



women against violence
against women

Stepping Out of the Binary:

Deepening the Dialogue on
Prostitution

Vancouver B.C.
September 2008

Stepping Out of the Binary: Deepening the Dialogue on Prostitution

Preamble:

This document was developed during a two-year collaborative process between the staff, board, volunteers and practicum students who were members of Vancouver Women Against Violence Against Women Rape Crisis Centre between 2006 and 2008.

As the prostitution industry became much more visible in the world and in Vancouver, WAVAW recognized a need to clarify its perspective on prostitution and discover the framework within which to hold the range of views expressed by the members of the agency; views that were representative of those being expressed in the community.

In order to articulate that perspective, the organization entered into a strategic process of thinking together. This paper documents that process. It is a description of the thinking of the members of the organization at the time of writing, supported by supplemental research and information.

“Stepping Out of the Binary: Deepening the Dialogue on Prostitution” was written, researched and produced by WAVAW staff member Stephanie Reifferscheid in collaboration with the following members of WAVAW: Tracey Mann, Lisa Shapiro, Kim Hakstaad, Jacqueline Wilson, Michaela Johnson, Irene Tsepnopoulos-Elhaimer, Cherlyn MacKay, Dalya Israel, Manijeh Ghaffari, Mysha Dewar-McClelland, Kamilla Singh, Monica Singh, Khaleda Ebrahimi, Darla Laughlin, Sarah Davies, Nina Sekhon, Melissa Medjuck, Anna Pippus, Volunteers and Practicum students.

WAVAW thanks UBC Centre for Women and Gender Studies for the funding, resources and opportunity to draft this document, while participating in their spring 2008 Community Visitor Program.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Dialogue so Far	Page 5
Women's Socio-Political Conditions	Page 9
The Institution of Prostitution	Page 11
Women and Girls in Prostitution	Page 14
What about choice?	Page 16
Effects of Prostitution on Women in the Industry	Page 17
Transitioning out of Prostitution	Page 19
Analysis	Page 21
2008 Statement on Prostitution	Page 23



Vancouver's Sex Trade, 2010

Groups hurry to change the law, and how business is done.

By Peter Tupper Published: August 12, 2008

...As Vancouver readies itself for the eyes of the world for the 2010 Olympics, the city tries to recover from the stigma of association with the Pickton murders and the Downtown Eastside. Both tragedies are connected to prostitution, but while some groups want to decriminalize sex work to make it safer, others are vehemently opposed to changing the laws, saying it would increase the exploitation of vulnerable women and children....

... "And the escort job market is so tight that as they enter, generally they're younger, more beautiful, more marketable, and inevitably someone else will lose their job, and be pushed out onto the street. This elimination of the safe work environment and the undermining of the stability of our industry is creating the environment that's allowing workers to go missing and be killed at levels that are just ridiculous," says [Susan] Davis (of the West Coast Co-operative of Sex Industry Professionals)

...Irene Tsepnpoulos-Elhaimer, executive director of Women Against Violence Against Women, says, "The laws, as they now stand, don't protect women in the mainstream, so we don't believe that the laws for prostitution being changed will protect women in that industry."

"There is no doubt that the winners here are the pimps, the organized crime and, frankly, the state. If we're really looking at ending violence against women, why do we cut funding to women's centres, why do we marginalize women's organizations, rape crisis centres, and why does the federal government put out a budget that mentions women six times and [sic] corporations 120 times?" (Tsepnpoulos-Elhaimer)...

Click here for complete article:
<http://thetyee.ca/News/2008/08/12/SexTrade/>

The Dialogue So Far

Introduction:

In recent years, some women involved in the prostitution industry have been calling for changes to the legal, social and physical conditions in which they generate income to live their lives. They explain that they are regularly and violently assaulted, many have gone missing and many have been murdered. They are treated with disdain and disregard by the men who pay them, those who profit from their labour and by the public at large. In the 2008 Report from Surrey Women's Centre, "*Every Life Matters: a report on the working conditions of street sex workers in Surrey B.C.*" women describe being spit on and having garbage thrown on them. Women in the industry talk about how they are treated as mere objects. They demand equal rights and accountability from the police. They name violence and lack of economic security as fundamental realities that must be addressed. See www.cncew.ca, <http://www.sisyphe.org>, <http://www.bccew.ca> for more discussion on this issue.

