

# **Statement for Social Service Agencies and Transsexual/Transgendered Organizations on Service Delivery to Transsexual and Transvestite Prostitutes**

Statement prepared by the National Committee on Prostitution, Transsexuality, and HIV, Vancouver, March 2011.

We are a group of transsexuals with a history in prostitution who have been involved in a national meeting on issues related to transsexuality, prostitution, and HIV. Since the mid-1990s, we have all been active in setting up, developing, and evaluating community-based programmes for transsexual and transvestite prostitutes.

Through our work we have identified several areas of concern related to the administration and orientation of programmes for transsexual prostitutes. We feel these problems exist both in agencies that have transsexual-specific programmes as well as organizations that have a significant transsexual clientele, but no formal transsexual programme.

Attitudes towards prostitution make up the first problem. The second problem has to do with agencies using transsexual and transvestite prostitutions of expansion.

There is a prevalent conception of prostitution – within transsexual organizations, and social service agencies – as inherently negative. Prostitution is seen as a “last resort” for individuals who have addictions, who have low self esteem, people who were sexually abused as children, and stigmatized as gender variant youth. Specifically with regards to transsexuals, prostitution is seen as the only occupation available to transsexuals because of social marginalization. For example, social service workers will make a statement such as “Transsexuals are forced to work on the street to pay for their surgery.” Without always knowing it, social service workers are constantly trying to “save” transsexuals and transvestites from prostitution whether in the short or the long term. Exit programmes and “job retraining” programmes for prostitutes represent attempts to get transsexuals and transvestites out of prostitution in the short term. Efforts to remove transsexual and transvestite from prostitution in the long term are often more subtle: for example, transsexual organizations accept prostitutes in “theory,” but often hope that transsexuals will get out of prostitution and go back to school. They do not currently support transsexuals and transvestites who work as prostitutes: in practical terms, while these organizations may have workshops on transsexuals and employment, they do not organize activities for transsexuals who work as prostitutes on their working conditions. These transsexual organizations will often invite lawyers to speak about legal questions concerning transition on the job, but will not invite lawyers to speak about prostitution and the law.

We as a committee see prostitution as a valid form of employment and an integral part of many transsexuals’ cultural identity. We deplore any attempt to “save” transsexuals from the “evil” of prostitution. We find these attitudes actually contribute to the marginalization of

prostitutes from society, as well as the problems transsexuals have with self-esteem, addictions, the high prevalence of HIV amongst transsexual prostitutes, and isolation. We find it especially ironic that non-prostitute transsexuals espouse such negative attitudes of transsexual prostitutes when we consider that a history of transsexuality is a history of prostitution. Transsexuality and prostitution have been welded together in many cultural and class contexts. Historically, transsexual prostitutes engaged in personal, political, and community struggles which have created a social climate in which individuals can change sex more easily. Yet this history has either been forgotten, has not been reclaimed, or has even been silenced. Currently, transsexual prostitutes engage in intimate and sexual relations with tens of thousands of men in this country. This activity contributes to greater openness, appreciation, and understanding of transsexuals in a huge segment of the population. Yet this political contribution to changing social attitudes is unacknowledged and vilified. Non-prostitute transgendered people are too busy celebrating recent passage of human rights legislation to recognize the labour of transsexual and transvestite prostitutes.

These negative attitudes towards prostitutes have dramatic ramifications in relation to the second issue we identify, namely that social service agencies have the potential to use transsexual and transvestite prostitutes for expansion. At the present time, there is both documentation and common knowledge of some of the problems transsexuals and transvestites, and even more specifically street involved transsexuals/transvestites, face in accessing health care and social services. Since the mid-1990s, certain agencies have applied this knowledge in a concrete way, designing programmes targeting this population. We do applaud these initiatives, but we see social services as businesses, which like all businesses, think in terms of money and administration: expansion, getting grants, creating jobs. In some instances, this drive has the potential to be primarily motivated by administration and money, not necessarily the needs of the transsexuals and transvestites designated to be “clients” of the agency. For example, there have been many attempts at starting transsexual specific programs without proper evaluation. The rapid development of transsexual/transvestite specific services over the last 5 years has also meant that as transsexual/transvestite prostitutes, we have not had a chance yet to sit down as a community and evaluate where we’ve been, where we are and where we need to go. A lot of social workers and social service agencies, with overly excited non-prostitute transgendered activists and community workers, jump on any opportunity to start anything anytime at any cost.

To address these problems, we think that a thorough consultation with transsexual and transvestite prostitutes is in order, as opposed to a “broad based” consultation with “transgendered” people. The latter rarely put transsexual prostitutes at the centre of the endeavour, and inevitably result in misrepresentation of the issues of transsexual and transvestite prostitutes and an overrepresentation of the concerns of transsexuals who are on computer listserves. Furthermore, such work needs to ensure that people who currently work as prostitutes are consulted, not just individuals who are ex-prostitutes, or “rehabilitated” prostitutes. If this consultation contacts a wide diversity of transsexual/transvestite prostitutes, the information will be gathered from prostitutes who are not primarily white and who may not have English as a mother tongue: these are the majority of transsexual/transvestite prostitutes,

especially in Canada's three largest cities: Toronto, Montréal, and Vancouver. If such individuals do not make up the majority of the people contacted, the consultation is unacceptable.

With respect to negative attitudes concerning prostitution, we would like to reiterate that transgendered and non-transgendered community organizers and social service workers should start investing their money and energies in priorities deemed relevant by prostitutes rights' activities. They need to listen to what prostitutes rights activists in Canada have articulated for over two decades now. Organizations and workers should prioritize:

- The recognition and validation of prostitution as a legitimate form of employment
- Supporting and lobbying for the decriminalization of prostitution, including the repeal of the pimping laws, which are regularly used to stigmatize and criminalize the personal relationships of prostitutes
- The condemnation of laws which criminalize youth of whatever age involved in prostitution
- Supporting people who want to work as prostitutes; to provide them with the resources needed to work safely; to go where they work to offer these services
- In service delivery – counselling, street outreach, referrals – to have the courage to include full discussion on the working conditions of prostitutes. This work would include prices, hours and places to work, specific working conditions, work options (different places to work, taking a break from prostitution).

## **Conclusion**

We have outlined two problems in terms of service delivery for transsexual/transvestite prostitutes – negative attitudes towards prostitution and the potential for agency expansion. We have also given some concrete suggestions for workers and agencies to counter the negative attitudes and practices towards prostitution. We hope you will incorporate these reflections as part of a broader commitment to progressive programme and policy development related to transsexual and transvestite prostitutes.

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