Each year since 1988, communities around the world come together on World AIDS Day, December 1st, to raise awareness and show solidarity with those living with HIV. Traditionally it is a time we remember those who have died, and celebrate survival and the important gains that have been made. This year for Thailand, as WAD events around the country are cancelled, many of our thoughts are focused closer to home.

The devastation brought about by the flooding in 14 provinces has been unprecedented. For those in central Bangkok and further south, supply shortages and lighter traffic may have been among the few noticeable impacts, but for many more around the country life has been unavoidably disrupted.

At least 820,000 workers have now lost their means of work and with that their capacity to support families and rebuild. Like other workers, many sex workers have also lost homes, belongings and work and must now prepare for new challenges ahead as attention shifts from relief efforts to post-crisis reconstruction.

Past experience in Thailand and the region has taught us that those who are now faced with no work are vulnerable to exploitation, deteriorating workplace conditions, and the erosion of rights at work as businesses struggle to recover from the economic devastation of the floods, or simply choose to take advantage of the many desperate and dislocated.

Unlike most other workers in Thailand however, basic labour rights and workplace protections barely exist in the sex industry and consequently, sex workers face already high exposure to unsafe and unfair work conditions. The experience of sex workers after the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami sadly reminds us that post-crisis recovery plans may exclude sex workers and that whatever the crisis – be it an HIV epidemic or a natural disaster – sex workers are frequently left without the assistance they need.

The protection of fundamental principles and rights at work such as occupational health and safety including the prevention of HIV, the elimination of discrimination, protection from forced or involuntary labour, and the freedom to associate are human rights belonging to each and every person. Sex workers are entitled to these same rights as other citizens and workers.

In this time of crisis, we all have a role to play in ensuring that rights are not weakened and that recovery efforts support those most in need. As clients, owners, managers, police or authority, sex worker, or the community, we all have an interest in ensuring that the sex industry in Thailand is allowed to be safe and hygienic, and that decent work is protected for all.

This World AIDS Day, the Empower Foundation and SWING join together with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to call for the needs of all workers, in all forms of work and arrangement, to be considered in post-crisis recovery efforts and to ensure that important gains in HIV prevention and the realization of fundamental labour rights are not washed away with the flood waters.

For more information about ILO AIDS and Decent Work:

ILO/AIDS