Between the late 1980's and the mid 1990's, 65 women were reported as missing from the downtown eastside of Vancouver. Many of the women were engaged in survival sex work and many are Aboriginal. For years, the Vancouver Police virtually ignored the information. Throughout that time, emergency alarms were raised regularly by family, community and even some individual police officers. Report on report was filed with police. All of the women had been marginalized by poverty, racism and/or criminalization as survival sex workers. In the process they were made invisible and, as we discovered later, many were brutally murdered. An arrest, trial and conviction in 2007 have not ended the violence that has been disproportionately targeted at women involved in prostitution. In late 2008, women in prostitution are still being held hostage and reported as missing.

Dialogue ensued throughout Canada and Vancouver on the issue of the prostitution industry, purportedly to find solutions to the dangers experienced by women involved. With the upcoming world Olympic Games, Vancouver has been a particularly active site for action and advocacy on prostitution. The Mayor of the day implemented a Civil City initiative that effectively criminalized poor and homeless people in the City, including women involved in street prostitution, despite the Mayor's plans for a drug replacement scheme targeted to that particular population. Essentially, he began a program for *Cleaning up before the company arrives in 2010*, but has done virtually nothing to provide housing and other supports for poor people in Vancouver. Vancouver's local Member of Parliament in Ottawa organized two all party committees to review legislation surrounding prostitution activities, as a form of action by the Federal Government to end violence against women involved in prostitution.

Over the previous decade, political attacks and pressures had fragmented the collective voices of activists, distancing them from their common values, separating political allies from each other, and damaging solidarity amongst us. Much political analysis, too, became individualized and decontextualized, resting with either individuals or with individual organizations. Such fragmentation shows itself very clearly in the current public dialogue and debate on prostitution

Solutions/Responses:

Solutions to the dangers of prostitution were quickly funneled into legalistic responses alone. Some women in prostitution, along with some academic and legal allies launched a campaign to change legislation, arguing the changes would increase safety for those involved in the industry, that the males who were the buyers wouldn't require women to go into dangerous isolated areas if the men weren't threatened by criminalization. This group advocate for the decriminalization of the entire industry, for its recognition as simply one more form of trade in the free market place, to be unfettered by restrictions or legislation. They opened a Sex Worker Cooperative and continue to lobby for a Federal exemption in order to open a Cooperative run Brothel in Vancouver, in time to profit from the 2010 Olympics. One high profile woman in the industry argued publicly that they should get the exemption in time for the Olympics because they deserve to make good money from the Olympics like everyone else.

Vancouver City organized the two-year long Living in Community Initiative, a dialogue process between sex worker organizations, the business community, the police and the public. The project was designed to look at ways that would lessen the marginalization of women in prostitution and the impact of the prostitution industry on the community. A local group of law activists interviewed women in prostitution and produced a research report that resulted in mostly legalistic recommendations despite the deplorable social conditions of the women's lives that were revealed during the research. For more information on the research, visit: <http://www.pivotlegal.org/pdfs/BeyondDecrimAbridgedVersion.pdf>

Early on, a few feminist organizations raised their voices of caution and of outrage; organizations such as the Canadian Feminist Association for International Action, Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter, the Coalition against Trafficking in Women and the Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres. Joined later by some other feminist organizations, by some organizations representing women formerly involved in prostitution and by some Aboriginal Women's organizations, they are calling for the end of prostitution. They argue that prostitution is a form of violence against women. They demand an end to criminalizing women involved in the prostitution industry, and for the criminal justice system to hold men accountable for crimes against women, by criminalizing those who pay for sex and those who profit from the industry. To date, no feminist anti-violence organizations have publicly disagreed with that response. For more thoughts, visit: www.sisyphe.org (sisyphe.info), <http://www.catwinternational.org>, <http://www.CASAC.ca>, www.fafia-afai.org, www.rapereliefshelter.bc.ca, <http://www.breakingfree.net>.

