

In SHARP Focus at the International AIDS Conference 2006

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. A final issue will be released on Tuesday, August 22 that will provide a summary and "round up" of AIDS 2006. For more information, please contact Susana T. Fried at susana.fried@gmail.com, Marissa Hildebrandt at marissahilde@yahoo.com or Rachel Thomas, OSI/SHARP at rthomas@sorosny.org.

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1. Editorial: Susana and Marissa's End of Week Overview

As the conference approaches the end, many civil society organizers and community activists seem to be scratching their heads. What have we really accomplished at AIDS 2006? Perhaps the most creative involvements could be observed in the newfound art in the medium of condoms. In an article *At Home with Condoms* published in the conference blog *Panoscope*, (published by the Panos Institute) Pamela Omwodo (Kenya) remarks on the colorful Global Village display of condoms, and suggests that good marketing could encourage African men to overcome the stigma of buying condoms. On Thursday, Brazilian artist Adriana Bertini situated ten female statues in front of the media center. The statues were fashionably dressed in the latest textured condom styles (they averaged anywhere from 200 to 600 hours to prepare, using about 3,000-10,000 condoms each). Criticisms of the conference range from those who see hypocrisy in the lack of good nutrition at the conference (see *Panoscope* blog by Kristin Palitza, South Africa) to the discourse of morality and mortality. Others bemoaned the distance between the main conference and the Global Village. Wondered Shahira Ahmed (Sudan/USA), "given the expansion of the program at the Global Village, it isn't clear why these are organized as separate spaces, instead of one integrated conference." At Thursday's plenary session, the General Secretary of the World YWCA, Musimbi Kanyoro of Kenya, asked, "How can we let people die because they don't meet what we call our moral standards?" The language of morality and ethics must be reclaimed and used to hold leaders at every level accountable, she said, because "the cost of inaction is a high moral failure that will shame our children."

2. Reports from Conference Sessions

Young People and Sexuality: The Unspoken Taboo

In contrast to the many sessions run by and for young people, the adult experts on youth sexuality relied on a distinctly different lexicon of young people's sexuality – that of statistics and multivariate analysis, STI clinics, identity terminologies, and even the "riskier categories" of youth music to reflect on some conference unmentionables (the erotic and sexual pleasure of young people). Unfortunately, the nuances of youth sexuality remained largely unmentioned. Speakers brought up some critical issues – the importance of creating safe spaces for the "gender identity of young MSM" in Jamaica, putting homophobia on the table, forced sex and other abusive partnerships, drug use, and the characteristics and behaviors among young adults reporting anal sex. The audience applauded Pamina Gorbach, UCLA, when she responded to a question that she had indeed looked at correlations with "the other sexual identities" between engaging in anal sex as an initial intercourse experience and trading money or goods for sex. Le Minh Giang, Hanoi Medical University (Vietnam) and National Development and Research Institutes (New York) finished his presentation with a picture of needles stuck in a tree, a disposal site for IDUs. Is this really the picture of sexually active young people? Deviating from the grim view of his

co-panelists, Miguel Muñoz-Laboy, Columbia University, New York both addressed youth as “active social actors” and announced his discovery that young men who experienced enjoyment with vaginal sex are more likely to listen to hip hop music, while young men who used condoms on an inconsistent basis reported higher affiliations with church-going.

Rising through the Challenge: Institutional Strengthening and Best Practices in LGBT Organizations Working on HIV/AIDS in the Global South

Beginning with a desire to reflect on ways to strengthen LGBT organizations in their research and advocacy for human rights, Kim Vance of ARC International introduced Keith Goddard, Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ), and Sunil Babu Pant, Blue Diamond Society (Nepal). Pant spoke first, and described his grassroots start in writing to the police about violence directed towards the LGBT community and the challenges in registering as a general health and human rights organization. One of his organization’s first critical efforts was to protect a lesbian couple from their families and state actors. He highlighted gaps and challenges, including the lack of an HIV/AIDS bill that would protect PLWHA and vulnerable population’s rights. Pant added that marginalized communities, particularly sex workers and transgender communities struggle to get funding in Nepal. Nevertheless, more than 300 MSM/transgender peer educators have been mobilized, with networks in more than 20 cities, a drop-in center, and small STI/VCT services in seven cities providing condom distribution and outreach education programs. (See interview with Sunil Pant, below.)

