

Advocating for sex work organisations, Tasmania
Scarlet Alliance Public Symposium Brisbane2008
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Historically Tasmania has a heavily criminalised sex industry. And previous to the introduction of the current Sex Industry Offences Act in 2005 “prostitution” was dealt with under the police offences act and included crimes such as “running a bawdy house” and “living off the earnings of prostitution”. Today, brothels **remain** illegal and street work and even *clients of brothels* are also criminalised under the current Act.

Sex workers in Tasmania also experience extreme marginalisation partially caused by a well organised and high profile abolition movement that has a political influence as well as a social impact. For example we regularly see ads on page two of the Hobart paper claiming “prostitution ruins families”.

Criminalisation and marginalisation are compounded with Tasmania being the only state in Australia with no history of a state funded sex work project so up until recently there have not been any tailored services for sex workers in Tasmania.

However, Scarlet Alliance’s work in Tasmania is not recent. Scarlet Alliance has been very active for at least a decade and our presence in Tasmania has been eventful and varied.

In 2000 Scarlet Alliance held the annual National Forum in Hobart recognising the isolation that Sex workers experience in Tasmania

In 2004 the current sex industry Act was being developed and Scarlet had a strong presence around law reform including a [submission to the Tasmanian Government](#). In the same year our president at the time (Janelle Fawkes) spent time in Hobart calling sex workers and meeting with workers and brothel owners. Scarlet Alliance put out a media release and along with local sex

workers held a media conference outside parliament house. We met with about 8 organisations and unions as well.

By 2005 it became clear the Labour government was going to backflip on the law reform and Janelle again travelled to Hobart this time to brief cabinet. Joined by local workers, Scarlet Alliance presented the arguments to cabinet on why the approach they were taking (they were seeking to totally criminalise brothels), **wouldn't work.**

In 2006 Scarlet Alliance established the Commonwealth funded CASH project in Hobart - we purposefully decided to locate part of this project in Tasmania because of the lack of a local sex worker organisation and we employed a project officer for 2 days a week. The CASH project took Scarlet Alliance on outreach throughout the industry and across the state and in contact with dozens of sex workers the project produced a targeted resource for sex workers in Tasmania

Over this whole period we have supported Tasmanian sex workers to attend our national forums and we have used our opportunities to respond to media, reply to newspaper articles and do media interviews.

In 2008 we started to lobby strongly for funding for a sex work project. Our first submission to the Tasmanian Community Fund was rejected on the grounds that the project was a State Government responsibility.

We then wrote a comprehensive three year Project Submission to the Tasmanian Government.

In August this year the Scarlet Alliance Executive Committee decided to have their 2008 face to face meeting in Hobart in order to organise lobbying meetings.

The CASH team which involved 4 people from 4 states and territories held their final project meeting in Hobart which also allowed for a number of scarlet staff to get involved.

All executive committee members attended a meeting with Population Health Key Policy Staff.

Over the same week Scarlet Alliance held a sex worker only forum, a [community forum](#) and a [media event](#). These events successfully raised awareness of our issues across sectors, industries and to the general public.

Immediately after the community forum the Minister for health Lara Giddings was quoted in the paper saying “I think this is an issue that sex workers have a responsibility to look after their health and wellbeing as the rest of us do in the community”

Numerous letters where sent to the relevant ministers from Sex workers and a separate form letter was distributed to supports to signed off on in support of a funded peer sex worker project.

There were a number of other follow up meetings with ministerial advisors and senior bureaucrats. We made it clear to the government that we were not going away. We chased up every opportunity for meetings and took advantage of meetings to push our point in a way that was difficult to argue with.

We had the research, we had the experience and we were the experts.

In only the past few weeks we have directly received interim funding from the Tasmanian government to continue a skeleton project in Tasmania until the end of the financial year. The interim project will employ one person for 2 days at week.

Meanwhile we have submitted an extensive report to the treasury for a full scale project to be funded from next financial year. Until then we will continue to meet with the government to promote our goals and be available to answer their questions and keep the process on track

We will also keep a strong presence in lobbying for sex worker rights in Tasmania and just Last Friday I delivered a submission to the sex industry law review that is currently open in Tasmania.

As you can see that there has been a lot invested in Tasmania.

With the ground work done and so that when we were able to establish a paid position in Hobart many people had heard of scarlet alliance and there were some sympathetic supporters in the community around law reform. That is not to say it is easy. There is still a lot of unfamiliarity with sex worker rights as an ideology and as a movement and part of the CASH project workers role was to introduce the sex industry to the idea of mobilising for rights and sex workers organising networks.

