



Sex Worker Health and Rights Advocates Technology Survey

Compiled by Tactical Tech in collaboration with Melissa Gira. Commissioned by the SHARP project.

Introduction:

The purpose of this survey is to explore the existing use of technology by sex worker health and rights advocacy groups and to find out which technologies they are interested in learning more about.

This part of the needs assessment was carried out by survey: there were a total of 37 survey responses, three of these done by interview. There were only eight responses from participants attending the meeting in Phnom Penh. The majority of surveys we received were from Central and Eastern Europe along with a significant number from Australia, Europe and the US. We were sorry to find that we had very few responses from the global South (only 20% of total respondents).

Summary of findings

Sex worker health and rights advocates are using information and communications technology to a greater or lesser extent in four primary areas:

- Communicating with and mobilizing their constituents (sex workers);
- Increasing constituent participation in advocacy;
- Regional and international networking;
- National advocacy campaigns.

Findings of note from the needs assessment are:

- Mobiles are used for outreach to sex workers. This will most likely be a key technology when considering how to organize and increase participation from constituents.
- Web and email is used predominantly for advocacy work and to a limited extent for cross-country solidarity networking.
- As most organizations stated they have reliable access to the Internet, the biggest likely barrier to international networking will be language and content creation (i.e. posting resources as opposed to asking questions on email lists).
- There is a general flair and tendency towards innovative and creative uses of technology, such as photographs, PowerPoint, videos, karaoke, audio, etc. This could be partly due to cross-cultural and literacy barriers, but also partly due to the creative nature of the community.
- Privacy is a concern for a number of groups; some groups reported knowledge of surveillance, however none are using digital security technologies, though many are using informal ways of protecting themselves.
- The biggest barrier cited by respondents to accessing technology is cost.

Whilst the surveys and interviews were extremely useful in beginning to understand technology use across a wide range of sex worker health and rights advocates and advocacy organizations, there would need to be more responses from the global South to get a more balanced picture. This could perhaps be tackled through more face-to-face and phone interviews, especially as we found the anecdotes from these in the first round generally more helpful than the

surveys. With a view to making recommendations, we would like to know more about which people in each organization are using technology, and what the organization's priorities are for moving ahead, for example, ideas and inspiration, training, support, access to funds, etc.

Advocacy

Nearly everyone is conducting outreach directly to sex workers as part of their activities. The other activities they are engaged in seem to vary from organization to organization. Though not everyone said they are engaged in political organizing, nearly everyone responded saying they have specific advocacy goals. Common themes are:

- End discrimination and stigmatization of sex workers;
- Gain labor rights for sex workers, including safe working conditions; and
- Include sex workers in policy and law reform.

A few people also responded with additional goals, such as:

- harm reduction;
- advocating for migrant sex workers;
- HIV/STI prevention;
- law reform;
- holding medical institutions' research accountable; and
- working with the media as advocacy priorities.

Nearly all said that the main target for their advocacy work is government officials. They predominantly approach these through direct meetings or by working through the media. A few others stated that their advocacy targets are NGO's providing services to sex workers; others are also targeting the clients of sex workers. Most are conducting this advocacy via face-to face meetings and demonstrations, but some also utilize email alerts and websites. Some have also started using audio and video as an advocacy tool.

Information and communications

Organizations are handling communication and information for three distinct audiences:

- Their constituents – people they are doing outreach to and mobilizing locally, predominantly sex workers.
- Their allies – other organizations working with sex worker health and rights advocacy. (These may be at the local, national or international level.)
- Their advocacy targets – largely government officials, media and other NGO's working on sex-worker related issues. (These are more often local and national.)

The communication tools organizations use to connect to these audiences are:

- Constituency – mostly via face-to-face meetings and voice over mobile phones. SMS texting via mobile phones is common in areas where literacy is not an issue. The types of information they are disseminating includes information about their rights, news about services, and logistical information about actions and demonstrations. An example of this is SANGRAM/VAMP in India who are using mobiles to survey sex workers by phone calls on female/receptive condom usage. Technology is also being used to facilitate organizing; for example AMAS/Redtrasex, in Argentina, are using mobile phones for mobilizing members for political demonstrations. APNSW has produced a Karaoke video featuring a protest song that was used in preparation for demonstrations: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIRQwVymeWA>).

- Allies – largely via face-to-face meetings, mail, phone and the Internet. The types of information they are disseminating includes education about sex worker issues, reports, policy developments, information about actions and demonstrations.

- Advocacy targets – largely via face-to-face meetings, mail, phone, the Internet and through the media. The types of information they are disseminating are generally reports containing details on the impact of policies. However, with the media they are disseminating: press releases, information about reports, actions, demonstrations. A number of organizations are increasing their constituents' participation in advocacy through using technology. For example SCOT Pep in Scotland are using an e-mail list to inform constituents about relevant bills going through parliament and "...encourage them to make their views known". The Best Practice

Policy Project in the US would like to “...give small payments to community members to write policy analysis and legislative updates that speak to local representatives and get this out via email.” They are also interested in the idea of “very community driven journalism (which) would be great if it was in the hands of many... “.

• **Advocacy and Organizing**

Video and audio content is created by a minority of groups. Those who do create video content are publishing their work online on video sharing websites, such as YouTube and blip. One organization, COSWAS (Taipei), is also producing audio podcasts. A few organizations are storing audio testimony privately as oral history, or to play at demonstrations and public events. Online photo albums are in use by some groups, such as COSWAS, who document their meetings with digital photos.

