

Speech by the Minister for European Affairs and International Cooperation, Ben Knapen, at the closing meeting of the 'Stepping Up, Stepping Out!' Conference in The Hague, 25 April

I would like to start by addressing the last speakers. Ladies, I was moved by what you said. Thank you for your encouraging stories. It shows that we can make a difference. It is brave of you to share these experiences so openly with us. Such openness is unusual, sex work is an area full of taboos, full of shame and low self-esteem. But it is important to address these issues. Important in the battle for better sexual health and more sexual rights.

Sex workers have a lot of sexual contacts in surroundings that are by no means always safe. This means sex workers run a bigger risk of STIs and HIV infection. In addition, sex workers are hard to reach as a group. In most countries, prostitution is illegal. Sex work is surrounded by taboos. And is often stigmatised.

I, we and my country want to strengthen your position. I want you to be able to make your own choices about how you earn money. And that's why sharing experiences is so valuable. We will use your stories to make our policy more effective. So thank you very much again.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In Yemen I recently visited a Marie Stopes sexual clinic. There I saw an enthusiastic team working to help women who want to use contraceptives but who can't. Either because their culture prevents it or because they do not have access to them. In Congo I spoke to women who had just given birth. They were the victims of gang rape and had no idea who the fathers of their children were. And in Ghana I visited a school where there was no separate toilet for girls. So once they reached puberty, girls stayed at home.

All these things have little in common, but it was experiences like these that confirmed for me how important it was to select sexual health and rights as one of my four policy priorities. I'm doing what I can to promote access to information and contraceptives, to help women in conflict situations and to foster gender equality. In this way we hope to reduce unwanted pregnancies, maternal mortality, HIV infection and the spread of STIs.

Sexual health remains a priority for the Netherlands. My aim is a new generation that is HIV free. As I said just now, sex workers are a hard-to-reach group with an increased risk of infection. It is crucial that we reach them with prevention programmes. That's why we're paying special attention to this group. We does not only mean the ministry, but also the parliament, who is encouraging me to pay attention to sex workers.

But my aim is not just to prevent HIV. I also want to improve sex workers' legal status and quality of life, and ensure they get greater protection. They are often the victim of human trafficking and violence. But they can't always count on doctors, police officers or courts to help them. If they wish, we must help them to step out of prostitution.

The Netherlands is one of the few countries in which sexual issues and prostitution are openly discussed. We want to use this openness to break down taboos in other countries, to combat stigmatisation and to end discrimination. The Netherlands works to spotlight issues like coercion, exploitation and unsafe workplaces. We continue to support Dutch NGOs like ICCO and Soa Aids Nederland, and international organisations like UNAIDS and UNFPA. Organisations whose programmes aimed at sex workers have already achieved a great deal. Dutch NGOs, for instance, have already helped over 5,000 sex workers.

Let me mention an example. In its MOVE Forward project in Vietnam, Soa Aids Nederland encourages sex workers to set up their own shelters. Places where they can meet, share experiences and follow courses. They can also get microcredit loans to start their own businesses. In this way they can find alternative employment and eventually step out of prostitution.

I have already pledged 2 million euros to continue NGO programmes aimed at sex workers. But this does not simply mean more of the same; we are making good use of past experiences. By evaluating the programmes of ICCO and Soa Aids Nederland, for instance, we know we can do more than just help sex workers take the first step out of the trade. Walking away from prostitution is a long and difficult road. So we now support sex workers throughout the process. We help them step up and step out. We want to ensure that women have opportunities they can grasp, that their legal status improves, and that they have access to health care and education.

Like in Vietnam. The shelter project there has already helped almost 350 sex workers. Some have started their own teashops. They can't live off the proceeds, but it does give them enough income to refuse customers who are aggressive or who want unprotected sex. It is a little thing, but it is important. We want to see more of these projects in the future.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For two days now you have been talking about the best way forward. You have brought your knowledge, experience and ideas together to create a tailored approach to helping sex workers.

I look forward to hearing more about your ideas for the future. In the meantime, I can assure you that sexual and reproductive health and rights will remain one of my priorities – and that includes sex workers' rights. That's why I have decided to contribute to the Sex Worker Freedom Festival in Kolkata, which will be taking place at the same time as the International AIDS Conference. In this way, sex workers who cannot get to Washington can still make their voices heard.

I must commit, we live in a democracy. That is why I am not the only one responsible for this policy. But in parliament are a lot of supporting parties. Therefore I can say: you can still count on us.

Thank you.