

Meena is the General Secretary of Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha or SANGRAM. It's a little easier to say that, at least for me. It's an organization based in Sangli, India which has worked for the empowerment of people in sex work. Ms. Seshu has worked with marginalized populations, particularly rural women, adolescences and people in sex work on HIV and AIDS, sexual and reproductive health, violence against women and gender and sexual minority rights through grassroots rights based organizations in Karnataka and Maharashtra. Her title is No Excuses: The Living Experience of the Struggle for Rights. So please join me in welcoming Meena Seshu. [Applause]

**MEENA SESHU:** Thank you. [Speaking in foreign language] Good morning. I'm here to tell you a story. A story of struggle and success. We struggled and we fought. It wasn't always clear that we would succeed. And sometimes, we

did not. I was trained as a social worker. As professional social workers, we are trained to guide communities. But our struggles revealed to us that this approach was not only faulty in achieving results, it was not ethical. For instance, what did we, a band of middle class women, know about the sex worker community? But we were all ready to guide them.

The sex worker community resisted all our attempts and taught us that effective interventions are only possible if we respect their knowledge, experience and participation. They brought on to us the simple truth that dropdown programs that are not guided by community knowledge, community experience and community participation do not work. [Applause]

As we struggled, we learned that pragmatically only right centered approaches actually worked. It was this approach that helped us reach 5,000 sex workers within six months. Our monthly requirement of condoms, fully a breadth, reached 350,000 condoms a month within a year of starting the invention. It was also this approach that showed us that when we decided to work with rural women, adolescences, young people, men who have sex with men and trans people.

I would like to begin by introducing you to my friend and colleague, Durga Pujari, who was one of our first outreach workers. Durga is now President of [Inaudible], RAM the collection of women in sex work who have struggled against

injustice and triumphed. And I hope this works. [Video Played]

[Applause] Thank you Durga. [Applause] This community of sex workers taught us that they're the most effective educators of both their trials and other women in sex work. They helped us develop what we now call the SANGRAM Bill of Rights that comes from our experience in Sangli.

I remember in 1993 the Information, Education and Communication Committee in charge of AIDS, [Inaudible] this is the pre-national AIDS controlled organization base, once sent out a long list of client negotiation strategies for sex workers. This included graphic photographs of STI symptoms, how to talk to men; convince them about condom use, etc. I was young, naïve and 29 years old. The HIV educator and me took the list, called a meeting and sat down to discuss this new tool.

A [inaudible] and a brothel owner listened to me patiently but couldn't stop laughing throughout the meeting. She made me understand how ridiculous I was being. She asked me directly if I had any knowledge or dealings with men. The sex workers finally told me, we know how to deal with clients. We know how to deal with men. You just get us good quality condoms. And we'll do the rest. [Applause]

The first SANGRAM Bill of Rights was thus born. People have the right to be approached with humility and respect. Sex

workers were not treated respectfully in the health services. And thus, avoided going to the Civil Hospital. The Civil Hospital approach [inaudible] for the good of the sex worker community, SANGRAM should do a collaborative program with the Civil Hospital that would bring high quality medical services right to the door step of the community.

So we called a meeting, told community leaders and we set up a clinic just outside the brothels for treatment services. We spent a lot of money and set up a temporary structure just outside the brothel area which had a medical unit, a counseling room, a mini lab. There were about 10 doctors.

Imagine my horror when I went to the brothels the next day. The community was deserted except for old women and very young children. They actually run away from Sangli City and abandoned their houses to avoid getting treatment or being corroded into getting treatment. We were flabbergasted. We couldn't understand why they weren't flocking to these accessible services. The Civil Hospital doctors were furious.

But we learned our lesson. You learn that you can't tell people that they must get a test or they must be treated. You can explain and offer but it must be in a way that allows them agency. It has to be a consulted process. That's the second bill. People have the right to yes or no to things that concern them.