These and other feminist organizations, including WAVAW, have long challenged the police and the criminal justice system to be accountable to women, to take women seriously, to treat sexual violence as the crime it is, to improve their system so it is open and accessible to all women. Feminists continue to challenge government to establish measures that would create substantive equality for all women, to provide proper housing and supports for all citizens and more options for women to improve our lives. Through their public education work, they challenge society to shift its attitudes towards women, including those who have been criminalized, and to really value women as full human beings, deserving of respect, dignity, social and human rights.

WAVAW's Responses:

WAVAW also recognizes that women in the prostitution industry are particularly oppressed, marginalized and targeted for violence. Over the years, WAVAW engaged in a number of initiatives to increase their awareness and to support and advocate for prostituted women. Then in 2006, the organization joined in the Living in Community dialogues around the City, hoping to instill some critical questions into the dialogues, about changing the social conditions of women's lives that leave women vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation; what prostitution means in the global arena; the connection to the larger issues of women's equality.

We were not hearing about actions our governments were willing to take that were not simply legalistic in nature, nor were we hearing about strategies for supporting women to transition out of prostitution. Instead we heard about cuts in funding to the few organizations that provided support services to women and men wanting to exit the prostitution industry. We witnessed the lack of police and courts attention to violence against women of all socio-economic groups. We heard arguments in the community that focused only on legalistic responses to violence against women in prostitution, without any consideration of foundational issues such as transitional services, housing, childcare, counselling, adequate income, employment, community services, resources and real choices for women. We experienced more and more fragmentation and dismantling of women's services.

Talk around WAVAW revealed that staff held a variety of perspectives and opinions about sex work. No one view was held by all, although many of the various viewpoints are grounded in the 25 years of knowledge and experience gathered from work with women across the socio-economic and cultural spectrum of our society, including women and girls who were involved in prostitution. In those 25 years, we have talked with and worked with at least 87,000 women and girls and other allies. Their voices, along with the voices of former and current WAVAW members, form the feminist, anti-oppression framework of the organization.

"I don't think any women will disagree with this. WAVAW's vision is for women to have wholistic lives. The title of the paper is very important (i.e. the binary); encouraging different ways of thinking. Within the community there will be little difficulty with this as the women choose what to do. "
(WAVAW Member)

As an organization that prides itself on inclusion and diversity, our views on prostitution range across the spectrum of feminism. We decided therefore to expand the frame of our perspective in an attempt to incorporate those views. While we were in the process of developing our agency perspective, we experienced a number of challenges from feminist organizations and others. We were challenged to remain silent when we expressed particular views during some critical meetings with politicians. We were also challenged for not speaking up specifically for a particular side of the decriminalize-criminalize debate. We quickly recognized the fragmentation that can happen when discussions as important and complex as this become simplified into two-point debates; fragmentation that can only deter and halt our larger goal of equal value and respect being accorded all women.

Stepping Out of the Binary: Deepening the Dialogue on Prostitution

Capturing the Conversations:

Hoping to open up the public discussion well beyond the two-point debate of ‘decriminalize or not’, the organization started a dialogue amongst our own members. We held a series of nine Dialogue Cafes for volunteers, board members, regular staff, relief staff and practicum students, which were taped for later analysis. Many different women participated. The dialogues confirmed the complexity and diversity of our views, a diversity that is both representative of our society and includes deeply considered feminist thought. Through the process, WAVAW’s feminist anti-oppression analysis was reiterated and some agreements emerged from the agency members; agreements about our value of honouring all women, about sexist and racist oppression, about the socio-political-economic conditions of women’s lives, and the power of violence against women, among other agreements.

