

RedTraSex Statement
at the High Level
HIV/AIDS
Meeting
2016

Lessons learned from the work on HIV/AIDS among women sex workers



Women sex workers have learned about how to put an end to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We have learned that the first step is to build organizations based on our identity. This is why, acknowledging that we are workers is as important as organizing ourselves. And we become stronger as we value ourselves being sex workers. We have done this to expose human rights violations. To demand that our governments implement public policies. To sensitize health professionals and gain access to comprehensive health care. To achieve regulation of sex work that grants us better legal conditions to end stigma and discrimination. All these actions form the basis of our comprehensive response to HIV/AIDS.

In the run up to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGASS) High Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS in June 2016, the Latin American and Caribbean Women Sex Workers' Network (RedTraSex) recommends that in taking stock of the progress achieved and unmet needs, the achievements and claims that women sex workers' organizations have to share be taken into account.

What has happened in these years?

In 2015 States set putting an end to AIDS by the year 2030 as a goal. This new goal was a result of the assessment that the Millennium Development Goal on universal access to health care by 2015 had not been achieved. Long before that, RedTraSex had been warning that the necessary measures that States had committed to take years ago, at the start of the new millenium , were not being implemented in our region. At the 2008 High Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS we submitted a document called “Human Rights and HIV/AIDS, Our Rights” where we stated:

“Women sex workers are not a vulnerable group for HIV/AIDS. We are being made vulnerable ... by repressive policies criminalizing us and placing us in a weak position from which to negotiate condom use by health surveillance policies violating our fundamental right to confidentiality; by research positioning us in the place of objects to be studied and not acknowledging us as rights-holders; by governments that are more concerned about measuring the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in sex workers than by the women being killed; by a fierce competition for funding that never reaches the population nor has a real impact on women sex workers; by stigmatizing messages that isolate us from the rest of society and lower our self-esteem by associating us with the notion of ‘infection vector’. Women sex workers are not the problem but we can be part of the solution.”

Eight years have passed since then. And the work done by women sex workers’ organizations in all countries of Latin America and the Caribbean shows strong results: in the region, HIV prevalence in women sex workers is from 0 to 5.7% according to the country but on average it is below 1.8%, the lowest among those known as “key populations”.

¹ See “Keeping the Promise. Summary of the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS”. United Nations General Assembly. Special Session on HIV/AIDS. 25-27 June 2001, New York. http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/sub_landing/files/jc668-keepingpromise_en.pdf

What is the key?

The response to HIV/AIDS requires, above all, strengthened organizations. This is the innovation that makes RedTraSex proud of its outcomes: the organizational spaces built for accompaniment, training and rights advocacy, populated by women who are in a better position to decide about their lives, take care of themselves and fight for a fairer society. Building organizations requires not only working among peers but also sensitizing political decision-makers, judicial system officers, security forces, health professionals, feminist organizations and unions.

To be organized has let us understand the root causes that make women sex workers a group more vulnerable to HIV and also how stigma and discrimination result from societal double standards, machismo and the underground conditions in which sex work is done in our societies.

By organizing ourselves, we managed to produce our own research to get reliable information. The Study on Stigma and Discrimination against Women Sex Workers in Health Services in Latin America and the Caribbean conducted in 2013 shows how a comprehensive health approach can reduce the prevalence of HIV. A large proportion of women sex workers surveyed (in some cases, 9 out of 10) go to see a doctor in order to get condoms. More than 90 % of us use condoms at work. This practice is the result of the training and strengthening work done by women sex workers' organizations in the region.

Conducting our own research also allows us to bring to the High Level Meeting information on HIV-related human rights violations that continue to take place in our countries.

30% of women sex workers who undertake an HIV test do not receive any kind of counselling either before and/or after getting the result and testing is still done without the knowledge of the woman being tested or is being forced upon her. Also, there are breaches in confidentiality regarding the test result. In Honduras, for instance, some districts demand that women sex workers have a health card bearing their photo and test result.

Women sex workers are still being criminalized because of HIV. The report Human Rights Situation of Women Sex Workers in Fifteen Countries Across the Americas, submitted by RedTraSex to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) shows, for instance, that the Bogota Police Code penalizes "the behaviour of those engaged in prostitution: The activity must not be performed in any case if the person is aware of having HIV or any other sexually transmitted disease". In Bolivia, a woman sex worker engaged in her profession in the cities of Sucre and Potosi was condemned to home imprisonment for having continued to work after being diagnosed HIV positive, even though she was using condoms.

These are only a few examples of how HIV/AIDS is still being utilized as a tool for institutional violence, social control and mistreatment of women sex workers.

What is the women sex workers' agenda?

