Kolkata, 21 July 2012: The six-day Alternative International AIDS Conference, dubbed as the Global Hub kicked off today with a pre-event gathering of sex workers from over 43 countries who swamped Swabhumi in vibrant and colourful attires after a short walk through the streets of Salt Lake on Saturday shouting slogans like "Sex work is work".

The XIX International AIDS Conference which begins in Washington DC on Sunday will have a live digital link with the Indian hub overlapping for a few hours after 6pm. Titled as Sex Workers Freedom Festival, the unique event is being hosted and co-hosted by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) and All Indian Network of Sex Workers (AINSW) respectively.

"Travel restrictions are not just for the conference time. Sex workers are permanently denied visas to enter US for work or for residence. They cannot join partners who are US residents and so this is a much bigger issue," said Andrew Hunter, president of NSWP.

"Being the most vulnerable population, sex workers wanted to be a part of the US conference to fight the challenge of HIV across the world but were denied visas," said Bharati De, co-chair and secretary of DMSC, which represents sex workers in Kolkata. Sonagachi model, where sex workers were in the forefront of HIV prevention has been a successful model in the world and the project is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. Community led intervention is a key strategy used by India which reduced new HIV infections in the last 7 years by 40 to 50 per cent by scaling up preventive education campaigns among high risk groups like sex workers, men who have sex with men and injecting drug users.

The Kolkata meeting will deliberate on the "Seven Freedoms" -- the right to move, work, have access to healthcare, participate, organise, be free of violence and discrimination -- without which sex workers say they cannot reduce their vulnerability to HIV.

"Collectivisation of sex workers will improve their bargaining power to negotiate safer sex practices with their clients. As a result, the Indian HIV prevention programme made a significant impact and conferences like this will make sex workers' voices louder and stronger," Dr Smarajit Jana, conference chair, said on the sidelines on Saturday. Held every two years, the International AIDS Conference is returning to the United States for the first time since 1990, after being kept away by laws that barred people with HIV from travelling to the country.

"It is time to neutralize the evil within us. We have to be realistic while tackling anti-trafikking groups, which are pushing our work back," added Andrew Hunter, president of the Global Network of Sex Work Projects.

Khartini Slamah, who is spearheading the Malaysian Sex Workers movement led the pre-conference meeting with her witty comments. "Vienna conference has come with a lot of plans two years back. But they have to be implemented and the communities have to be involved in every level including the decision making level," she concluded.
"Kolkata warmly welcomes sex workers but US govt bans us" Andrew Hunter, President, NSWP

"What was unimaginable a decade back is happening in SWFF at Kolkata" - Dr. Smarajit Jana, Chair, Sex workers Freedom Festival

**Introduction:** The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), which is one of the organisers of the International Conference for sex workers from July 22 to 27 at Swabhumi Kolkata celebrate their work with the community for the last 20 years in Kolkata. Over 900 sex workers from 41 countries are taking part in this conference.

**Preparations:** The preparations for the Kolkata Hub conference began in early December last year and a series of preparatory meetings were held and the DMSC formed various committees to handle multiple activities. These committees have designed tasks that have been set to them which include media relations, Registration, supporting activities at the Global village so on and so forth. There is also a social media team that is reaching out to millions of people through social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter since June this year. DMSC will be providing updates on various happenings that will take place during the conference.

**What to watch out for?:**
- A rally will be organised from Sonakachi on the 24th of July where over 2000 sex workers and supporters are expected to participate.
- The rally will begin at 4 pm and conclude at College street by 5 pm
- Cultural activities by various groups will be carried out at the Global village during the conference
- Film on sex workers will be screened during the conference
- A daily bulletin will be available capturing key moments of the day
- Live video link to the International AIDS Conference in Delhi will be made available

**Expectation from the participants:**
"We are excited about being part of this International conference for sex workers that is happening in India for the very first time. I hope that this conference will help sex workers from different parts of the world to learn from their experience on the ground and replicate it in their own area"- Ms. Shanthamma, Sahabaghini Federation, Karnataka, which boasts of 60,000 sex workers in the state.