“I feel our final position must focus on our stance against violence against women and toward attitudinal change (big picture sex industry or prostitution industry) to ensure we remain an inclusive and accessible organization to all women.” (WAVAW Member)

The process of discovery continued with filtering the perspectives raised during the café dialogues through WAVAW’s analytical framework. In early 2008, the organization participated in the Community Visitor Program at UBC Centre for Women’s and Gender Studies’. The program provided WAVAW with some critical resources and opportunity to research and think about frameworks in which the perspectives articulated by WAVAW members could be incorporated - frameworks that would be consistent with WAVAW’s mission, vision, and values. UBC professors and graduate students generously offered questions, knowledge, perspectives, suggestions for approach, authors and research to consider - all which proved to be very helpful in the project. Most critically, the project’s framework is grounded in the knowledge and analyses provided by women in and outside of the prostitution industry, other community members and activists. This information was gathered from WAVAW’s work with individual women, from community panels, media articles, internet blogs, conferences, individual conversations, videos of related events and other sources.

Statements, opinions, positions, research and debates on prostitution have been televised, reported, published, posted on websites and on blogs, some quite acrimonious in nature. Even while the public debate has focused on legalistic arguments, many of the public voices have acknowledged the social-political conditions in which women in prostitution negotiate their lives. But, the language used to describe the behaviour/activities of those engaged in prostitution, is often challenged and raises sensitivities in listeners and in participants of the dialogues. Women are identified as sex workers, as sex trade workers, as prostitutes, as prostituted women, as survivors of prostitution, as victims of prostitution among other descriptors, each of which evokes particular assumptions. The emotional sensitivity invoked by the specific language demonstrates how deeply the issues affect us, how close to our hearts and spirits they are.

Rather than frame the discussion by first establishing the descriptors that are congruent with a particular position, the language in this document will include a mix across the range of phrasing/ descriptors and will not attempt to address the descriptors/language. Instead, the discussion here will be an attempt to create a framework for discussions about the subject of prostitution; a framework that is in agreement with WAVAW’s feminist, anti-violence, anti-oppression perspective. Compatible language and descriptors should emerge out of the larger framework.

Women's Socio-Political Conditions

Violence Against Women:

The International Centre for Research on Women (@: <http://www.icrw.org>) tells us that violence against women occurs in epidemic proportions in countries around the world:

- At least one in five women worldwide suffer rape or attempted rape
- Between 10 percent and 69 percent of women report having been assaulted by an intimate male partner at some time in their lives, according to surveys conducted in various countries.
- Between 10 percent and 15 percent of women report that they have been forced to have sex with their intimate partner.
- Sexual violence has been a strategy in nearly all recent armed conflicts
- Women also are extremely vulnerable in post-conflict situations, especially in refugee camps. In the Rwandan camps in 1994, it was reported that every woman and girl past puberty had been sexually assaulted

In Canada (from: www.endingviolence.org):

- Every 7 minutes, a woman or child is sexually assaulted, almost always by a man.
- Every week, 1 more woman is murdered by her intimate male partner.
- Women are about 8 times more likely than men to experience violence in relationships.
- In 2004, approximately 653,000 women in Canada had been physically or sexually assaulted by a spouse at least once during the previous 5 years.
- One in three girls and one in six boys will experience some form of unwanted sexual contact before they reach age 16.
- 40% of women in Canada have been sexually assaulted
- Women make up 98% of spousal violence victims of kidnapping/hostage-taking and sexual assault.
- Three times as many Aboriginal women as non-Aboriginal women are victims of violence by their intimate partners.
- In 2005, 54% of Aboriginal women reported potentially life-threatening forms of violence and sexual assault in their intimate relationships.
- Only 8% of sexual assaults are reported to police.

This is the environment in which women live our lives. This is the context within which we make choices for our survival. As one form of violence against women, sexual assault clearly demonstrates the misogyny or hatred of women that abounds in our country and our world. Sexual assault is intended to rob women of our sense of security, of our power and of our spirits. Since sexual assault is targeted mostly at women by mostly men, it is in fact a Hate Crime against women; a crime that the Canadian state refuses to acknowledge.

