



## SWEAT (Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce)

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### Who are we?

SWEAT is a South African non-profit organisation, based in Cape Town, that engages with sex workers on issues of health and human rights. We are a small, dynamic and flexible organisation with seven full-time staff and three work programmes: training and support; advocacy and lobbying; and research.

Our primary goal is to achieve a legal adult sex work industry in South Africa, in which the human rights of sex workers are realised and where sex work is acknowledged as work. As such our work with adult sex workers focuses on:

- Organising sex workers to claim their rights, including setting the standards for fair and safe working conditions;
- Decriminalisation of adult sex work in South Africa;
- Access to health, legal and social services;
- Promoting safer sex practices and sex workers' health and well-being.

### What do we do?

SWEAT has been in existence for over ten years and has been able to reach sex workers and employers in the industry through outreach work that is non-intrusive and non-judgemental. We go out to where people are working, at times when they are working. We are available to those who want our services while ensuring minimal disruption to their work; and we respect those who do not want our services. We give out condoms and educational materials, and use every opportunity available to engage in conversation regarding health and safety issues. We are responsive to any issue or need that we encounter and where we cannot assist, we will provide a referral to someone we think or know can help.

We are also engaged in more in-depth work around safer sex through workshops with sex workers collectively in brothels, as well as with groups of sex workers that we have organised outdoors. The focus is on working with people

collectively and using these spaces to promote thinking and acting on issues. Similarly, we are supporting the beginnings of a national “movement” of sex workers launched by participants at a national meeting in 2003. At present we support quarterly meetings of a national leadership core, as well as monthly local meetings of persons involved in this “movement”.

Our direct work with sex workers and others in the sex work industry in Cape Town informs our work directions in an ongoing way concerning health and safety issues, as well as our work around law reform.

The advocacy and lobbying programme campaigns for the decriminalisation of adult sex work, addresses local legislation that impacts on sex workers and engages in issues relating to regulation and working conditions with sex workers.

Our research programme began in 2003. We are developing a credible information base that will assist us in our work directions, as well as enabling us to act in the interests of sex workers.



## Challenges

There is an ongoing tension concerning the need to do more for more sex workers. We experience pressure from external stakeholders to counsel, provide more services around HIV and Aids, to rehabilitate and to rescue. There are pressing concerns about children entering into sex work, about drug abuse, about coercion into the industry and the exploitation of women.

SWEAT remains focused on broader health and safety issues and on changing the law. We need to stay focused on trying to achieve change that will reach the most people. This often means paying less attention to individual needs and more attention to collective actions that will have a broader impact.

Of course we are deeply concerned about issues such as children entering sex work, exploitative working conditions, and individuals in crisis. However, we are not the most appropriate organisation to address these issues. We do network with other service-rendering organisations, refer and follow up.

We are guided and informed by the people that we interact with. The majority of sex workers are concerned about making a living and staying safe. They are not concerned about issues of exploitation or objectification, as has been the focus of some feminist movements.

## Moving on

SWEAT is not always understood or very popular and we have had to work hard at developing allies. We sometimes receive “lip service” support from other

organisations. We recognise that overtly supporting the right to sell sex and to treat sex work as a form of work requires a shift of thinking that goes against much feminist ideology and work towards women's rights. We too are often caught up in serious reflection on these issues when we encounter the oppression and hardships sex workers – who are largely women – face daily.

Change to the legal framework can work towards a climate whereby those in the industry have more space and options. It can also create more opportunities for people involved in sex work to take control of their working lives and take more collective action. Ultimately, changes to the law will open up more choices for sex workers, as well as allowing sex workers to become more involved in issues that directly affect them.



**Jane Arnott**

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