



Sex workers' mobilisation against discrimination: An explicit case for harm reduction methods in Brazil

*Mega-events have caused controversy all over the world, given the transformations that they prompt in the hosting cities. In Brazil, however, the build-up to the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics has been used as a consciousness-raising environment by marginalised groups, including sex workers. In this post, **Janine Ewen** discusses her research around sex workers' mobilisation against social discrimination and how their movement makes a direct case for harm reduction methods in Brazil.*

I travelled to Rio de Janeiro over 2013 and 2014 to learn more about the sex industry in Brazil. My first trip involved conducting primary research with sex workers and civil society organisations prior to the World Cup 2014. A mixture of in-depth interviews, alongside attending one of Rio's largest conferences on HIV/AIDS, Equality and Diversity opened up a wealth of knowledge on one of the most marginalised groups. Other activities in my research project involved actively participating in health and political debates, as well as receiving invitations to live plays by sex workers on the societal struggles faced from working in the profession, including violence by the police. I will be heading to the Law Enforcement and Public Health gathering in Amsterdam over October to discuss the 2014 mega events, sex workers and to learn more about International harm reduction efforts by the police.



My research paper, [Using the Venom of a Snake for an Antidote: exploring strategies and services for sex workers in preparation for the World Cup 2014](#) was accepted for discussion on the human rights panel of the [2nd International and Mega Events conference this year](#). My findings suggest that sex workers were expecting to experience or witness violence over the 2014 World Cup, either by international tourists, or at the hands of the police ([police violence predictions were confirmed](#)), mostly spoken of taking place in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's two largest cities.

Sex workers and civil society organisations face continuous accusations of exploiting children, stemmed from the myth that sex workers in Brazil encourage youth involvement in the sex industry. Sex workers wanted me to draw attention to the fact that they are accused of exploiting children, even if intervention involves connecting a child to a social worker or providing shelter. Sex workers promote the legal age of 18 years old, as they do not want children to be in the sex industry, but they also do not want to shut the door on any minor who needs help. Civil society organisations are worried what authorities may do if they are caught intervening.

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The research also touches on the government's focus on HIV/AIDS towards Brazil's sex working community. The majority of sex workers are actively promoting safer sex messages and will develop creative campaigns on HIV/AIDS. They agree that sexual wellbeing should be an investment by their government, but this isn't enough to tackle social stigma and corruption by the police. This strategy is heavily based on contraception, rather than considering the social determinants that can impede a person from achieving an improved health status. My case studies identified examples of discrimination by health professionals. Below is one example of a transgender sex worker who was denied a universal transportation card by a doctor.

"I was denied a transportation card to access HIV treatment by my doctor. Had it not been for the help of a volunteer lawyer, I would not be able to access my needed treatment."

According to the [UNAIDS 2013 update](#), in Brazil there are between 660,000 and 810,000 people living with HIV, which accounts for 1 in 4 of those living with HIV in Latin America. With roughly 179 million inhabitants, the sheer size of Brazil's population means that the HIV/AIDS epidemic could potentially affect large numbers of people; therefore integrated efforts to keep the epidemic under control are still a priority. However, tackling societal discrimination must be at the top of the list, especially for sex working communities. Brazil's sex workers, especially in Rio de Janeiro, showed me activism and a huge amount of resilience by forming close alliances; they are far from weak and vulnerable.



"Any vulnerabilities are by because of our social environment; corruption in our police and the lack of consideration by our government." Sex worker in Rio.

"We will use the venom of a snake for useful antidote. The venom is the police violence and the useful antidotes are the services granted us who are transgender. We are allowed psychological support to "deal" with our sexuality and gender changes, but we use this to discuss police corruption." Sex worker activist in Rio.

The [Law Enforcement and Public Health gathering 2014](#) (LEPH) will discuss the needed relationship between the police, public health and the implementation of harm reduction methods. The police are beginning to realise their role is more than to chase criminals or impose arrests; they too play an important role in supporting global public health challenges from their frontline observations and close liaison in community settings. The conference will confront this neglect by bringing together police, public health practitioners, academics and policy makers to examine, review, assess, share and learn from each other. A session on mega events and sex work has been constructed to pull together the wealth of evidence on the global phenomenon of mega-sporting events and their impact on the sex working communities.



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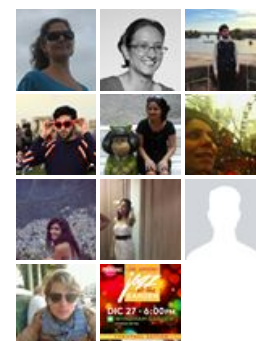
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Janine will be revealing more research findings through her presentation: 'A repeat Performance for a Security Legacy? Brazil and Glasgow's sex industry in 2014: similar circumstances of mega event policing'. Follow [@JanineEwen](#) for twitter updates.

All photos courtesy of Janine Ewen.

About the Author

Janine Ewen is a researcher specialising on public health, policing and harm reduction. Her previous experience has involved humanitarian aid efforts in East Africa. Janine was awarded with a humanitarian acknowledgement in 2013 by the Red Cross for charity work abroad and in Scotland.

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