WAVAW's vision is for a society free of violence, where all women are valued fully and have all resources and options available to them to develop their lives. WAVAW holds a feminist anti-oppression analysis that recognizes that our society is based in a sexist, racist, classist foundation; a capitalist structure that maintains privilege in the hands of a few white men. We recognize that violence against women is the direct result of oppression of women by the state through individual men and through the police. Violence is used to maintain power and to control women and other marginalized groups.

As a weapon of genocide, violence against women is used to annihilate entire societies through war and other forms of colonialism and imperialism. The form of that violence always

Stepping Out of the Binary: Deepening the Dialogue on Prostitution

includes sexual violence, attacking women at the core of our life-giving power, attempting to kill our woman-ness, our woman spirit, through rape and impregnation with children of the enemy culture. These actions reify the culturally determined position of male economic privilege and entitlement to power and control of resources, one of which is women's bodies.

Women's Economic Inequality:

A disturbing picture of the inequality women experience is revealed in the 2008 report 'STILL WAITING FOR JUSTICE: Provincial policies and gender inequality in BC 2001-2008' written for the BC Federation of Labour by Gillian Creese, Phd. & Veronica Strong-Boag, Phd., of UBC's Centre for Women and Gender Studies. The report which can be viewed at: <http://www.bcfed.ca> tells us that:

- A gendered wage gap remains central to the Canadian economy. Canadian women earn 70.5 percent of the wages of male counterparts.
- Everything to do with women's health has largely disappeared from public policy. The Ministry of Health's 2006/07 - 2008/09 Service Plan fails to address women's particular health needs and does not even disaggregate data by gender.
- The loss of rape crisis lines is a good indication of priorities.
- Increasingly women are showing up in homeless counts across the lower mainland. In 2005, 27% were women and with them were 74 children.
- Child care support has been measurably cut.
- BC social assistance policies constitute a clear case of gender discrimination that is contrary to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms & the BC Human Rights Code.

Because of our lower wages and our responsibility for children, women are disproportionately impacted by high costs for child care, transportation, gas, and housing, seriously limiting opportunities for improving our financial situations. Women are overrepresented in minimum wage employment and on welfare rolls. Monthly social assistance rates remain at \$950.00 including rent for a single parent with one child. Considering the \$8.00 minimum wage, after tax income for minimum wage earners working full-time would be approximately \$1100.00 per month. Low income earners can barely exist, let alone create opportunities for themselves and their children. Women living on welfare and seniors' pensions are regularly threatened with loss of their housing.

We want to acknowledge the complex, layered analysis of global economics; something we cannot even attempt to describe. We see though the blatant devastation of transnational poverty, the results of which are world starvation, oppression, death of children and families from diseases, and war. World economic policies have shifted economies and industry. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund hold nations to ransom for having received money through them to boost up their failing economies; failures created through corporate expansion and decimation of lands and resources. Through the borrowing process, many countries are forced to sign onto economic policy agreements that disempower their people and that feed the neo-colonialist desires of first world capitalist corporations. Whatever it takes, profit comes first; and that profit is created off the backs of poor and desperate peoples.

Global economic policies have left the Philippines, for example, in such poor financial shape that their largest export is their people, particularly Filipino women. Very large numbers of them have been streamed into the Live in Caregiver program and the Mail Order Bride

Stepping Out of the Binary: Deepening the Dialogue on Prostitution

enterprise, both of which are forms of legitimized sexual oppression and trafficking. (For more on the subject, check out: http://members.tripod.com/~gabriela_p/8-articles/990601_prose.html and <http://kalayaancentre.net/pwcofbc;>)

"It's important to name the global context around women, including immigrant workers and global violence." (WAVAW Member)

"Women are targeted because we are women. Women of colour are even more visible and marginalized; this is also clearly a part of racism." (WAVAW Member)

Colonialism and Slavery:

