

# PSSP

## Prostitutes' Safe Sex Project

### BACKGROUND

The Prostitutes' Safe Sex Project was formed in 1986 by prostitutes who wanted to stop AIDS and to stop the blaming of prostitutes for spreading AIDS. PSSP pooled its resources with Maggie's, a self-help organization for prostitutes that, like PSSP, was started by the Canadian Organization for the Rights of Prostitutes. The result was a grant from the City of Toronto Board of Health in 1989 to allow Maggie's to operate PSSP. Since their inception PSSP and Maggie's have seen it as essential that prostitution be decriminalized in order to help stop AIDS.

We have grown considerably since 1989 and we now receive funding from the Ontario Ministry of Health, Health and Welfare Canada, the Ontario Trillium Foundation and various private sources. Despite considerable growing pains, we remain committed to the decriminalization of prostitution and to the principle that the organization be owned and run by sex workers. To this end our constitution ensures sex worker control of the membership, board of directors and staff of Maggie's.

PSSP is a member of the Canadian AIDS Society, the Ontario AIDS Network and the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights.

### OUR PHILOSOPHY

Prostitutes are not part of the problem in the AIDS epidemic; we are part of the solution. Because prostitutes often have sex with hundreds of people we are perfectly situated to play the role of safe sex educators. Instead of trying to stop prostitution (an approach which pushes prostitution underground making AIDS education and safe sex practice more difficult), societies should be providing prostitutes with the education and means to promote safe sex. Despite the lack of support for safer prostitution, many prostitutes in North America are already front line workers in the battle against AIDS.

### PSSP POLICIES

#### PROSTITUTION

Prostitution is a job, different from other jobs only because of laws which make it next to impossible to work legally and attitudes which see selling sex as somehow more degrading or harmful than the countless other ways people degrade or endanger themselves to make a living.

#### WHOREPHOBIA

Whorephobia is the name we give to the illogical and irrational

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attitudes that lead to the hatred, persecution and prosecution of prostitutes. Some prostitutes must also cope with their own internalized whorephobia, which leads to shame and low self esteem. This is particularly a problem for people who engage in "survival sex" due to a lack of choice. It is this lack of choice, and whorephobia, that are the problems, not prostitution.

#### DECRIMINALIZATION

Laws against prostitution leave prostitutes vulnerable to exploitation, violence and disease. These laws disempower prostitutes and push prostitution underground making AIDS education more difficult. When laws against street prostitutes are being actively enforced, and prostitutes are being fined and jailed, we are more desperate for money to pay our fines, and make up for lost time. People who are desperate are much less empowered to say no to a customer who doesn't want to use a condom. Laws which prevent the running of indoor prostitution businesses prevent employers of prostitutes from promoting safer sex to their employees and customers since they are forced to maintain the fiction that they are running an "escort" service. Prostitution must be decriminalized in order to remove the laws that are a barrier to AIDS prevention.

#### HIGH RISK GROUPS

Prostitutes are not a high risk group, and prostitution is not a high risk activity. AIDS is caused by a virus that is transmitted by having unsafe sex or sharing a needle. It is not transmitted by money, or by "promiscuity". Prostitutes who get AIDS do not get it because they are prostitutes, they get it because they have shared a needle, or had unsafe sex. In North America prostitutes are more likely to get AIDS from boyfriends than customers because, like most people, they wrongly believe they do not need to use condoms with someone they love. Prostitution can be just as safe as sex for free, as most prostitutes in North America have already learned.

#### BLAMING PROSTITUTES

The constant focus on prostitution and AIDS in the public mind misleads people as to who gets AIDS and how. It contributes to the dangerous belief that AIDS is a problem only for those who have many partners. It also leads to calls for forced measures, such as mandatory testing, quarantine and health checks, to prevent the spread of AIDS. These measures, like anti-prostitution laws, push prostitutes away from agencies that could provide needed information, at the same time that they give the public the false impression that something is being done. They encourage the public to count on the government to protect them from AIDS, rather than learning to protect themselves.

Researchers, politicians, journalists and others who focus on prostitution as the problem, rather than on unsafe sex and needle use, are irresponsibly contributing to the spread of AIDS, and the violations of human rights.

#### PROSTITUTES AS VECTORS

Prostitutes, and women generally, are seen as the source of disease, but we never hear of the men who give them disease being called vectors. In Africa studies have found high rates of infection among prostitutes, but the rates among the truck drivers who use prostitutes are always much lower. Yet we rarely hear that a small number of men are spreading AIDS to a large number of women, rather than the other way around.

In the case of AIDS, male-to-female transmission is far more efficient than female-to-male, putting women at greater risk than men. And it is the men who generally refuse to use condoms; we have never heard of a woman holding a gun to a man's head and forcing him to have sex without a condom, but we have heard of the reverse. Yet it is still the women who are being blamed.

