



## **Australian Sex Workers Association**

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### **To whom it may concern, Re: media ethics and non-english speaking background sex workers**

Scarlet Alliance is the Australian Sex Workers Association, representing and advocating for sex workers, past and present, in Australia.

In 2005 a Melbourne based journalist befriended a particular community of non-English speaking background sex workers and sex worker advocates in Australia. The journalist expressed interest in documenting the HIV/AIDS prevention work and high condom use among sex workers in Australia, and using the documentation for policy purposes to promote sex worker rights in an Asia-Pacific country. The particular sex worker community, sex worker advocates, their sex worker organisation and AIDS Council were formally approached by the journalists company, and permission was granted for the journalist to interview the sex workers and sex worker advocates. Release forms were signed by the sex workers, and verbal agreement of identity concealment precautions was made. The journalist spent extensive time hosted by the sex workers, sex worker organisation and AIDS Council, interviewing staff, advocates and sex workers for the documentary. Copies of the footage, and approval of the material was promised to the sex workers involved. However this was never forthcoming.

Two months after filming had completed, the sex workers received a horrifying and life changing shock. Without their consent, their identities, photos, interview material, and personal information gathered through casual discussion, were all published in a national newspaper. The story was subsequently published in an abridged form in a state based newspaper. The footage has been released on DVD, and is available all over Australia, and has been promoted on state wide radio. The DVD includes footage taken without sex workers consent, at times when they thought the camera was off. This is freely and proudly admitted by the journalist on the DVD.

It is impossible to quantify the terrible damage this has caused to the sex worker community involved. Some of the effects include:

- Individuals sex work status suddenly known to their family, children and partners
- Individuals sex worker status suddenly known to their entire ethnic community
- Sex workers loss of control over disclosure, with their entire family and community knowing that they are sex workers
- Sex workers loss of control over the material that they shared with the journalist, not knowing when the next article will appear
- Loss of trust by sex workers to the HIV/AIDS services involved
- Sex workers feeling let down, failed and disrespected by the HIV/AIDS services involved
- The sex worker community going through a huge experience of loss, as their ability to be discreet and confidentiality is taken away from them

- Individuals within the sex worker community losing trust with one another. They were all introduced to the journalist through other individuals within the community, and now question their judgement in trusting others.

The sex worker advocacy staff at the sex worker organisation had spent 5 years building relationships with this particular community. It should be acknowledged that sex workers from non-English speaking backgrounds require specialised and considered peer based HIV/AIDS education outreach strategies. These approaches were developed by the sex worker organisation slowly over time, with much respect to the community in question. A healthy trust had developed between the sex worker community and their organisation.

The sex workers trusted the journalist because they trusted the sex worker organisation. The journalist traded on this trust to gain entry into sex workers homes and work spaces. All of this information was then used against them. It is understandable that many of the sex workers are now questioning why they allowed themselves to get so closely involved with their sex worker organisation. It was their strong relationship with the sex worker organisation that ultimately compromised their confidentiality when the journalist got involved.

Sex worker organisations in Australia interact with communities that require high levels of respect in regards to confidentiality and disclosure. Our work involves being aware of these issues, and developing safe spaces for sex workers to feel able to talk about their personal issues. These issues are often not discussed in any other space. When an outsider enters that space for the purpose of exploiting sex workers trust, such as journalists who stand to reap personal gain from sex workers stories, this can potentially damage the sex workers safe space, and turn it into risk for the sex workers involved.

For these reasons, sex worker organisations and sex workers are incredibly reluctant to interact with journalists who request to them about their personal lives. Organisations such as Scarlet Alliance, and the myriad of sex worker organisations across Australia and around the world, prefer to present issues in systemic, industrial, civil and human rights based framework. It is rare that sex worker organisations will present identifiable and traceable personal stories. It is our duty to protect the identities of the sex workers who generously share their experiences with us.

The sex worker community we are discussing in this article is still suffering the terrible and agonising effects of having their identities revealed in a national newspaper. For those sex workers, there is no happy end to this story. Even if a law suit could be won in court, extensive damage has already been done. Feeling unable to trust members of their community and unable to access their sex worker organisation, angry at the media for exploiting their story, and unsure how far the DVD has spread throughout Australia; this cannot be undone.

Journalists need to understand the effects of exploiting the trust of sex workers. To a journalist, the article is a pay packet. For the sex workers involved, it is their entire life, their safety, their relationships with their family and community, and their dignity. Perhaps some of these sex workers at some time in their life would have decided to come out about their sex work, to their family, or to their community. However the journalist has taken the power away from them to be able to decide for themselves.

Scarlet Alliance and the sex workers involved are taking legal action against the journalist, and will keep fighting until the DVD is off the shelves, and an apology has been printed in the paper. We hope that this particular journalist will never again be able to exploit sex workers in this way. However it is up to all of us to ensure that all sex workers are protected from these kinds of events. Media ethics policies are vital to the sustainability of sex worker organisations, and any organisation that has sex workers involved. We welcome more discussion about this among sex workers and allies, and hope that events such as this can be avoided in the future.