

In SHARP Focus at the International AIDS Conference 2006

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Editor's note: In SHARP Focus at the International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2006) 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, activities, and debates (paying particular attention to those addressing sex workers, men who have sex with men and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons – or, in new terminology 'same sex practicing and transgender individuals') as these emerge during AIDS 2006. In SHARP Focus is directed toward those attending the conference as well as those who are not. It includes interviews, event reports, analyses and a schedule of key upcoming events. For more information or to share events, strategies and activities, please contact Susana T. Fried at susana.fried@gmail.com, Marissa Hildebrant at marissahilde@yahoo.com or Rachel Thomas, OSI/SHARP at rthomas@sorosny.org.

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

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1. Editorial from Susana and Marissa: Mid-week Overview

At this point into the conference, the buzz of rhetoric versus action, particular representations, rights-based language, and evidence-informed research weaves through the Global Village displays and down the stairs into rooms of what critics find to be discussion and panel presentations that remain too limited in scope to encompass the nuances of the pandemic. Repeatedly throughout the conference, participants and observers note their frustration with the difficulty of engendering engaged theories that are forward-looking and bringing appropriate action into focus and expansion. Sometimes, the contradictions are evident: for example, many delegates sat patiently through a series of brief pornographic videos depicting sexy condom use in a Pleasure Project session, but made a mass exodus immediately after the film ended. Despite the chosen “official condom of the IAC,” which sit in small baskets at the information booths in the Global Village, no condoms were placed in the tote bag offered to all attendees of the conference. At Monday’s plenary session, Louise Binder was asked several times to conclude her speech, but the audience cheered her on as she admonished the moral bankruptcy of those in power and condemned the “mass murder” resulting from the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Where will this conference take us? How will Canada use the messages of this conference to better address HIV/AIDS and a Prime Minister whose absence is well documented in protest boards and t-shirts? Urgently expressed fliers and postcards advertising new updates in Canada and elsewhere abound and exchange hands like recipes. “Should routine testing be made universal?” “Let’s ask PM Harper to do the right thing.” “Over the next two weeks, the Canadian government will decide whether *insite*, Vancouver’s supervised injection site, will continue to operate.” Indeed, Canada is especially under the critical eye of the conference. On Tuesday, a short-noticed press conference gathered some sixty plus people in the MSM networking zone in the Global Village-- a well-organized reaction to Margaret Wenté’s article in *The Globe and Mail*, “A Few Down-home Truths about HIV/AIDS in Canada.” Of the most stirring comments, Wenté writes, “We are importing HIV from sub-Saharan Africa.” Speakers at the press conference contested Wenté’s “truths” with truths of their own experience and research. Bob Watkins, a long-term HIV/AIDS survivor, noticeably pushed back his tears and spoke a myriad of emotions into the cameras, “I woke up this morning as an immoral person trying to infect the population of Africa.” On a wall behind the speakers are pictures, displayed over a reflecting pool with drifting daisies are the faces of men, young men, and transgender MSM who have been murdered for fighting and/or living with HIV/AIDS.

Another press conference on Tuesday addressed aboriginal involvement in the conference and a recent satellite session. Speakers noted their view that too few abstracts from aboriginal and indigenous communities were submitted and accepted, as the lack of access to technology segregates the voices of those with much to say. The speakers at the press conference announced the new position for a Canadian International Aids Secretariat to network on behalf of aboriginal and indigenous communities and looked forward to the barely touched possibilities for involvement of these communities in Mexico 2008.

2. Reports from Conference Sessions

Monday, August 14

Women's Rally and March

Early Monday morning, cameras, journalists, and passersby documented and witnessed the first IAC endorsed rally and March of women and men, who were not enough to clear the table of 1500 bright yellow event t-shirts in English, French, and Spanish. Sex workers, activists, YWCA representatives, student leaders, "hotel workers rising," and many other activists marched and demanded that sex workers, transgender issues, and women in prison be put back on the HIV/AIDS agenda. The rally focused on the need for more women to be seated at decision-making and legislating tables, the representation of First Nations Women, and the discrepancy between talk and action. Speakers Dr. Helene Gayle, President of the International AIDS Society, Louise Binder, Blueprint for Action on Women & Girls & HIV/AIDS, Stephen Lewis, US Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, Mary Robinson, President of Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative, and U.S. congresswoman Barbara Lee stepped up to the microphone in support.

