

Sex workers say: 'Tax Us'

It has been called the oldest profession in the world and now head of the Caribbean Association of Sex Workers, Miriam Edwards, says sex workers throughout the region would be willing to pay taxes if respective governments started recognising what they do as a job.

"We are willing to pay taxes if they give us the right to work and if they accept sex work as a job," she told delegates at the 2011 HIV Conference earlier this week at the Atlantis, Paradise Island Bahamas.

Edwards added that sex workers want to pay taxes so they can have access to benefits which other workers are eligible to receive.

"We are not prepared to stop sex work and we don't want anybody to ask us to stop. We just want our job to be accepted just like that of the police and the nurses," she told delegates.

The Guyanese national said she was forced to enter the commercial sex trade at age 14 as that was the only available option which allowed her to be able to remain in school and subsequently take care of her seven children.

Edwards, who proudly noted that none of her children had followed in her footsteps, said the way to keep young people out of the sex trade is to afford them proper parental support.

"When we talk about keeping young people out of sex work we have to ensure their parents are alive and there for them because there are lots of parents living with HIV and cannot work and the neighbour who gives rice and flour will start having sex with their 13 year old," she said.

Edwards, at the same time, requested that more funding be allocated for prevention work tailored specifically to meet the needs of sex workers.

"Sex workers are being left out of these special programmes and so we need more programmes and more funding," she said.

Princess Brown, president of the Jamaica Association of Sex Workers, said sex workers do not want to be accepted and put in a corner but be treated as any other worker.

"We don't want them to put us away in a secluded place in some bush and say they accept us," she said.

Although the HIV prevalence rate is high among commercial sex workers, Brown said sex workers have the right not to disclose their HIV status to their partners/clients.

"Sex workers are human beings and for any human being it is their right not to tell someone that they are HIV positive and so if a sex worker does not want to say then that is their right," she argued.

She said that although she has several certificates and a diploma those never provided job opportunities for her as did sex work.

She said she is the mother of five daughters, one of whom is now in London studying medicine, and another studying to become a flight attendant.

Speaking to some of the challenges facing sex workers, Brown said she has lived many of them first hand, as she cited an experience when she worked at a night club in the Bahamas two years ago.

"Immigration here is terrible to migrant sex workers and I can tell you because I almost broke my neck trying to hide in a ceiling from immigration officers," she said.

She said often times the human rights of sex workers are violated when they are caught. "When they catch us they will send you home in whatever they catch you in. They will carry you to the prison in whatever costume you were wearing, without any panty, in your G-string whatever you are wearing," she said.

"I sprained my foot and was afraid to go to doctor because I was told if you can't say what you are doing here they will call the immigration on you," she said.