"We are ready to show the world that sex workers have the capacity to run the parallel International conference in a developing country.”” Bharati Dey, Convener, Sex workers freedom Festival

Sex workers need the freedom to be more expensive! Right to work.-Mariann, a sex worker from Hungary

Religious stigma is unbearable, a Malaysian sex worker.
Spearheading sex workers rights in India

By Lakshmi, Ashodaya Mysore, India

Swabhumi (Kolkata) 20 July 2012: My name is Lakshmi, I am a female sex workers from Mysore, a district in Karnataka, one of the states in southern India. In 2005, a few of us came together when a lady doctor goaded us and we formed a small organization. We were so scared but slowly we were able to gather many sex workers and soon became we became a big umbrella organization. The lady is none other than Dr Sushena and the the organization is Ashodaya, our own family of male, female and hijra sex workers. Over a period of time we also started Disha, for sex workers living with HIV.

Slowly but surely, we started mobilizing sex workers and soon we became hundreds and hundreds, from a hand few... We started a health clinic in our own CBO office as many were denied services at public hospitals and clinics. We also started a community kitchen and got a drop-in-centre funded and soon Ashodaya has become a meeting point for many of our community women and many have become regular after trainings in condom promotion, community mobilization and other HIV prevention activities which helped them to take care of their own health too.

By then, we have also created links with other Community based organizations of sex workers both in Karnataka and other states and we formed a National body of sex workers. That was six years back and today, I am the president of the All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW). I faced a lot of stigma and I suffered a lot when I tested myself positive. But with the support of all my peers, I not only overcame depression and loneliness but also started a group to support other women in my state who are affected. I came out openly in the Press with my HIV status and now I want to make sure that we all enjoy Freedom from stigma, denial and discrimination in every form. Unlike some other CBOs, we also fight for workers rights and, every May Day, we take out a silent midnight torch rally around the slogan ”My body, My right” in Mysore. Our friends from Bangalore, the Garden City join us. It's just a 2 hour drive.

Today, I feel proud to attend the XIX International AIDS Conference Hub in Kolkata as the president of our Indian body as this is the first time that such a huge number of sex workers from over 40 countries are coming and taking part in this a conference and what better way than to come to Sonagachi, the pioneering project that fought for the rights of sex workers.

I am so excited about it. We are preparing for this for the last one month, eagerly awaiting the BIG event and here we are! On 5th I have travelled to Delhi to do a press conference. Though there were about 20 reporters and camerapersons, they did not show much interest in the subject. But I was surprised to see huge coverage in more than 25 papers in the days following the press meet.
In Karnataka, we have selected 20 representatives from over 15 organisations of sex workers and booked train tickets. It is a 30 hour journey and my friends arrived only now as there was a strike and all trains stopped for a few hours. 20 others are coming from Chennai in another 32 hour journey while the biggest contingent is from Andhra Pradesh as 60 from more than 30 CBOs are on their way. Another 40 from Maharashtra and other high-prevalence states like Manipur and Nagaland will make it about 150 community members from India. Most of them are new to these big conferences and are all excited.

I came early for the press conference yesterday. I was really surprised to see almost 50 people in the Press Club. When the press meet started at 1 pm I could spot only 6 reporters and felt that this would be another damp squib. But within a few minutes the hall was packed. About five channels did separate interviews of Andrew, Ruth and Jana. Today, about 20 newspapers and more than 30 websites covered the news.

I am looking forward to the sessions, especially, the media session. Now-a-days, we are doing a lot of activism on media ethics and we have also complained on a rogue channel as they did a sting on some of the home-based sex workers. The National Broadcasters Standards Association (NBSA) called Kranthi, our network where all the CBOs in Karnataka are part of, to depose and our representatives went to Delhi to argue the case. We are looking forward for the judgment as many sex workers suffered because of crisis triggered by TV.

I am also looking forward for the India festival as we celebrate all our freedoms and I warmly welcome all the foreign delegates and wish them a happy stay in Kolkata.