Sex workers, HIV, and Human Rights: What can be done?

Melissa Ditmore of The Network of Sex Work Project (NWSW) facilitated a panel discussion that presented examples of community collective action in responding to HIV/AIDS. The Sonagachi Project, started in 1992 in Calcutta, India, served as an example for a sex worker run and owned initiative that resulted in increased condom use and socioeconomic activities for sex workers and their families. The session addressed anti-prostitution laws at the provincial and national level and the tendency to make sex workers subjects of research rather than subjects of rights. The ongoing struggles of sex workers with police officers and other state actors within discriminatory legal frameworks echoed the call for including sex workers in planning and implementation strategies.

Tuesday, August 15

Being Queer in the African/Black Diaspora

How could we frame homosexuality in African Black Diaspora? Why the invisibility? Where are the African gay people at the IAC? These were questions asked by Cheikh Traoré, African HIV Policy Network (UK), and others at a session entitled, "Being Queer in the African/Black Diaspora" hosted at the Global Village. Notisha Massaquoi, Acting Executive Director of Women's Health in Women's Hands Community Health Centre, Canada discussed how identities merge, such that at the women's networking zone she is a "black women" and in another space she is an "African American Queer woman." Moving through the language of compulsory heterosexuality, sexual performance, disease of the other, and the ultimate silencing of sexual diversity when talking about immigration issues, speakers focused on the fear of representing one's queerness to their home country. Speakers living with HIV/AIDS such as Tokes Osubu, Executive Director, Gay Men of African Descent (United States) emphasized the power of love and compassion in survival.

Criminalization and HIV: Stories of communities fighting back in a human rights framework

While the title of this session seemed to promise a few hours of positive experience, Sunil B. Pant, President of Blue Diamond Society (Nepal) began with a horrifyingly graphic presentation of violence against sexual and gender minorities. Pant described how, regardless of political change in Nepal, many outreach workers and peer educators are still arrested by accusation of promoting homosexuality, and sex workers are arrested for carrying a condom. While the audience sat uncomfortably with the verbally described image of rats eating away at the bodies of transgender folk in garbage cans, Catherine Heeley, National Prostitutes Collective (New Zealand) presented a region where sex workers are "on top of the law." The New Zealand Prostitutes Collective, established in 1987, responded to prostitution laws that gave police authority to keep detailed lists with the names of sex workers. The collective developed working relationships with media and paved the way for Giordina, a transgender sex worker to

become an elected politician in parliament. The discussion briefly mentioned war as a criminal act that contributes to the spread of HIV/AIDS.

MSM in the Developing World

Glenn de Swardt, Triangle Project, spoke of South Africa as the gay capital of Africa, offering the best service in terms of MSM needs and often a landing place for MSM issues from the North. Questions from the audience reflected the prevalence of sexual tourism in the MSM community, and particularly how this issue remains out of the political arena. The speakers gave a brief history and societal depiction of the problems MSM face in their regions—dildos banned in South Africa in mid nineties, the murder of homosexual leaders in Latin America, and the use of heterosexual friends to get medications from health services in Senegal. All of the speakers talked about legislative obstacles, such that Luis Fernando, Association for Comprehensive Health and Citizenship in Latin America and the Caribbean (Columbia), remarked how any of the presentations could be interchanged with another presentation. Even with this homogenizing perspective, each speaker offered a very different flavor to the discussion of MSM. Cheikh Ibrahima Niang, Programme SAHARA, Universite Cheikh Anta Diop (Senegal) warned that when talking about violence, MSM, and gender inequity, we must use a holistic approach employing tools with historical and cultural heritage. His proverb, loosely translated to signify taking a problem off your head and putting it in the hands of the community to find a solution, imprinted a fruitful image for the rest of the session.

