

## **Background to WNU Press Conference on Tenofovir Trials in Cambodia on March 29, 2004.**

The Women's Network for Unity was established in June 2000 by a group of sex workers for sex workers. It provides a foundation for support and builds solidarity and self empowerment among sex workers. Our network provides a space for women to come together, share ideas and discuss the collective challenges we face. We have over 5,000 members across Cambodia.

Our Network has been involved in some advocacy with the media and parliamentarians over the past few years on issues ranging from sex workers right to work, trafficking, violence against women and changes to the Law on Prostitution.

The first ever Cambodian sex worker-planned and run press conference was held in Phnom Penh on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2004. Network expressed its opposition to an experiment which is recruiting healthy female sex workers to test HIV/AIDS drug, Tenofovir DF and find out if it is safe to use on HIV- women and reduces HIV infection. The same drug trials are starting soon in Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria and Malawi. These trials are conducted by researchers from University of California, San Francisco, Australia's university of New South Wales and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the American National Institute of Health.

The researchers are looking for 960 Cambodian sex workers who are HIV- to take the pill once a day for one year in exchange for free medical services, counseling and \$3 per month. Testing is due to start in June, 2004.

The WNU is against the use of sex workers in poor country like Cambodia for experimentation especially when the drug has only been tested on healthy monkeys – never on healthy humans. Side effects of the drug when given as HIV/AIDS treatment is diarrhea, nausea, weakness to major liver and kidney failure and 'brittle bone" disease.

WNU president Kao Tha says many sex workers are worried about being the first healthy humans to test the drug and are worried about the side effects of taking a drug for prevention purposes.

"They said they don't want to try the drug because they are poor and they are sex workers....If they fall ill, who will look after their mothers, children, sisters or brothers?"

"If the researchers are so sure that this drug is safe for HIV- women to take, in the short and long term, why won't they commit to insurance for us and our families? If we get sick or can't work it can be difference between life and death for our families" she asked.

The Network wants insurance against possible side effects of Tenofovir for 30 or more years and not just health care for the duration of the trial. When the researchers are finished and leave Cambodia who will take responsibility for sex workers and their families who may be suffering longer term side effects?

WNU believes that all sex workers who participate in the trial have the right to ask questions and be fully informed about the risks and to demand better medical and financial protection. Must poor sex workers in Cambodia take the risk of taking Tenofovir, withstand the side effects, and sacrifice health and income for \$3 month and no longer term guarantees?

If our members agree to take the risk, which may one day benefit people in richer countries and the drug company, then we deserve adequate protection for our future lives and our families. The high cost of this drug means that even if it is successful in preventing HIV/AIDS Cambodian sex workers will most likely never be able to afford it.

WNU also warns that women involved in the trial will not know if they are taking the drug or a sugar placebo and may mistakenly think that condom use is not necessary – or they will take risks with clients to increase their income. We believe that even if experiment participants are given counseling and condoms many young women will still believe that they are safe from HIV infection as long as they are involved in the experiment. Condom use is our most effective and cheapest protection from HIV/AIDS and we are worried women will stop using them because they think they are protected by the drug. Anyway it is married women who have the highest increase in HIV/AIDS infection and this is from their husbands.

WNU plans to continue outreach activities to its members on this issue and have further meetings, work shops and press conferences to negotiate protection of its members' health and human rights. We welcome other sex workers stories of similar experiences from around the world especially to find out what is happening to the women in Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria and Malawi.

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