On a different continent, another story emerges. Keith Goddard spoke of his organization’s initiation fighting for a space at the annual Zimbabwe International Book Fair. Glancing at his little pink book, Goddard warned the modest audience seated in the LGBTI networking space, “Don’t get sidetracked. Most of the time it’s not about gay issues, but about the abuse of authority and sexual assault.” In 1995, in response to homophobic rhetoric of government officials, including the President of Zimbabwe, the Southern African AIDS Trust was one of the first to pledge significant funding for the work of GALZ, acknowledging that LGBTI rights were indeed under threat. Since then, GALZ has produced numerous publications and received significant attention from the media and researchers. Goddard closed by expressing his wish for the normalization of MSM topics in HIV/AIDS debates.

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and HIV/AIDS: Surmounting the Challenges

When Ann Langer of Engenderhealth (USA) announced that her session would be interactive, the delegate audience was more than ready with over an hour’s worth of questions and responses that allowed for a discussion in real time and everyday language. With the assumption that sexual and reproductive health and rights need to be protected, the diverse set of informal speakers asserted that vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities (a group often forgotten in discussions about reproductive and sexual health and rights), must be named. In a variety of different linguistic styles and themes, the balance of personal responsibility and societal response was queried. The demand for donors with no strings attached also drummed steady in the room. Questioners challenged the acquiescence to PEPFAR: why not refuse the requirements? Several individuals from African countries asked how to approach the tired, sad faces of grandmothers managing twenty orphans about sexual health and rights issues, which so often become an afterthought to their daily struggle. Beatrice Were, Actionaid International (Uganda), expressed her worry about the way PLWHA, mostly women, are invited to panels with the expectation of eliciting tears and distress - without necessarily raising the larger issues of global responsibility for addressing HIV/AIDS. She stressed the importance of looking at the bigger picture: if we do not begin accepting that women living with HIV/AIDS have a right to sex and to bear children, then our practices and policies will deny women’s sexuality and bodily integrity and quash opportunities for greater gender equality.

Building a Global Transgendered HIV/AIDS Prevention Strategy (519 Community Centre)

Overflowing the Global Village Main Stage area, eager allies of the transgender community crowded the stage flaunting five inspiring transgender women, who each aptly painted their dualistic moments of beauty and pain; community comradery and societal abuse; achievement and battle; and sexual zeniths and stigmatization/discrimination. Organizing a transgender event was no easy task, as an audience member announced that a transgender conference session had been scheduled, but obtained no advertisement in the main conference manual, no designated space, and no time slot other than the one allotted for this Global Village event. Laxmi, (India) detailed her exceptional experience in a context of family acceptance in India where transgenders claim a specific cultural and religious value represented in classical dancing. Still, she says doctors will be fearful to touch her, as if she “just came from the seventh sky on this planet.” Darby Hickey, Different Avenues (Washington, D.C.), recited a laundry list of obstacles that transgenders face in the United States: police interference in sex work, police abuse, sexual violence, unemployment, and money given only for HIV/AIDS issues, and unfair treatment in health care settings. With a kind and stunningly gracious expression, she calmly stated, “HIV/AIDS is not a priority when you’re being shot at.” Khartini, from the Network of Sex Work Projects (Malaysia), leaped in periodically with her messages: sex workers are not only sex objects; no group can “own” a specific issue, even violence; stop transgendericide; decriminalization of sex work is not enough given issues of capitalism and racism; let’s talk about

African transgenders; and we are not MSM, do you think I'm MSM? When an audience member asked how the ladies would like to be reborn, all the women onstage promptly replied, "transgender."

3. Noteworthy

Sex Workers' Demonstration

Demanding human rights and workers' rights in order to fight HIV/AIDS, more than 200 sex workers, transgender and other supporters marched for sex worker's rights from the Global Village's Stiletto Lounge, through the convention centre, to Toronto's Simcoe Park (a space dedicated to workers who had died from unsafe working conditions). Sex worker groups from 21 countries were represented in the demonstration, chanting "Time to Deliver.... Sex Workers' Rights!" Alejandra Gil of Mexico decried the mandatory HIV-testing of sex workers in Mexico and said, "At conferences like these, people often think of us sex workers just as objects of study, as statistics, but we are human beings with human rights!" Dale, from APNSW Bangkok (Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers) told the crowd to remember male sex workers and the recognition of their rights. Laxmi from India said, "Whatever policies the government makes, if they don't start to recognize the sex workers' rights, their policies will go down the drain."