Aboriginal Women's Action Network and Breaking Free, among others, provide us with some important thoughts to consider. They give us critical information on the connections between colonialism, slavery and prostitution. Check out <http://www.breakingfree.net>, a U.S. grassroots organization that works with black women in prostitution, and <http://www.Sisyph.org>, for the Dec. 2007 statement by the Aboriginal Women's Action Network statement on prostitution. Filipino women activists also tell us that oppression of women is embedded in colonialization; that liberation of women can only be achieved in a context of national liberation. For more information, visit: http://members.tripod.com/~gabriela_p/8-articles/990601_prose.html

Prostitution has become a huge business across the globe. Each year, 800,000 women and children are trafficked into the industry. Demand has been created by the sexualized objectification of women in media and society. While some women in the world certainly have more privilege and options than others, all women experience sexism and increasing numbers of women around the world are forced to acquire income in ways that sexually objectify them. In Vancouver, Surrey and surrounding areas, we are seeing increasing numbers of South Asian and other immigrant women becoming involved in the Prostitution Industry.

The Prostitution Industry

"It bugs me that 'prostitution is named as the oldest profession'. Well, in the past, who knows what it was like, but in today's context it is traumatic and violent. Why are women in prostitution being exploited more now than before? Where is the empowerment? Did the women [in prostitution during ancient times] have equal status, even to other women? Did they have options of becoming wives for example?" (WAVAW Member)

The Oldest Profession:

We are often told by speakers, writers, theorists, and the general public that 'prostitution has always been present in our societies'. However, usually absent from this statement is the socio-political context in which the prostitution has been carried out, in which women's lives have been seriously controlled by sexist, racist and colonialist oppression throughout much of history. When prostitution is placed back into the socio-political context of its time, its so-called long-standing existence is not sufficient rationale for justifying the industry's modern presence.

Stepping Out of the Binary: Deepening the Dialogue on Prostitution

Community leaders and Elders tell us that it wasn't always this way; that women were honoured and valued fully in their societies before colonization. They describe women's rightful places in North American Aboriginal societies, Filipino societies and African societies, to name a few, as leaders and life givers, valued and respected by their communities.¹ In questioning the existence of prostitution in their pre-colonized societies, some of them point to the absence of a word for prostitution in their original languages and information from their oral histories.²

Many North American Aboriginal women, leaders and writers tell us that prostitution was not a part of their history prior to European contact. They describe how prostitution contradicts the principles by which the members of their societies have been expected to live for centuries; principles in which women are held in high regard and all of life exists in balance with all other aspects of life, such as symbolized by the Aboriginal Medicine Wheel^[1]. Their societies were usually communal and social roles served the community as a whole. Important decisions about individual behaviour were made only in consultation with Elders, community and family members^{[2],[3]}. The needs and health of the whole community, including the spiritual, mental, physical and emotional balance of the individual were the foundation of any decision. Prostitution could not exist within such a cultural context.

“What’s happening today? What is happening to Aboriginal women in the present? How do we end prostitution? How do we help women to exit?” (WAVAW Member)

Prostitution today:

A wide variety of activities make up the prostitution industry. Among them are: internet sex, telephone sex, video games, escort work, pornography, strip dancing, brothel work, independent at home sex work, on the street survival sex work, among others. A few women say that their involvement in the sex industry is how they practice their art, as dancers for example, and that their work is a celebration of their talent and of sexuality. Others describe their work as therapeutic; helping men and women to decrease our inhibitions and to better enjoy our sexuality. Despite the fact that these are minority perspectives of the industry; they are often given greater credence than the perspectives of the vast majority of women who are involved in prostitution for the sole purpose of making enough money to survive.

In commerce and industry, people provide services or make objects for sale or rent. In most prostitution though, the therapy is not the service and the object for sale or rent is not the art. In prostitution, the woman or her body is the object for sale or rent. As such, the institution of prostitution constricts women into sex objects. Women's identities are limited to that of prostitute/sex worker. Women are rendered uni-dimensional and more and more de-humanized. The discussion at hand encompasses all forms of sexual exploitation, all activities in which the bodies of mostly women are bought in order to satisfy the sexual desires of overwhelmingly male buyers.