In 1997, after the collective of women and sex worker [inaudible] was registered; we felt we had done our duty and we wanted to close SANGRAM down. But the women of VAMP understood the epidemic better than most of us. Durga, who you just saw in the film, said that HIV was like a big river. And by working with sex workers, we had built only one dam. Building a dam at only one site will not stop a massive flood she said. If we really want to stem the tide, we have to build dams at different bends of the river.

She explained to us that men listen to sex workers about condoms but they did not seem to even discuss sexual issues, forget condoms, with their wives. I remember she said maybe we needed to teach wives negotiation strategies.

[Laughter]

VAMP pushed SANGRAM to reach [inaudible] women and young people. The sex workers observed that young men were especially hard to convince about using condoms. They did not want to sacrifice sexual pleasure. And they did not want to hear the consequences of not using condoms. And thus, a rural non-sex worker program started.

At that time, women living with HIV who were pregnant were told that they should have an abortion. There was no Nevirapine, no nothing. But even with the knowledge that many of these children would be born HIV negative, women were told to abort. The struggle was to create a safe space to discuss

rights as well as legal and medical issues affecting people living with HIV and AIDS.

I would now like to introduce you to a member of SANGRAM PLUS, the collective of women living with HIV/AIDS from Sangli District. [Video Played]

SANGRAM PLUS was born to help address the intersection of violence against women and HIV and AIDS. Women's' rights are particularly difficult to talk about because they challenge traditional patriarch structures. SANGRAM's solution to this is to try a collective consciousness in order to strengthen people's ability to assert their rights and negotiate safety.

People have the right to reject harmful social norms. The challenges of reaching out to rural women and young girls were numerous and deep. Being accused of breaking up marriages, challenging sexual norms, helping young people get together to talk rationally about sex and HIV, reaching sheltered young girls, giving them the language of rights and urging them to take control of their lives is not only a difficult task, it's near impossible in a conservative set up.

Our interaction sexuality education classes are a right. Our strong feminist perspective is difficult to digest for most young men. As is similar in most parts of world, young men crammer for information on sexual pleasure and the women, of course, are tailored to show more interest in reproductive health issues. We deal with controversial issues

around sexual diversity in an open and honest manner. MSM, trans people, sex workers are part of the comprehensive sexually education administered by the SANGRAM activists. Pleasure me safety is our slogan.

People have the right to stand up and change the balance of power. Challenging social norms, challenging the most powerful in the district - police, [inaudible] leaders, political leaders, [inaudible] leaders. [Inaudible] And eventually getting them, if not to be supporters at least not obstacles, is the struggle.

At the state and national level, some success has been achieved in the engagement with government and non-government actors. Working with sex workers, women's groups, HIV/AIDS activists, career activists within the country and outside has resulted in concrete gains.

Mobilizing the voices of sex workers as citizens and community leaders to influence Government of India to abandon its plan to amend the immoral Traffic Prevention Act was without doubt one of our major successes. The amendment would have further stigmatized sex workers by criminalizing the purchase of sexual services. For women who did not think that they could go to the local police station to help believe that they can talk to the group of ministers in Delhi is indeed an achievement.

And with information from our International Networks of Sex Workers, the Global Network of Sex Work projects; NSWP and the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers; the National Network of Sex Workers India was able to argue that there's no evidence from any country that criminalizing demand is an effective strategy for preventing violence against sex workers, trafficking in persons into sex work and certainly not HIV. [Applause]

In 2007, the National Network of Sex Workers India hosted to the meeting of the Global Network of Sex Workers Projects to rewrite the UNAIDS' guidance note on HIV and sex work which was then presented to UNFPA and UNAIDS in Delhi by the Indian sex workers.

But the most exciting journey has been the recent success in influencing the request for proposals to the Global Fund Round 10 from India. The National Network of Sex Workers set up a sex worker led consortium which was able to advocate for our inclusion as partners in the Round 10 proposal from the Government of India.