The march then returned to the convention center where Dr. Marc Wainberg of the International Aids Society joined the sex workers' chanting and dancing. In fact, the very visible presence of sex workers – and the consistent crowds drawn to the Stiletto Lounge – has been a topic of much buzz all week long. Daily *demonstrations* of sex worker/client encounters have received a growing audience, and the space is always filled with observers, questioners and on-lookers. A performance by Khartini Slamagh, *Starpower*, held at the Global Village, drew one of the Main Stage's largest and loudest audiences.

4. Interview

Sunil Babu Pant, President and Founder, Blue Diamond Society, Nepal

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

SP: I am the founder and president of the Blue Diamond Society in Katmandu, Nepal, which works for the rights of men having sex with men, transgenders, gays, lesbians and bisexuals.

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

SP: This is my second conference. I was in Bangkok, which was organized better. I was really excited and happy at Bangkok. I don't hear MSM voices much here, especially from the South, as there is no plenary session. MSM sessions usually get stuck with the gender identity and sexuality identity stuff, debating "GLBT," "sexual minorities," local terminologies. People are messed up with the wordings LGBT, MSM, but I use different terms where appropriate. In local context we use our Nepali terminology; it's been there for centuries, and we don't have to educate what people already know. If we have to write some documentation for effeminate *meti*, I write in a bracket "an effeminate male who is cross-dressing." For us, we are *metis*, and we have several other terminologies. We don't indulge with this terminology debate.

I was only doing a few sessions in Bangkok, but here I had a presentation to do, and I have a special designation as a Rapporteur. Yesterday, I was asked to report on Bill Clinton's speech, and I would have rather gone to the indigenous people's session. Bill Clinton doesn't say anything new, and he didn't do what he was supposed to when he was in power. This conference is not much different in that it isn't listening to different communities, the community members. The speakers are from the same countries every time; the same people are representing and demanding the same things with the same anger as in the Bangkok conference. I wonder where we are and what the progress is. In 2005, Peter Piot claimed that year was the best year so far. For me, 2005 was the worst year because there were more infection rates than the year before, and the gaps between treatment and prevalence is still widening. So how does he justify 2005 as a better year than previous ones? It's good to hear protests, but I wish I could be more part of them. It's really sad that I don't see transgender involvement all. There are no skills building sessions or parallel sessions. Transgenders represent the highest prevalence group, so why are they lacking representation? There is clear discrimination within the IAC community and the HIV scene at large. In a way it's useful, because I have been able to speak at three major sessions with a larger audience. A

lot of people who are participating know what's going on in Nepal and know the needs there, the strategy adapting, and achievements. A few donors have shown interest to exchange cards and talk. It's useful for me. The Blue Diamond Society is five years old, but there are so many organizations. I want to hear more grassroots organizations from Pakistan and Bangladesh and to see new faces coming out for the struggle.

Editors: 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.)

SP: I really don't see a breakthrough with this huge, unorganized conference, from my personal and organizational view. I have meetings, make friends, network, and try to learn from other practices. It's good to see a lot of supporters, which is energy boosting. I take back my experience with seminars and consultations, so that whatever is learned is shared with the community. We don't keep the information only to ourselves. I'm going around the Global Village, collecting materials that we don't have. There is so much good CD4 testing information, which I can use to lobby the government to purchase a testing machine. There is no testing machine in Nepal.

It is distressing to see a lot of failure stories, but we are quite used to that. There are fundamental institutional rights, which I talk about now regarding our new constitution in Nepal. Why can't this right to health be spelled out in our constitution? There is a lot of debate with big countries, WHO, UNAIDS, which have different perspectives than the communities about rights and testing. Sometimes you wonder why there are different opinions. Is there a middle ground? Are we trying to understand? In this debate about hospital testing? Will there be compulsory testing? Why don't we mobilize testing with some care and support strategy? Donors and big organizations say ARV cannot reach the remote areas, so how will testing reach those areas?

Editors: What are the lessons that your organization has learned that might be useful for other organizations working with and for same sex practicing* and transgender people?

