogs.

In Asia, mobile phone organising and advocacy was a commonly identified interest. This may correspond to the large size of the groups and of their constituencies in Asia and to their approach to advocacy, but it also reflects the proliferation of mobile phones and relatively restricted access to the Internet in the region.

The few African and Latin American groups surveyed were equally interested in mobile advocacy, CMS, databases, and IT tools that allow groups to collaborate on documents.

In North America and Europe, where groups reported having more access to the Internet and were more focused on networking and policy, CMS were also a priority, as were databases and mailing lists. North American groups were less interested in mobile phone advocacy, but expressed some interest in using mobile phones for photographic documentation.

All of the organisations surveyed in Central, South Eastern, and Eastern Europe were interested in using databases, CMS and collaborative document tools. Groups in some countries, such as Lithuania and Ukraine, were very interested in extending the use of mobile phones, while those in others, Macedonia for example, were less so.

Conclusion

The potential of ICT use by the Sex Worker Advocacy community remains great. Ideas that emerged out of discussions concerning what could be done with ICTs included:

- uploading photos and videos of abuses to the Internet from mobile phones,
- giving sex workers the technological training and access to publish their own stories on-line,
- increasing the capacity of organisations to mobilise large numbers of sex workers via text messages,
- co-ordinating the implementation of global messaging campaigns by providing individual organisations with tools that allow the users to collaborate on common documents and share them online, and
- supporting and co-ordinating a global campaign of rapid response to situations involving abuse, legal problems, trafficking and other serious issues.

In order to realise these ideas, steps must be taken to bridge gaps in expertise and to address the lack of resources among organisations. Efforts should be made to increase the number of people within the community able and willing to use and experiment with ICTs, and to empower these people.

We would highly recommend initiatives that would:

- focus on expanding ICT expertise within the sex worker advocacy community, largely through peer-based education,
- increase funding for sex worker advocacy organisations to access and use ICT tools, and
- provide targeted consultation from ICT/advocacy experts to increase the effectiveness of campaigns on the local, regional and international levels.

Appendix 1 – Web and Social Media Resource Guide for Sex Worker Advocacy

Sex Worker Advocacy Websites

- Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers - <http://apnsw.org/>
- Association of Hungarian Prostitutes - <http://prostitualtak.hu/>
- Best Practice Policy Project - <http://bestpracticespolicy.org>
- British Columbia Coalition of Experiential Women - <http://bccewc.ca/>
- Collective of Sex Workers and Their Supports (Taiwan) - <http://coswas.org/>
- Desiree Alliance: US Sex Worker Rights Advocacy Network - <http://desireealliance.org>
- Global Network of Sex Work Projects - <http://nswp.org>
- Il Comitato per i Diritti Civili delle Prostitute - <http://lucchiole.org/>
- International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe - <http://sexworkeurope.org/>
- International Union of Sex Workers - <http://iusw.org/>
- New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective - <http://nzpc.org.nz/>
- RedTraSex (Ecuador) - <http://redtralsex.org.ar/>
- SANGRAM/VAMP - <http://sangram.org/>
- Scarlet Alliance - <http://scarletalliance.org.au/>
- Scottish Prostitutes Education Project - <http://scot-pep.org.uk/>
- Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Task Force (South Africa) - <http://sweat.org.za>
- Sex Workers' Outreach Project (USA) - <http://swop-usa.org/>
- Sex Worker Rights Advocacy Network in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia - <http://swannet.org/>
- Touching Base, Inc. (sex work & disability) - <http://touchingbase.org/>

Tools For Blogging & Social Networking

Photo & Video Sharing Tools

- Flickr - <http://flickr.com>. Web-based application to share photos. Users can add tags to photos and add photos to groups based on a topic so that others can find them; they can limit the accessibility of some or all of the photos to specific contacts and friends, and users can cross-post photos to blogs. RSS feeds of photos so others can subscribe or photos can be integrated into other web pages.
- ShoZu - <http://www.shoZu.com>. A mobile phone application used to upload photos and video from phones to web-based services like Flickr, blip.tv, wordpress. It is possible to tag content and add comments using the phone, and to backup the contacts from the phone to the web. Users can also get photos and videos from other people on their phones.
- blip.tv - <http://blip.tv>. A web-based application for sharing video. Users can upload video files up to 1 gigabyte in size and host an unlimited number of videos indefinitely, as well as cross-posting videos to other video services. RSS feeds of videos are available, allowing others to subscribe or video to be integrated onto other web pages.

Blogging Tools

- Wordpress - <http://wordpress.com>. A blogging application. Users can categorize and tag posts; pre-made themes and templates are available to style the blog. There are built-in sidebar features for calendars, photos and video. It is possible to make some posts private and password-protected; spam protection is also available. There are RSS feeds of blogs, so that others can subscribe.
- Google Reader - <http://google.com/reader/>. Allows the user to subscribe to a blog or website's feed and get updates and alerts from the site as new information appears.
- del.icio.us - <http://del.icio.us>. A web-based application for sharing and categorising bookmarked links to any website. The application also allows users to subscribe to other users' bookmarks and receive updates when new information appears.

Mobile and Text Services

- txtmob - <http://txtmob.com>. Allows the user to send SMS to groups of their choosing; texts may be public or private, moderated or unmoderated.
- twitter - <http://twitter.com>. Allows the user to send and receive messages either through a mobile phone, by SMS; via a webpage, or from IM/Jabber/gchat. Direct messages can be sent to a specific person or to a closed group of contacts.

Video & Conference Calling

- Skype - <http://skype.com>. Allows the user to make VOIP (voice-over-internet-protocol) and video calls securely, using a microphone and computer. Land or mobile phone lines can call into a Skype line at rates which differ in different areas.

Collaborative Documents

- pbwiki - <http://pbwiki.com>. Wikis are easy-to-use Web pages that let you collaborate online and share information - the free version comes with unlimited pages and revisions, 10 megabytes of storage for file attachments, Zip backup and RSS feeds.

RSS (Really Simple Syndication): Allows the user to subscribe to websites and receive new information automatically as soon as it appears.

CMS: (Content Management System): Web-based applications that allow the user to create and manage sophisticated websites.

Appendix II - Summary of Respondents Information

Twenty-four of the organisations surveyed were from South Eastern and Central Europe, six were from Western Europe, four were from Russia and the former Soviet Union (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Siberia), three were from North America, three were from Australia, three were from Asia (Taiwan, Thailand, India); two were from Latin America, one was from Africa, and one was international.

Five of the groups surveyed had no paid staff, eighteen had fewer than eleven employees, eight had between ten and thirty, four organisations had between thirty and fifty workers and one group had ninety-six staff.

Six groups had no volunteers working for them, thirteen groups had ten volunteers or fewer, nine had between ten and thirty volunteers; four groups had between thirty and fifty volunteers and three organisations had between fifty and one hundred volunteers.

Twelve organisations had annual budgets of more than US\$100,000, twelve had budgets of US\$10,000-100,000, while six organisations, none of which were in developing countries, had budgets under US\$10,000.

Appendix III - Tools Organizations Are Using Now

Ranked by most widely used to least:

1. mobile phone
2. laptop computer
3. digital camera
4. printer
5. CD/DVD burner
6. desktop computer
7. digital video camera
8. scanner
9. digital audio
10. web-cam