

## UNGASS in SHARP Focus Sexual Health and Rights and the 2006 UNGASS Review

Editor: Susana T. Fried ([susana.fried@gmail.com](mailto:susana.fried@gmail.com))

Editor's note: UNGASS in SHARP Focus is an initiative of the OSI/SHARP (sexual health and rights project). Its purpose is to provide information about key sexual health and rights issues and activities arising in the process of the UNGASS review. It is directed both toward those attending the special session and those who are not. There will be 6 issues released. The first two will be issued prior to the review, in order to provide background information about the status of negotiations and planned activities during the UNGASS. Three issues will be released during the UNGASS (May 31 – June 2), at the end of each day. Finally a wrap-up report will be issued following the end of the session. For more information or to share events, strategies and activities, please contact Susana T. Fried at [susana.fried@gmail.com](mailto:susana.fried@gmail.com) or Rachel Thomas, OSI/SHARP at [rthomas@sorosny.org](mailto:rthomas@sorosny.org).

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SEND INFORMATION ABOUT EVENTS, STRATEGIES AND PROPOSED ACTIONS. WE WILL DO OUR BEST TO DISSEMINATE THE INFORMATION.

### Issue 3, 31 May 2006

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#### 1. Briefing on the day's events

The flags are out and colors adorn the basement of the UN. NGO side events are grappling with some of the most intractable and difficult issues of treatment, human rights based approaches and sexual rights. However, inside the negotiation rooms, the real issues, it seems, are being whitewashed in favor of "consensus" or, in reality, the lowest common denominator. As one blogger put it, "The frustration can be seen on people's faces, and heard in their voices. The just ended joint meeting of governmental and Civil Society representatives at the UN HIV/AIDS meeting was a portrait in the difficult nature of diplomacy. The governmental officials said little, artfully, while representatives of NGOs said time and again, "I will not speak diplomatically" before starting to list the real world circumstances they face everyday -- the very problems the world community has assembled to address -- and the subject of the increasingly tense negotiations as the hours tick by toward the Friday deadline for a declaration." (Scott Swenson, May 31, 2006 at <http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/>)

The contradictions are, not surprisingly, often palpable. In today's informal Interactive Civil Society Hearing, speaker after speaker proclaimed that they would speak frankly to the urgency of HIV/AIDS and the escalating crisis within their own communities and contexts. They named names – men who have sex

with men, injecting drug users, sex workers, migrants, people in prison, not to mention women's right to bear children even if they are HIV+ as well as women's right to choose not to bear children and have an abortion. They emphasized the importance of linking sexual and reproductive health and rights to HIV/AIDS initiatives. They challenged the trend toward ideologically based policy, claiming, as one speaker put it, "this is about mortality, nor morality." Speaker after speaker noted the devastating linkages of gender inequality and women's subordination with HIV/AIDS.

Yet, in the negotiation rooms and corridors, these issues are being taken off the table: concrete targets and indicators, naming of specific groups at risk, and the centrality of human rights to effective AIDS interventions. This, despite the fact that from the first speaker, Martine Ago (representing a sex workers rights organization in the Cote d'Ivoire) on, virtually every other civil society speaker stressed that fighting for human rights was a core aspect of fighting AIDS.

Similarly, rumor has it that phrases such as the "feminization of HIV" and the importance of "girls' empowerment" are being eliminated from the Political Declaration. Meanwhile, every civil society speaker noted the disparate impact of HIV on women and emphasized that a commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment are crucial to effective HIV/AIDS interventions. As the speaker from CARE, International in Kenya put it, "it isn't about addressing women, but addressing women issues." And, as an NGO speaker from Mexico stressed, "We aren't killed by HIV but by violence against women and sex workers."

For much of the day, negotiations have been taking place in small groups, in bilateral conversations and in meetings with the co-chairs. The goal is to produce a consensus draft, but at what cost?

## 2. Statement by Meena Seshu

Meena Seshu was one of the civil society speakers. Her statement spoke eloquently to precisely the issues noted above – and those issues being trade off in favor of consensus.