¹ Cowichan Women's History Conference and others

² Philippine Women's Centre

Profit:

Profit from the Industry is notable. Whole countries have become sex tourism destinations for men. Whole airplanes are hired for business men to travel to sex tourism destinations. Women can sell their virginity over the internet. [for more information, visit: <http://www.thefrisky.com/post/246-virgins-for-sale/>]. To date, the on-line bidding for one woman's virginity has reached more than \$300 Million US dollars.

According to Portfolio Magazine (April /08), \$50 Million is generated annually in the U.S. from an estimated 700,000 male clients. In England, 700 Million English pounds are spent annually on prostitution, almost twice as much as English people spend on going to the cinema [According to the Royal Economic Society in www.bbc.uk].

The Future Group³ tells us that prostitution is conducted in developing and wealthy countries but that it's the wealthy countries that keep the industry extremely profitable for traffickers. Prostitution has become a force of the global market place which renders women to the state of sexual bodies or parts which are available for rent. Women are forced to migrate and are regularly trafficked into sex work in industrialized countries so they can secure enough money for the survival of themselves and their families.

In outlining the plans for his newly funded project 'Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation', UBC Professor Benjamin Perrin explained that the destination for global trafficking has been increasingly funneled into sex commerce. In exploring concerns about the potential increase in prostitution during the upcoming Olympic Games, Vancouver Sun journalist Daphne Brahman cites Perrin, along with investigative journalist Victor Malarek, as follows:

- *"The Olympics is not a time to test a social experiment like this that has already failed in other countries." according to Perrin*
- *Perrin's recent report on trafficking, prostitution and the 2010 Games for the Calgary-based, anti-trafficking Future Group concluded that putting sex on sale during the Olympics will only increase exploitation of Canadian women and increase trafficking from abroad.*
- *He recommends deterring sex users during the Olympics. Both Perrin and [sic: Victor] Malarek warned that Vancouver will be a sex-slave destination unless the Canadian Border Service increases its vigilance now and the government and courts send a strong message to organized criminals that trafficking women won't be tolerated.*

We are told that prostitution is lucrative for some individual sex workers and those who profit from their labour. It purportedly offers the possibility of making good money to provide more than one's economic needs. For some women, in some forms of sex labour, prostitution may provide flexibility, reasonable money and some measure of independence. In the States, we were recently told by the news media about a sex worker who was paid several thousand dollars to spend a weekend with a high-ranking politician. We also know that some women have paid for their University educations through proceeds from sex work, such as escorting.

"Some women enter into prostitution to have a 'glamorous life'. They may come from a middle-class educated family but see this is as their choice. This is what recruitment looks like, recruiting young females from high school and bringing them into the sex trade industry."

³ The Future Group – a Canadian non-government organization focused on combating human trafficking and organized child sex exploitation.

But it's only lucrative or even sustaining for a very few women, and even some of them have described to us their ambivalence and despair about engaging in the work. Some have disclosed that they actually sought counselling so they could change how they feel when they are engaging in the activities of prostitution; so they could continue in prostitution without feeling used, like a sex object.

In reality, most women in prostitution do not become wealthy or personally empowered through their involvement in the industry. It is well known that managers/pimps can and do take in considerably more money than the women are able to keep for themselves. Women have little if any control over what they do and with whom. Some are left with no money for themselves.⁴

Many, many women describe working conditions in which they are highly controlled and treated as objects, economically exploited and usually subject to sexual assault, physical constraint, violence and abuse as part of their regular experience. Public attitudes and beliefs about women in prostitution continue to promote the denigration and dehumanization of women in prostitution. A hint of those beliefs and attitudes is discussed at: <http://feministing.com/archives/009097.html> where the authors of the article provide an analysis of the online video game Grand Theft Auto IV. In the game, boys get to have online sex with prostitutes, after which they have an option to kill the women.