3. Noteworthy

Women's empowerment and the female condom: On Monday, The Prevention Now! Campaign hailed the World Health Organization's (WHO) announcement that the FC2 Female Condom has met international standards as a woman-initiated dual protection method against HIV/STI infection and unintended pregnancy. The WHO declared that the FC2 Female Condom—a second-generation product manufactured from a latex derivative called nitrile—is a safe, effective, and acceptable HIV-prevention method that is comparable to the polyurethane FC1 Female Condom. Leaders of Prevention Now! noted that the announcement clears the way for the inclusion of the second-generation female condom in the Essential Products list of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and signals to national health ministries and international aid agencies that the FC2 Female Condom can be immediately purchased and integrated into national HIV prevention programs.

The issue of female condoms was a significant focus in the discussion following panel presentations during a session entitled *In Her Own Words: Violations of Women's Human Rights*. While some criticized the female condom for being expensive, bulky and squeaky, others noted that it is still a form of protection that is in women's control. It is particularly important for enabling HIV+ women to express their sexuality without fear of transmitting the disease. The session drew attention to some of the most invisible actors in the HIV/AIDS pandemic – women in prison and young women and girls. Paulette Nicolas from the Lighthouse counseling Center in Montgomery, Alabama in the US described the segregation of HIV+ women and men in Alabama's prisons – the only state in the US that still engages in such segregation. Judith Auerbach from amFAR (the American Foundation for AIDS Research) added that women in prison are far more likely than women outside prison to be HIV+, and, at the same time, also more likely to be HIV+ than men in prison. Added Anandi Yuvaraj (India HIV/AIDS Alliance), in India “marriage is a prison.” (Elsewhere, commentators noted that the title “female condom” is a misnomer, as the condom can be used be used for anal sex between men OR women.)

All of the panelists stressed that structural factors that prevent women from controlling their sexual health and rights is at the roots of the problem. Noting the intersection of racial and gender dynamics, Sophie Dilmitis from *Choose Life* in Zimbabwe, commented that sex education for white Zimbabwean young people consists of transmitting the message “thing like that don't happen to people like us.” Other sessions, notably one on LGBT Prevention Efforts in the Developing World presented the existence of lesbian or women who have sex with women as vulnerable to HIV in certain contexts – an issue that is the invisible of the invisible. Jonathon Berger of the AIDS Law Project in South Africa called for the HIV/AIDS community to grapple with the existence of concentrated epidemics within generalized epidemics, as, he argued, is the case of HIV/AIDS within lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities in South Africa. He further noted that the targeting of lesbians for rape *as punishment for the sexuality* – a disturbing trend that has been documented in South Africa, means that attention must be paid to prevention and treatment efforts geared to lesbians and women who have sex with women.

3. Interview

Wendy Kneer, Communications Director and Pleasure Propagandist, The Pleasure Project

Editor: Please describe yourself, your work and your organization.

WK: I am the Communications Director, or Pleasure Propagandist, and a Trustee of the Board of The Pleasure Project, an educational organization that works to eroticize safer sex or “put the sexy into safer sex.” We work with sexual health educators to help them feel more comfortable talking about sex and pleasure as a springboard to talking about safer sex. We also work with the pleasure media, porn educators, including Anna Span, to help them represent safer sex. We are a small organization of ten volunteers working virtually and internationally, but we’ve managed to train and work with CARE Cambodia (supported by CARE International). We produced an article coming out in *The Lancet* regarding condoms and pleasure, which discusses the potential for marketing condoms as pleasure and is co-authored by writers from DFID and WHO. We have been featured in the *Times of London*, *The Guardian*, *British Cosmo*, and *Eve Magazine*; we have gotten a lot of press solidifying the work we’re doing. We want to build a network of partners, finish our sexy sexual health toolkit, and conduct more trainings. We want to test our training materials in different regions of the world to improve our material and to have a manual.