When the role of men in the spread of AIDS is recognized, it is still prostitution that is blamed, rather than the economic inequality that makes **all women** vulnerable to male requests for unsafe sex.

#### HIV POSITIVE PROSTITUTES

A prostitute who is HIV positive and continues to work is only a danger to someone who chooses to have unsafe sex with her. The existence of HIV positive prostitutes is not justification for urging people to avoid prostitutes any more than the existence of HIV positive gay men or hemophiliacs is justification for urging people to avoid these groups. Rather it is a good reason for educating customers to use condoms.

Of course if society would prefer that HIV positive prostitutes not work, it would be cheaper, and more humane, to give them workers compensation than to lock them up. After all, they are having sex because they need the money, not because they want to spread disease.

#### PEER COUNSELLING

The most effective way to educate prostitutes about AIDS prevention is to recruit whore-positive prostitutes to do it. Working prostitutes know the language of the business, they know how and where to reach people, and, because they have incorporated safer sex into their business, they are good role models. It is not sufficient to be non-judgmental of prostitution; it is essential to provide encouragement for people to look at prostitution as a legitimate job that they can perform responsibly, with pride. Prostitutes should receive the message that "Prostitutes are Safe Sex Pros" who are playing a beneficial role in society by promoting safer sex.

#### VICTIM COUNSELLING

The attitude that prostitutes are victims who need to be saved from prostitution is a cornerstone of a system of legal and social persecution of prostitutes. Agencies which hold this attitude contribute to the victimization of prostitutes, and they reinforce the feelings of worthlessness that some prostitutes have. People who are made to feel worthless, are less likely to be concerned about protecting their health, or the health of others.

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### **PSSP POLICY ON THE FORCED TESTING AND QUARANTINE OF PROSTITUTES**

#### **BACKGROUND:**

There is a widespread and long-standing assumption that prostitutes, because they have many sex partners, are a source of disease, and that prostitutes transmit disease to their customers and, through them, to the rest of the population. This perception leads to the blaming of prostitutes for sexually transmitted disease, and to calls for the forced testing, treatment and quarantine of prostitutes as measures to stop disease spread.

#### **PSSP OPPOSES THE FORCED TESTING OF PROSTITUTES FOR STDs OR HIV ANTIBODIES BECAUSE:**

##### **1. THERE IS NO STATISTICAL EVIDENCE TO JUSTIFY THESE MEASURES:**

There is not a single documented case of a prostitute getting HIV from a client, or of a client getting HIV from a prostitute, in Canada. Those prostitutes who have tested positive, and they are a minority of prostitutes, have generally either shared needles or had unsafe sex with a non-paying partner who shared needles. In other words, they were not infected during the course of their work as prostitutes.

There are no men in Canada, and less than 100 men in the United States, who claim contact with a prostitute as their only risk factor. There is no way of knowing, however, if these men are hiding other risk behaviour such as needle-sharing, unprotected anal intercourse, or unprotected intercourse with a woman they had sex with for free.

We do know that a number of needle-sharing women in New York City and San Francisco have been infected with HIV since as early as 1977, and many of these women have had unsafe sex with hundreds of men in exchange for drugs or money to buy drugs. If these women were effectively transmitting HIV to their sexual contacts, there would be far more heterosexual male AIDS patients.

There are a larger number of men who claim contact with a woman as their only risk factor in some African countries, but there are also a larger number of males in these countries with untreated genital ulcers. Ulcers provide a point of entry for infections. There have also been problems in these countries of inadequate blood screening, re-use of unsterilized needles in clinics, and strong prohibitions against male-to-male sexual contact, which leads to denial of the behaviour.

Certainly HIV and other STDs can be transmitted by people engaging in commercial sex in North America, but prostitution accounts for only a very tiny percentage of this transmission (less than 5% in the U.S. according to the Centers for Disease Control). The vast majority of STDs are transmitted by free sex.

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**2. THERE IS AN ABUNDANCE OF EVIDENCE TO SUGGEST THAT MOST CANADIAN PROSTITUTES ARE ALREADY TAKING THE PRECAUTIONS NECESSARY TO PREVENT HIV AND STD INFECTIONS, AND THAT THESE PRECAUTIONS ARE EFFECTIVE.**

The lack of documented cases of people infected during commercial sex transactions is not least among this evidence. A report of the Federal Government (the 1985 Fraser Report) notes that "most [prostitutes] are well aware of the problems associated with STDs, visit medical clinics regularly, and take precautionary measures...prostitutes of all people in society have a real interest in seeing that they are not infected." A 1985 study of 109 prostitutes in three Western Canadian cities found that 88% said they used condoms; this was before there was even much talk about the possibility of heterosexual transmission, and certainly prior to any attempt to educate prostitutes.