Examples of digital documentation came out strongly during the interviews with Redtrasex in Buenos Aires and COSWAS. Redtrasex is using digital photography to document their demonstrations and meetings with public officials. COSWAS is using digital audio to record the stories of sex workers, particularly in instances where the sex worker does not wish their face to be shown. These recordings are then used as testimony in public hearings, as well as during actions, parades and meetings. It is also worth noting that COSWAS has produced an excellent video narrative that is being shared on YouTube and can be accessed at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBAZ4RxPxDM>
and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKndBqiQLho>

In both cases, the organizations seem to have easily integrated these techniques into their work.

• **Data Collection**

Sex worker organizations collect a variety of information. Largely the information they collect on their constituents is done in paper format, though most are careful about what information they collect and how they store it. A few better resourced groups are keeping information in databases.

A good example of this is Lefo in Austria, who uses “register cards” to store information about sex workers but has a database they use to store information about allies. They have recently received funding to develop a database to provide certain statistics to their government ministry. Lefo is considering using the database to record some sensitive information but they are concerned about data security.

• **Sharing Information**

Respondents from organizations that are acting as hubs for Networks are more concerned with aggregating information and less so with collection and storage. SWAN also cited in its phone interview a need to be automatically alerted of updates to the websites run by their network members. For those groups trying to aggregate information through a coalition or network, access to RSS (tools that automatically help people keep track of new content on selected websites), would be an enormous help.

Most organizations have their own websites that reach a primary audience of other organizations, NGO's, media and public officials. Fewer groups use blogs, and very few use wikis. Many organizations stated they wished for a collaborative way to produce materials and easier ways to update their websites. Operating an email list was much more common amongst larger networks of sex worker health and rights advocacy organizations, than amongst smaller organizations and those focused on direct services and regional work.

Focus on technology use

Most all the respondents connect to the Internet through a high-speed connection at their home or office, using a desktop or laptop computer. Very few said they have access via dial-up, and those that do are perhaps surprisingly in the global North. Their constituents (sex workers) are on the whole restricted in their access to the Internet, and the few that do use the Internet do so through Internet cafes. This correlates to the widespread use of mobile phones as a communications tool to reach constituents.

Computer access is most often only available to staff and volunteers, due to limited resources or shared office space,

or home/office space. In a few organizations, computer access is made available to sex workers/community members, but in these, very few sex workers use the computers.

Expense is cited as being the biggest barrier to both the organization's use of technology but also their constituents' access. The second barrier that is cited is language, since software is not translated for many localities. Skills come in as a distant third. It is clear though that the groups that can get past the barriers of cost and language, then hit expertise as a hurdle to their use of technology. This does not mean it is not important, just a challenge that is only faced after others are overcome.

Most everyone gets their technology support from outside paid technical consultants. It is only the larger organizations or better resourced organizations that have internal staff. Occasionally less resourced groups are relying solely on volunteer support. Women's Unity Network in Cambodia has one member of the organization who is training himself in computers and in English, he has become the primary technology user in the group, creating – amongst other things - PowerPoint presentations for use by the rest of the organization.

Most groups have access to printers, CD/DVD burners, and digital cameras, and a number use digital video and audio equipment as well. The variety of equipment they have correlates to the size of their budgets, with better resourced groups having more.

Roughly half of the respondents are aware of electronic privacy issues and information and communications security vulnerabilities. Those that are aware, suspect that the police are listening on their phones and/or reading their email. In discussions later about sex worker health and rights advocates in Cambodia, we discovered that it is common practice for the police to take mobile phones, to such an extent that people have come to expect the data on their phones to go missing. None of the groups seem to be taking steps to combat security issues, other than one or two organizations that use password protection on their computer logins. Empower Foundation, Thailand simply said "Phone and emails are tapped by Intelligence for many years now...there is little real interference so we don't think about it very often".

Interest in using IT Tools

Interest in IT tools varied by regions that organizations were based in, as well as the type of tools that organizations already use.

In Australia, the Scarlet Alliance already uses mobile phones for collecting photographs, and the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective Christchurch Branch "has initiated a ProTXT project, where sex workers can communicate with each other regarding safer sex, bad clients, and other issues of importance" (NZPC). In this region, however, groups were also interested in learning about how to create and maintain easily-updated websites (Content Management Systems, or CMS) and blogging as well databases and mailing lists.

In Asia, mobile organizing and advocacy was the predominant focus, which may correspond to the large size of the groups there, as well as the developed infrastructures for mobiles in place.

The few African and Latin American groups surveyed were equally interested in mobile advocacy, CMS, databases, and tools that allow for groups to collaborate on documents and track changes made.

In North America and Europe, where groups reported having more access to the web and were more focused on networking and policy, CMS was also a priority, as well as databases and mailing lists. North American groups were less interested in mobile advocacy, but somewhat interested in mobile photos.

For organizations in Central, South Eastern, and Eastern Europe, there was an across the board interest in using databases, CMS and collaborative document tools, there was a mixed level of interest in using mobiles with some countries such as Lithuania and Ukraine being very interested and other such as Macedonia less so.

Next steps:

This survey is the first part of a needs assessment. We will be continuing to interview sex worker health and rights advocacy groups about their use of technology and solicit examples of effective use of technology in their strategies.

We will then compile the findings of the surveys and interviews along with the resources and distribute the full outcomes of the needs assessment to the community by July, 2007.