Editor: What is your experience with the IAC? Have you attended previous IAC conferences? Have you found participation to be useful? Not useful? Please explain.

WK: This has been an amazing learning experience. The Pleasure Project was launched at Bangkok. At that conference, I was working for another sexual health organization, and I was so amazed with Anne Philpott, founder and Executive Director. I walked right up to her and told her I wanted to do this work. The reception at Bangkok was overwhelmingly positive. In a single presentation offering the audience standing room only, people thought it was really refreshing. We’re bigger here than at Bangkok, but we’re still testing the waters. This is our second conference, and we have done a lot since then. We are hosting a satellite session, a workshop in the Global Village, an oral presentation, and two other presentations.

Editor: Why are you attending this conference? Who are you representing? What are your expectations? What kind of work do you expect to be doing (e.g., networking, lobbying, running or participating in workshops, etc.)?

WK: We hope to get more people talking more openly and honestly about the realities of sex and sexuality. We want to spread the word, but we also want to make some good connections. The expectation is that our presence here creates more interest in talking positively about sex and pleasure as it relates to HIV/AIDS. We would like to bring attention to pleasure in the lives of PLWHA, especially women, because many are told that their sex lives are over once they’ve tested positive. We need to turn that attitude on its head, because there is lots of pleasure to be had whether you have tested positive or no. Just talking about pleasure is pretty controversial in itself. At this conference we showed clips from three different films, *Modern Loving*, an instructional video for heterosexual couples to help spice up sex life, and other two hard core film clips, in which Anna Span asked us to help her on how to spice up condom use.

Editor: How do you think pleasure has been represented at the IAC this year as opposed to past years?

WK: The Women’s Networking Zone has at least two sessions about pleasure. The sex worker groups and MSM booth also talk about pleasure. I do think there are only a handful of groups talking about pleasure, which tends to occur more in the Global Village than the main conference, as there are no big budgets for this. This shows an incredible lack of people talking about sexual pleasure. I find it interesting, but a bit sad that with a disease mostly spread through sexual contact, very few people are talking about one of the reasons that people have sex, which is that feels it feels good.

Editor: The issue of the right to sexual pleasure has come up a few times in this conference. What is your opinion on the issue of the right to sexual pleasure?

WK: I think it is a slippery slope. Rather than focusing on the right, we like to talk about realities – that is, people do enjoy it, or others don’t. If you’re talking about rights, you then get into the dangers of legislating pleasure. We’re not saying you shouldn’t talk about rights, but you should do that with caution in this case.

4. Upcoming Events of Interest

(Please note: we have attempted to highlight a few select event that the editors consider to be addressing emerging issues or innovative practices. The fact that this is a very difficult task is an encouraging sign that sexual health and rights have a distinct place on the agenda of AIDS 2006, even if marginalized groups still remain at the margins. In this issue, we cover events through Thursday.

Thursday, August 17

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| 10:15-12 | Be Careful What You Wish For: Donor-Led Efforts to Address Gender-based Violence
<i>Global Village-Women's Networking Zone</i> |
| 11:00-12:30 | Time to Deliver: Influencing Policy and Law (Michael Clayton, ARASA)
<i>Session Room 11</i> |
| 2:00 | New Findings on the Impact of US Prostitution Loyalty Oath on HIV Prevention
<i>Press conference Room, Media Centre</i> |
| 4:00-6:00 | Attention All Women Living with HIV/AIDS: a social and networking gathering
in honor of the International AIDS Conference 2006
<i>Women's Networking Zone in the Global Village</i> |
| 4:15-5:45 | Stigma, Discrimination, Violence, Exploitation, and Abuse of Children affected by HIV/AIDS: A
children's rights and protection perspective
<i>Session Room 3, Level 800</i> |
| 6:30-8:00 | Youth closing session: Where have we been and what's next?
<i>Global Village -Session Hall 1</i> |
| 7:30 | Outcast Films: Pills Profits Protest: Chronicle of the Global AIDS movement
<i>Royal Ontario Museum Theater</i> |

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