Much is made of the higher rates of STD infections among juveniles who work as prostitutes, but it is never mentioned that the rate of infection among young people as a whole is very high, and that it is quite possible that many young prostitutes are being infected by their non-paying peers whom they are less likely to use condoms with. Nor is it mentioned that juveniles are rarely professional prostitutes, they make up a minority of prostitutes and they are certainly not representative of prostitutes as a whole. It is unfair to blame all prostitutes (and all juveniles) for the activities of a reckless minority.

**3. FORCED TESTING AND/OR QUARANTINE OF PROSTITUTES COULD LEAD TO AN INCREASE OF HIV AND STD INFECTIONS AMONG PROSTITUTES.** If customers believe the government is insuring that infected prostitutes are not working they will be less inclined to feel a need to use condoms. Prostitutes are able to get customers to comply with condom use at present because these men fear getting a disease from the prostitute. This would not be the case if the customers believed prostitutes were disease-free.

Forced testing would also drive prostitution further underground making education more difficult. Prostitutes would be less likely to go voluntarily for health checks if they feared violations of their personal liberty.

**4. FORCED TESTING AND/OR QUARANTINE OF PROSTITUTES COULD LEAD TO AN INCREASE OF HIV AND STD INFECTIONS AMONG THE CLIENTS OF PROSTITUTES.** It would not be possible to test a prostitute after each client to determine whether she had acquired something that could be passed on to someone else. A person could be infected with HIV several months before a test would detect antibodies.

It would also be impossible to track down and test everyone who sells or may sell sexual services. So if clients assumed the government was screening out infected prostitutes, and refused to take precautions, they could be in for some unpleasant surprises. So could their wives and other sex partners.

**5. FORCED TESTING AND/OR QUARANTINE OF PROSTITUTES COULD LEAD TO AN INCREASE OF HIV AND STD INFECTIONS AMONG THE REST OF THE SEXUALLY ACTIVE POPULATION.** The continued focus on prostitutes as the vectors for STDs among heterosexuals leads people to believe that

to avoid AIDS they need only limit their number of partners, and avoid people, like prostitutes, who have many partners. Most of the women who have AIDS in North America, however, got it from doing just that. They were infected by their steady, non-paying partners.

People must learn that AIDS is not caused by "promiscuity". Someone who has unsafe sex with only one person could be at far greater risk than someone who has safer sex with many partners. Instead of continuously focusing on the remote possibility that a man might get AIDS from a prostitute in Canada, the media, politicians, and educators would be more responsible to focus on the danger to women in having unsafe sex. Why is it that this greater danger is ignored? And why is it that no concern is ever expressed for a prostitute who might get AIDS from a man? Why would people rather lock up HIV-infected prostitutes, than give them workmen's compensation so they needn't work? Perhaps the answers to these questions can shed some light on why we even have an AIDS epidemic.

#### **6. MEASURES DIRECTED SOLELY AT PROSTITUTES ARE DISCRIMINATORY.**

There is no justification for the forced testing of prostitutes that cannot be used to justify the testing of all sexually active people. In fact, if anyone was to be tested it would make more sense to test sexually active people who have sex for free since they account for the transmission of far more STDs, and they are far less likely to use condoms.

But, of course, this would not stop AIDS either. If people believed that those who were infected were being isolated, they would not see a need to use condoms. And because it would be impossible to contain a disease like AIDS, anything that discourages people from using condoms would only hasten the spread of AIDS. Rather than expecting the government to save them, people must learn to take care of their own health.

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### PSSP POSITION ON DOING SAFE SEX EDUCATION TO PROSTITUTES

#### INTRODUCTION:

The Prostitutes Safe Sex Project began in late 1985 as a project of the Canadian Organization for the Rights of Prostitutes. We were concerned at that time that prostitutes were being unfairly blamed for the spread of AIDS. We were also concerned that our rights would be further violated in the name of protecting the public health. It is not an understatement to say that the rights of prostitutes are not well protected in a society where most people still believe, wrongly, that we are criminals. To this day, the police and others argue that prostitution must be stopped, and, at the very least, prostitutes should be forced to be tested for HIV, in order to stop AIDS. (It's ironic that at the same time we're hassled for leaving condoms all over.)

The reality is that laws that prevent prostitutes from working legally also prevent education about safer prostitution. But despite the fact that prostitutes and operators of prostitution businesses cannot openly promote safer prostitution, many prostitutes have managed to respond quickly and effectively to the threat of AIDS. Condom use in the sex trade is the norm. Even before AIDS female street prostitutes were making their customers wear safes to prevent other STDs. Agreeing to work without a safe is seen in the business as undercutting (not to mention crazy) and if prostitutes hear someone is doing this the offender is pressured to stop.