SP: It's not just one thing that makes the organization successful. Community involvement and commitment from the community has to be there. The struggle for LGBT rights is a longer-term struggle. We need to keep in our minds that it might take another twenty years, and you can't get tired or burnt out. I have learned and grown so much, being involved with the community. I always think about how the society and the community invested in me. It's always less that I give, and I'm benefited everyday. I met a friend who said why are you doing this hard job, why don't you move to a safer place? I say it's not that easy. The society and community invested in me. How can I just leave and be so selfish and look for safety? But I also believe that fighting is much easier than hiding in the dark. Once you start fighting you get more energy; you get more solidarity. That makes the fight easier and makes the enemy much weaker. If you hide in the dark, tomorrow will be more difficult. The sooner you realize you have to fight, the better position you are in. A lot of people talk about backlash, and that you shouldn't say something because the situation wasn't ready. You make them ready. If you tried to avoid backlash today, you have backlash tomorrow. So fight it.

You have to ask yourself how much are you fighting for yourself, and how much do you continue to fight for yourself. Some want to have immediate results, and those people, where they go, they fail, they lose, they leave. It also matters how people value their lives. If money is a value, if comfort is a value, if lack of trouble is a value, that is, I think, illusion. It's different if you have a goal in your life, and universal freedom is valued. I'm not sure how many people have that as a value. So you run away and that's not freedom. You make a lot of money, and that's not freedom. What about the trouble within you, which is not having freedom? So those people who value freedom, value dignity, they keep fighting until they have it. If you fight then a lot of people benefit.

Editors: Where do you see the future for your organization and other LGBTI organizations?

SP: Our direction was toward freedom, and the direction changed according to the environment, and to get a good language through the constitution. How do we get a good language for a new constitution? For HIV/AIDS, it's an important goal that we save as many lives as possible by education through change. For social justice, it's a matter of attitude and societal change, so that everybody respects each other. It's not because we are gay or women that we need full rights. It's because we are human, and we need to change the attitude. Every human must have equal rights and must have

* We use the phrase "same sex practicing individuals" to encompass men who have sex with men, women who have sex with women and transgender persons, where appropriate. While the phrase is cumbersome, it accomplishes several important tasks: first, it emphasizes practices over identities – an important feature in working on sexually transmitted infections. Second, it is gender-neutral, encompassing the sexual practices of women, men and transgender persons. Finally, it escapes some of the accumulating connotations that might be associated with the terms "MSM" or "LGBT," as these are seen to impose identity assumptions on individuals, whether or not they claim those identities

freedom. I think education is key, but we also need to empower ourselves. It's hard for so many who are controlling things to give up control and to let other people control our lives. It's difficult to understand injustice in distribution whether its resources, manpower, land, or rights, locally, nationally, and internationally.

For the constitutional campaign we're doing, we need funding. We need to train the local activists so that they can be better activists and better campaigners and have a dialogue with their community. We need to train other LGBT groups on how to document human rights violations and how to respond to law and injustice. We need to organize a workshop inviting judges and government officials, like Justice Edwin Cameron from South Africa to help us be effective as we get involved in drafting a constitution. We need to give pressure for equal rights for LGBT and the right to health, and we need some lawyers, which we don't have. We need lawyers who can follow the many violence cases and study the international law constitution to find and give a good language for the constitutional assembly.

5. Upcoming Events of Interest

FRIDAY

Closing session: Bringing the conversation beyond Toronto

Facilitated dialogue

Women's Networking Zone, Global Village

10:30-11:30

6. Corrections

In SHARP Focus' editors sincerely apologize for a typographical error in spelling the name of Dr. *Helene* Gayle in Issue 2. Also in Issue 2, we included an article that discussed the MSM Satellite, held on 10-11 August. In it, we state that Shivananda Khan of the Naz Foundation International used the term MSMW, as a way to encompass the fact that men who have sex with men also have sex with women. In follow up conversations with Shivananda, he clarified that another panelist had used the term, and he picked up on it to critique the term, arguing that the constant effort to add letters to the growing "alphabet soup" does not help clarify the multiplicity of genders and sexual practices, particularly as these play out in HIV/AIDS vulnerability. We apologize to Shivananda for misrepresenting his position.

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