

# PSSP

## Prostitutes' Safe Sex Project

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### 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

The Safe Sex Professionals

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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.