#### WHY DO OUTREACH TO PROSTITUTES?

If prostitutes are already having safer sex, why bother with an AIDS education program for prostitutes? There are many reasons:

- 1) There are always people in the business who are ill-informed, usually because they have just arrived from a small town where AIDS information is not easily available, or because they are younger people for whom access to safe sex information is difficult. Economic downturns also lead more novices into the business.
- 2) While most prostitutes know enough to use condoms, some don't know the difference between lambskin and latex, others don't know the right kind of lube to use, how to use nonoxynol-9 effectively, how to clean needles if they or anyone they know shoots drugs, how and why to avoid other STDs, how to assess the risk of having unsafe sex with a lover, etc... Gaps in knowledge are greater in smaller centers because there are fewer AIDS cases, and therefore less media discussion about how to avoid AIDS.

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3) Prostitutes need help educating those customers and other sex partners who don't want to use condoms. Because most prostitutes have contact with hundreds of men a year, they are well situated to play the role of educators. An outreach project can provide prostitutes with the information and skills they need to do this education.

4) Some prostitutes, especially those most desperate (often drug addicts), are willing to have unsafe sex if a customer insists.

## HOW TO DO OUTREACH TO PROSTITUTES

### 1) Find out what information male and female prostitutes need to know to avoid AIDS.

The main messages are:

a) **Always use condoms for fucking with tricks and treats** (that's customers and lovers). Convincing female prostitutes of the need to use safes with their treats is not easy. It helps when they know that most prostitutes who are HIV infected were infected by boyfriends, and that these boyfriends had usually been IV users or bisexual.

b) **Never share needles, or anything else that might draw blood, unless it has been disinfected with bleach first.**

c) Because prostitutes usually have many partners, they usually want more than this basic info. Info about STD detection, prevention and treatment is also very useful.

### 2) Involve people who know the life to deliver the message.

It makes as much sense to have public health nurses or social workers do outreach to prostitutes as it does to have them educating gay men about safe sex. Of course these people are better than nobody, and in some cases nurses or social workers can be very effective. But generally, it is easier to teach prostitutes and ex-prostitutes how to do outreach to their peers, than it is to teach non-prostitutes about how to find, make contact with, and relate to prostitutes in a non-judgemental way. Working prostitutes are the best choice because, as individuals who have successfully incorporated safer sex into their work, we make good role models. It is empowering to be treated as an equal, rather than as a client who needs help.

### 3) Deliver the message in a positive, non-judgmental manner.

Nobody likes to be assumed to be ignorant. And nobody likes to be dumped on. If the approach is "You people need to start using condoms so you won't spread AIDS" people will be insulted. If the message is "Prostitution is bad, but if you must do it, use a condom" the good news may well be thrown out with the bad. After all, how can something that is bad be done responsibly?

We have found that giving prostitutes cards and pamphlets to give to their customers is an effective way of getting around insulting someone's intelligence. They can take the material and look at it later without having to admit ignorance. (Prostitutes are particularly defensive about our AIDS knowledge, since we've

been dumped on by the media so much.) Then they can pass the material on to tricks, treats, or other prostitutes.

We've also found that materials and buttons that say things like "I'm a Safe Sex Pro" or "Safe Sex Ho" (Ho is a street word for whore), are well received. It appeals to our sense of professional pride and it helps us feel good about the role we play training our tricks to have safer sex. It's rare that we get credit for being front line workers in the fight against AIDS.

If people who aren't practicing safer sex see that having safer sex gets a positive response, they are more likely to change their practice than if they get dumped on for spreading AIDS.

**4) Get support from the community for a "Safer Prostitution" campaign.** The safe sex message must be reinforced by the media, the police, social workers, and everyone else who has contact with prostitutes and their customers. Unfortunately, this brings us back to the problem of the law. Because prostitution is only quasi-legal, the media feels obliged to condemn prostitutes. Most social service agencies see their role as saving prostitutes from prostitution. And, of course, the police are expected to arrest prostitutes, not encourage them to practice safer sex.

Some Toronto police officers have been giving prostitutes encouragement for wearing "Safe Sex Ho" buttons, but others have been threatening to use the buttons, condoms and other materials as evidence of criminal activity. One woman was told she'd be charged with communicating for the purpose of prostitution simply for wearing a button. Inspector James Clark of the Morality Bureau sent PSSP a letter confirming that our material will be used as evidence against prostitutes. Escort services are also in a difficult position because they will be busted if they admit to being involved in prostitution. And with the recent passage of Bill C-61 (the freeze and seize law) they stand to lose all their property. Even if police don't act on these threats, the possibility that they might have a stifling effect on attempts to promote safer sex.

In New South Wales, Australia prostitution has been largely decriminalized, and the brothel industry has embraced the promotion of safer sex. In order to effectively promote safer prostitution in Canada, prostitution must be decriminalized here too. People involved in outreach to prostitutes must make decriminalization a priority.