We are challenged by having to compete with large, international NGOs for PR status. We are still calling for the sex worker led consortium to be the primary recipient and are hoping that for the first time in the world, sex worker collectives will be given this right to choose their own

homegrown representation to the Global Fund. [Applause] We need the Global Fund to work for us. [Applause]

In our region, HIV became a problem at a time when the political power of religious fundamentalists was growing. It wasn't bad enough that sex workers were already harassed and abused by the police. Although it was clear that sex workers were a central part of the solution of HIV, to HIV, we have had to deal with centuries of entrenched stigma and social distain.

Religiously motivated vigilantes from India and eventually from conservative Christian groups in the United States, who wanted to rescue sex workers from lives of immorality, have targeted SANGRAM and VAMP for advocating for the rights of sex workers. The raids have been violent and conducted with missionary zeal and thug like brutality. Raids only drive marginalized communities underground. And long-term community work gets disrupted.

It was only the collective strength of VAMP that did not allow the HIV outreach program, condom distribution and access to treatment services to be disrupted. The raids on VAMP established the fifth bill of rights. People have the right not to be rescued - repeat, not to be rescued by outsiders who neither understand nor respect them. [Applause]

In 2000, a small group of men from Sangli approached SANGRAM asking for a program focused on men who have sex with men, coatees [misspelled?] and jagapas [misspelled?]. Coatee is

a [inaudible] labor for males who may feminize their behaviors. Jagapas are male [inaudible] a form of [inaudible] prostitution linked to the Hindu religion.

I would like to tell you a story that has helped me understand the true meaning of rights. Pandu from Muskan, the collective of coatees and jagapas. [Video Played] [Applause]

Pandu taught us the most important right of all. People have the right to exist how they want to exist. Our workers taught us that people like Durga, Mongila [misspelled?] and Pandu don't marginalize with the hypocrisies of the system. Like all survivors, they do have the courage and strength to create a world that has much to offer. A world that's not only by their pain but also their dreams for a society and a people who will affirm their right to self worth, dignity and livelihood that no one agency can either confirm or deny.

Before I end, I have two issues that I'd like to bring to your notice. I take this opportunity to show solidarity to the Alaei brothers, AIDS physicians wrongly imprisoned [Applause] since June 2008. I appeal to all of you [Applause] to sign the petition at [IranFreetheDoctors.org](http://IranFreetheDoctors.org).

That's Cheryl. On 15th June, 2010, Cheryl Over was denied entry to the United States of America on her way to attend a meeting of the Technical Advisory Group of the Global Commission on HIV and AIDS at the invitation of UNDP. Cheryl, as we all know, is a designated researcher of sex work, health

and human rights activist and long-term sex worker's rights advocate.

The denial of entry was based on the U.S. Government's belief that Cheryl represented a high risk of involvement in prostitution or trafficking of persons and that she's believed to have a prostitution related conviction from the 1970s which nobody can trace. Current U.S. legislation rests its ground on crimes involving moral turpitude. Moral turpitude? [Laughter] Entry was also denied for any person believed to have been a sex worker in the previous 10 years regardless of criminal record and applies to people from countries in which sex work is recognized as an occupation. Nobody from the Netherlands can go to the States. Sex workers that is. [Laughter]

This denial of entry raises serious concerns for sex workers who wish to attend the International AIDS Conference to be held in Washington, D.C. in 2012. [Applause] Can you imagine a world AIDS conference without the red umbrellas? It's not happening. [Applause]

I would like to end this presentation by acknowledging my mentors and co-authors, Joanne Csete and Jonathan Cohen. [Inaudible] Wilder and [Inaudible] for the film clips, Francois Ziti - I hope I've said it correct. Francois Ziti of OSI who held my hand through this process. Kelly Long of [Inaudible] for the magical PowerPoint. You must thank her. My gurus, the incredible collect of [inaudible] the also beautiful coatees

and jagapas from Muskan and the quietly strong resisters from  
SANGRAM PLUS. Thank you very much. [Applause]