*Informal Civil Society Hearing, Speech by Meena Saraswathi Seshu, SANGRAM. New York, May 31, 2006*

*Honourable Chair, delegates and co-activists. I am Meena Saraswathi Seshu from SANGRAM in India. Today, I bring you the voices of thousands of women who are fighting heroic battles against the HIV/AIDS epidemic. They are sex workers, mothers, daughters, wives, girlfriends and women living with HIV/AIDS. These are the women*

*we are accountable to when we fail to make bold commitments to address women's rights, gender inequality and sexuality.*

*The harsh reality is that the epidemic threatens, to sweep away several of women's basic and hard won rights. Every day, I hear the stories of women who have been infected by their life partners, who have been disowned by their families and left destitute. Women who can not make positive choices because they are expected to be passive. Women who are stigmatized because they do not comply with societal norms. Women who do not have the 10 dollars to keep track of their CD4 counts and thus are unable to be part of the ART roll out. Women who are unable to access the ART roll-out.*

*The spread of HIV is affected by poverty, caste, class, race and sexual orientation, but, gender inequality, places the burden of the epidemic on women. The action and inaction of governments also contributes to women not being able to negotiate safer sex: women who have been trafficked; women in situations of conflict; women and girls in custody, women and girls who have been sexually abused, transgendered people and all those who live a marginal existence on the fringes of so-called "normal" society.*

*Stigma, which has its roots in the standards set by mainstream morality, is a major factor that prevents women from accessing their rights. This is true for women who are in monogamous relationships, within and outside marriage, and women in multiple sex partnerships, within and outside of a commercial context. It is also true for adolescent girls in school, and those young girls who are deprived of schooling.*

*The world has repeatedly agreed that we can address these realities by protecting and respecting the rights of women and girls – their reproductive rights, their sexual rights. Yet, clearly, the international community has failed to follow through on its commitments. Instead, donor conditionalities and trade agreements that severely erode the rights of marginalized groups are gaining ground.*

*National governments that are serious about combating HIV/AIDS must commit to equal opportunity, non discrimination, and women's empowerment in every sector – health, judiciary, education, information, media, labor, and youth. This is what we mean by multi-sectoral approaches, not just integrating an HIV/AIDS strategy into every ministry.*

*We must abandon the idea that the epidemic is limited only to so-called "high-risk groups"- sex workers, drug users and men who have sex with men. Attention needs to be drawn to the idea of risky behaviour in HIV infection, as opposed to high risk groups. The culture of silence that surrounds sexual relations and HIV/AIDS in public discourse must be shattered. Particularly, where marriage itself places women in vulnerable situations.*

*A comprehensive policy agenda will benefit everyone – including women and girls. More importantly, it cannot be shaped or implemented by women and girls alone.*

*Governments must allocate and monitor the use of resources for health services and education that protect and empower women and girls, including:*

- *Comprehensive **sexual and reproductive health services**, universal access to **subsidized condoms**,*
- *women-initiated prevention technologies, and vaccines; **Comprehensive sexuality education** that promotes sexual and reproductive rights, as well as full and accurate information, for all children and youth in and out of school.*
- *All women who need it should have access to treatment for opportunistic infections and ARV treatment, without discrimination.*

*Rights based approaches are critical to the response and must not be overlooked. Criminalization is not the answer. We need commitment and leadership from all of you.*

*Women need you now. Do not fail them. Within the too-many dismal stories of the impact of HIV there are individual women and organizations that create a better existence by mustering courage and confidence. Women are fighting back. They give me hope. They have begun to create new languages for voices that have been silenced for too long. We need to listen to them. We need action.*

Meena Saraswati Seshu, General Secretary, SANGRAM,  
Sangli, Maharashtra, India.  
E.mail:meenaseshu@yahoo.com

### 3. Shadow report by Helem

In the run up to the UNGASS, a number of organizations produced “shadow reports.” The shadow report prepared by Helem, a Lebanese organization working for the protection of lesbians, gay men, bisexual and transgender persons, stressed that discrimination against men who have sex with men remains a serious barrier to effective prevention, treatment, care and support and offers a series of recommendations including sexual education in schools, the engagement of political and religious authorities and civil society on the question of HIV/AIDS, STIs and homosexuality and dissemination of appropriate information of sexual identity issues and HIV/AIDS to men who have sex with men. The shadow report is available on their website to [www.helem.net](http://www.helem.net). It is important to note that Helem has not been allowed to legally register as an organization, has been visited several times by the police, and is regularly threatened with being closed. Clearly the issues faced by Helem, as well as many others, are precisely the issues being debated at the UN. They are also the ones most in danger of being sidelined in service of consensus.

4. Links to webcasts: Many of the debates and discussions at the UNGASS review are being webcast through Kaisernetwork at [www.kaisernetwork.org](http://www.kaisernetwork.org).