Oh! Calcutta!

June 1, 2002 By Melissa Hope

A carnival with the requisite merry-go-round and cotton candy, a health fair with free STD screening, workshops on anti-terrorism, forums with politicians, performance art, films and dancing. Sound like the trappings of a phantasmagoric Fellini flick? Guess again. These were all highlights of the Millennium Mela, a “Million Sex Workers March” of sorts organized by the Indian sex workers’ union, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) in March. Seven thousand ’hoes hailing from all over Asia convened in Calcutta for a five-day pridefest-*cum*-awareness campaign, with decriminalization, social recognition of sex work as a valid profession and AIDS education topping the agenda.

“The most encouraging part was how effective the sex-worker community could be,” said Smarajit Jana, MD, DMSC founder. "They succeeded in organizing the Mela not just as a conference or debating ground but as a forum to share emotion and togetherness -- without much interference from the ’intellectuals.’ It was truly an event *by* sex workers *for* sex workers."

In India, organized sex workers have much lower rates of HIV infection than their non-union counterparts. At one time, Bombay’s red-light districts, where prostitutes have little autonomy and may even work in debt bondage, are said to have 10 times the number of HIV positive women as Calcutta, where the DMSC boasts 60,000 members -- girls, guys and switches. Kolkata Network of Positive (KNP+), one of the many groups at the confab, gives HAART to its members, care of DMSC.

That the DMSC welcomed opposition politicians and critics of sex workers in its debates was also seen as a sign of the organization coming into its own. “It was a real show of attitude to invite opponents and detractors of sex workers to this Mela and allow them to use this platform,” Jana said. “I believe this requires a level of confidence and courage.”

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