

Sex Workers Rallying to Protest Google's Funding of Morality Groups

By Bob Johnson, XBIZ.com

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SEATTLE — Sex workers' rights organization SWAAY isn't happy with some of the morality groups Google is supporting and plans to hold a protest outside of the search giant's offices today.

The backlash is in response to Google's announcement of its 2011 corporate giving plan that SWAAY said backs organizations with "questionable human rights records."

"We applaud Google's desire to fight slavery, forced trafficking, and exploitative labor conditions, but their funding recipients include three non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that cause serious harm to sex workers around the world: International Justice Mission, Polaris Project, and Not for Sale," the group's campaign materials reads.

"As front line sex worker support services struggle for funding to serve their communities, it is offensive to watch Google shower millions upon well-heeled conservative and faith-based groups that fight against rights and safety for sex workers."

SWAAY pointed out that the International Justice Mission is an evangelical NGO who "seeks to restore to victims of oppression the things that God intends for them." "The so-called "rescue" work promoted by organizations like IJM translates to actions that are nothing short of violent, neocolonialist oppression against an easy target: brothel workers in developing countries."

The activist organization further cited IJM for using its power to pressure governments to crack down on the whole sex industry as an "anti-trafficking" measure, which leads to violent raids from corrupt police forces in countries like Cambodia, the Philippines, and India with people being beaten and raped.

The Polaris Project and Not for Sale are also targets. SWAAY said both lobby for the further criminalization of all forms of sex work and the sex industry in America and abroad, regardless of whether the workers are consenting adults. "Criminalization isolates and endangers sex workers in serious ways, leading to increased stigma and violence against already-marginalized people. This type of prohibition pushes sex workers away from obtaining the healthcare they need, or from reporting rapes, robberies, and other crimes against them because they fear being arrested themselves," SWAAY said.

SWAAY's demands include an end to Google's funding of any organization that crusades against sex workers' human rights and safety, especially the violent, forcible "rescue" and imprisonment of sex workers in the developing world.

Protesters are also asking for an apology from Google in the form of equal donations to community-based nonprofits that respect all sex workers' rights and dignity by providing non-judgmental services

such as free condoms and safer sex information, medical care including HIV testing and treatment, harm reduction for drug users, counseling and support groups, legal aid, and public education around these issues.

Nonprofit organizations that are being offered as deserving alternatives are: San Francisco's St. James Infirmary, New Orleans's Women With A Vision, New York's Sex Workers Project, India's VAMP, India's Durbar, Cambodia's Women's Network for Unity, and the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers.

SWAAY said sex workers' rights advocates will be protesting in front of Google offices in Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chapel Hill.

The Seattle protest will run on Dec. 21 from 2-4 p.m. at the North end of the Fremont bridge, which is next to Google's waterfront office building.

Sabrina Melmoth, a SWAAY member said, "Google should not be backing NGOs that support human rights for some at the cost of violating the human rights of others. Donors don't have to choose between helping victims of forced trafficking and respecting the rights and self-determination of sex workers — we can do both at the same time. We hope that Google will stand with us in working towards a safer world for every person in sex work, whether those people are there through choice, circumstance, or coercion."

Full campaign information can be found here.

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