We have found that there was a great deal of misinformation. Some people found a scapegoat in scarlet alliance for the new laws and brothel owners where known to denigrate scarlet alliance as being anti brothel or anti brothel owners neither of which is the case.

We also found that although many people were familiar with the principals of decriminalising the sex industry there were gaps in people's knowledge of the broader issues for sex workers. Judy Jackson, the Attorney general who wrote the original act that partially addressed sex industry working conditions still revealed her prejudice when she said recently in a local paper "there are a couple of women who enjoy it, and I accept that but it's very rare"

This brings me to my next point that throughout the process of building our argument for a sex worker project in Tasmania is our use of evidence.

The principles that underline our work are all evidence based. There is research and reports that show that mandatory testing doesn't reduce the incidence of STIs, registration of sex workers doesn't make the sex industry more easy to monitor, criminalising sectors of the sex industry doesn't stop them from operating, and that peer education is best practice in delivering services to sex workers.

Using evidence based arguments makes it very difficult for governments to argue with you.

Another tactic that we never shy away from is using the media. I saw the way the media worked for us. There is often a lot of rubbish to wade through. However the media did help to – raise the profile of sex worker rights, promote project work, promote the organisation and increase networks. The media actually helped us to get in touch with workers that we hadn't had contact with but who contacted us after reading about Scarlet Alliance in the paper.

But the Media is only one avenue to get our message heard. As I explained before we have written reports, written letters, individual sex workers have sat down and written their issues directly to the government. Form letters, community forums, networking, letters to the editor, sharing information and community partnerships all helped to build momentum and keep our issues on the table.

To their credit we did also find some good partnerships within the government and do I realise that this is not always possible. But to our credit we didn't stop when were first met by a reluctant government and eventually we found some individuals within the health department who took on lobbying for us and to them I am very grateful.

During our negotiations with government there are a number of core principals that Scarlet Alliance stands firm on. One of them is peer education and one of

the ways which we practice peer education is through our [affirmative action policy](#) around employment and engagement of sex workers.

We have promoted our [Affirmative Action Policy](#) at every opportunity. Either referring to it directly or attaching the policy as an appendix to reports and submissions. That way government knows the underlying values of our organisation and can expect us to adhere to this policy through out the process. Conversely we will expect, when working with the government that they will support us to work with this policy as well.

And in a world that is shifting away from peer education on a whole.... we have used every opportunity to promote our objective to set up a peer based project. We have left no room for misunderstanding or to negotiate on these core principles

The [affirmative action policy](#) outlines Scarlet Alliances commitment to peer based projects.

It outlines that we will employ only people with sex work experience.

Because we believe that sex workers needs are best met by others who have worked as sex workers and therefore have knowledge and understanding of the issues faced by this special community.

If it is impossible to recruit someone with the required skills for the job who also has sex work experience, then the position is offered to the applicant with sex work experience who bests fits the selection criteria and we then invest in training and professional development to meet the necessary duties of the position.

[Affirmative action](#) recognises that the active involvement of sex workers in all aspects of project management and delivery is critical in providing leadership in the community on sex work issues. The views, perspectives and experience of

sex workers need to be recognised and acknowledged in all policies, processes, public positions and activities.

[Affirmative Action](#) also recognises that having sex workers work in the organisation as paid staff, volunteers and on boards and committees is important to keeping a clear focus on the issues for sex workers. Having sex workers employed in our organisation increases our accountability amongst sex workers and the sex industry. It further helps to ensure that services are sensitive to the needs of sex workers and that the policies and public statements actively acknowledge and reflect an evidence based, non-discriminatory portrayal of sex work and sex workers.

This is the model that we have taken with us to Tasmania.

It is the model that we have proposed and discussed with the government.

And it is the model we will employ for all our future work in Tasmania.

Because we have seen, around Australia and the rest of the world sex workers benefiting from running targeted services, we see the project staff benefit and we see the broader sex work community benefit. The greatest evidence of this is the high rates of condom use and high levels of sexual health among sex workers in Australia which is **NOT** seen in countries that promote criminalisation of the sex industry and do not recognise the value of peer education and peer based services delivery to sex workers.

So sex workers can run their own organisations. In fact they can run them in a way that is more relevant and more accountable than their non sex worker counterparts.

The development of sex worker targeted services in Tasmania is further evidence that this is the case.