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NATIONAL FORUM OF SEX WORKERS IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION BUILDS EMPOWERMENT AND CREATES A PATH TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

A national forum of sex workers, held in Moscow on 11-14 April 2016 is seen as one step towards achieving the sustainability of programs for sex workers as The Global Fund ends its funding for the Russian Federation.

(According to The Global Fund's website, there is only grant currently active. It is an HIV grant and it will expire at the end of 2017.)

The principal recipient of the existing HIV grant is the Open Health Institute (OHI). The sex workers forum was organized within the framework of the community empowerment and overcoming legal barriers module of the HIV grant by five sub-recipients operating in five cities.

The purpose of the forum was to bring together sex workers and sex worker activists from different regions of the Russian Federation to involve them in a national movement of sex workers headed up by Silver Rose, a voluntary partnership of sex-workers and their supporters. Forty community representatives from 10 cities attended the forum.

The objectives of the forum were:

- to describe the program being implemented under the community empowerment and overcoming legal barriers module of the HIV grant;
- to explain what the program can offer sex workers in term of protecting their rights and other services;

- to demonstrate how communities can participate in monitoring the services;
- to enable participants to develop strategic directions for the sex workers community for the coming five years, including, in particular, strategic directions related to empowering the communities and implementing the recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women; and
- to identify potential leaders to undertake capacity building activities planned under the module.

Forum participants told GFO the event was very important for the empowerment of the sex workers community in the Russian Federation. Participants said that they realised that they are not just individuals struggling with their own issues, but rather that they are members of powerful group of people sharing the same problems and goals.

Elena Zaitseva, who heads up the Global Fund program for OHI, said: “We are proud that the event was driven, organized and facilitated by the community and not by the PR, which has just provided financial, logistical and administrative support.” She added that the five-year strategic plan developed at the forum is important for the sustainability of the program her PR has been implementing. “The plan will empower sex worker communities to seek out grants to allow our programs to continue after The Global Fund withdraws support at the end of 2017.”

OHI plans to conduct similar forums for two other key populations: people who inject drugs, and men who have sex with men. OHI expects that the outcomes of these two forums will be similar to the outcomes of the sex workers forum – i.e. long-term strategic plans; more empowered populations; and a path established towards the sustainability of services.

Most stakeholders in the Russian Federation agree that strengthening at-risk communities is the best approach, and they believe that it has already produced results. According to Igor Pchelin, director of the Steps Fund, and a representative of the Russian Union Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS, The Global Fund “gave communities the opportunity to ‘come out’ from under their illegal status and become a partner with the state.”

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