There is still much to do. When the UNGASS Declaration was adopted, countries all over the world committed to provide adequate care to all persons living with HIV, to continue research for a vaccine, and to take care of all those whose lives were affected by the virus or by AIDS. The joint statement highlights that “gender equality and women’s empowerment are key elements for making women and girls less vulnerable to HIV/AIDS”.

More than 15 years later, women – and particularly women sex workers – continue to be subjected to patriarchal mandates that increase our exposure to HIV/AIDS. There is a need to respond to the epidemic in ways that understand care as going beyond sexuality and the use of condoms. It is not a matter of individual responsibility for women sex workers but a collective issue that requires State policies.

To move forward with a truly comprehensive response to HIV/AIDS, RedTraSex demands that States

Regulate sex work as work . to remove it from underground and to give women sex workers a legitimate place in society. Regulation of our work will let us have a legal and legitimate status to access health, social and legal services.

Repeal all laws and regulations violating women sex workers' rights and exposing us to greater risk. We demand a review of laws and regulations criminalizing us explicitly or implicitly, including compulsory regulations that only apply to women sex workers and encourage abuse and arbitrariness by security forces.

Ensure universal access to HIV/AIDS and STD prevention, treatment and quality care. In particular, to strategize in order to increase HIV early detection rates, treatment access and adherence, as a great opportunity to improve the quality of life is missed when treatment is started late.

Create comprehensive health care services free from stigma and discrimination, in which we are seen as human beings with full bodies and medical care is not focused only on our vaginas. Establish mechanisms linking HIV/AIDS care services to sexual and reproductive health care services in order to promote and broaden women sex workers' access to comprehensive care.



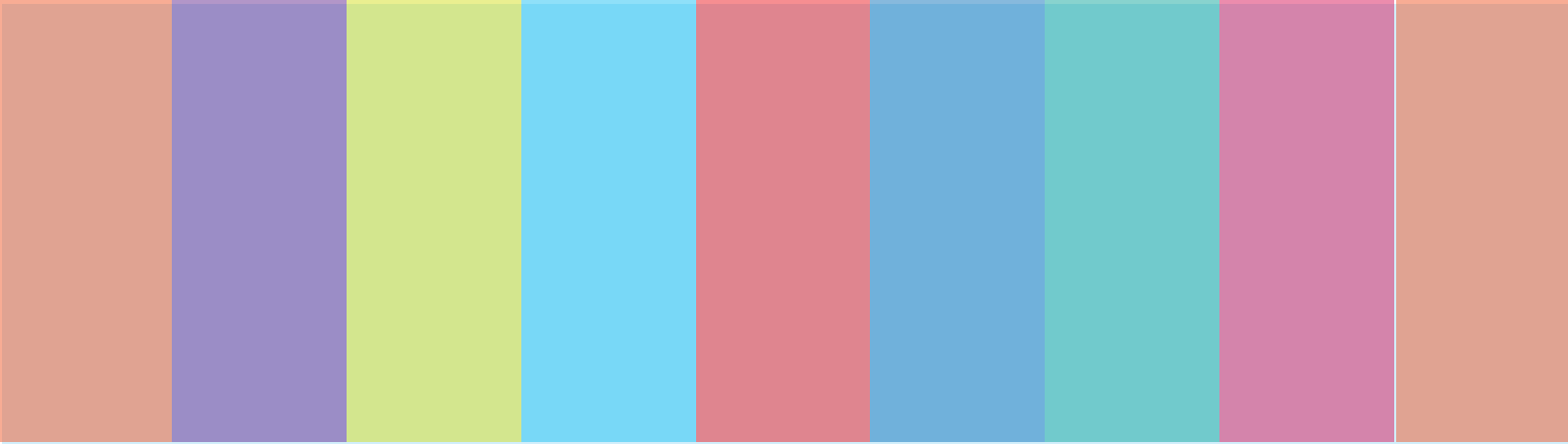
Take those prevention policies that have shown better results further: sensitivity campaigns, condom access and use, strengthening organizations so they can engage in peer-led prevention, damage reduction for drug users, early testing and friendly counselling.

Actively integrate women sex workers' organizations in the design of public policies for HIV prevention, detection and care from a comprehensive human rights and labour rights perspective that has proven to be the most successful to tackle the epidemic.

Strengthen women sex workers' organizations with sufficient economic and technical resources, at the district, local and national level.

Quickly implement all agreements from the Declaration of Commitment as this is the only way to achieve the goals set in the Sustainable Development Goals and the UNGASS Declaration.

The unmet need in the response to HIV/AIDS is to address the social causes of the epidemic. In the case of women sex workers, this means developing a legal framework to regulate sex work in Latin America. Without strong, solid and active women sex workers' organizations that are continually engaged in defining public policies and in monitoring their implementation, any response to HIV/ AIDS will be partial and wrong. RedTraSex has already proven it: women sex workers are not the problem, we are part of the solution.



RedTraSex

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