The Women and Girls in Prostitution

The Future Group estimates that 50,000 people are trafficked into the United States every year, mostly for the purposes of prostitution. And that ... "*Victims [of sex trafficking] come from virtually all developing countries and are trafficked into or through virtually all developing and developed countries.*"

The (US) National Task Force on Prostitution suggests that over one million people in the US have worked as prostitutes, or about 1% of American women [in: www.ProstitutionProCon.org]. In the Netherlands, where prostitution is legal, approximately 30,000 people are involved in the industry [in www.bbc.uk]; about 2% of their total population of 16 Million people. In 2001, the number of prostitutes in the world was estimated at 40 millions, 75 % of them aged between 13 and 25. Every year, about four million new women and children are trafficked throughout the world for the purpose of prostitution. [Élaine Audet et Micheline Carrier5.in www.sisyph.org Nov. 2004]

Many more females than males are involved in the Sex Industry. In Canada, they usually enter into prostitution when they are teenagers, often as young as age 14. (See PACE Report on violence against sex trade workers - June 2001.) By all accounts, legal and social, teenage prostitution is sexual exploitation. Children from all parts of the globe are routinely sold or forced into prostitution. In most countries, there are laws prohibiting such activities, but in many, those laws are not effectively enforced, partly because poor, disenfranchised countries receive

⁴ Elaine Audet & Micheline Carrier – two Canadian women who write about the need for a Canadian public dialogue on Prostitution

Stepping Out of the Binary: Deepening the Dialogue on Prostitution

significant income from global child sex tourism. The state therefore takes on the role of pimp, by benefiting in the form of taxes from businesses that profit directly and indirectly from sex tourism, child exploitation and the local adult sex trade.

Globally, approximately 50% of women in prostitution entered when they were under-age, according to researcher Melissa Farley. In Melissa Farley's nine country survey of 854 women and men in prostitution, 89% stated they wanted to leave the industry, 67% had been sexually abused as children, and 75% had experienced homelessness. The stage seems to have been set for prostitution. The 2006 Report "Violence in the Lives of Sexually Exploited Youth and Adult Sex Workers in BC" by the Justice Institute of BC links sexual abuse by parents and other family members to entry into "more formal types of exploitation

While entry into prostitution may come from trafficking, force or childhood sexual abuse, most women resort to the industry as the only option available to them for generating enough income to support themselves and their families. Without prostitution, many women and their families would not be able to eat. Such is the dire economic situation of peoples around the world created by Capitalist Global Economic policies.

2008 Conversation between WAVAW staff members:

- o I was wondering if we wanted to identify certain aspects of sex trade. Some women make money by the status of their glamorous lives. This is a different experience than women working in the downtown eastside...*
- o Some women say they want to do this and some don't, either way we as WAVAW need to discuss it. There may be an illusion of choice and making money but when it comes down to it their lives are in danger.*
- o The responses to media reports of a U.S. Governor paying for services of a high paid escort in Chicago degraded the woman involved, not the man. The more money you make the more status you have in the industry, but not feeling self-defined and empowered and it is still the woman who is being degraded no matter how much money she makes.*

Colonialization:

Through prostitution, women are removed from their communities and societies and their social roles within their societies. Certainly, the practices of cultural genocide in North America that colonized Aboriginal people and enslaved African people attacked their traditional value systems, their cultural identities and their social roles and forced Aboriginal women and Black women out of their established social roles in their communities, frequently into prostitution. Colonization strategies like the removal of children into state institutions continue to keep many girls from knowing who they are in context to their culture, leaving them at high risk for exploitation into prostitution.

We suggest that the forces which facilitated the Canadian State to enact cultural genocide on Aboriginal people objectified them as 'other' in much the same way as prostitution objectifies women. The link between objectification/othering and prostitution is clear articulated by Vednita Carter of Breaking Free⁵, in her description of the ways in which African-American women are portrayed:

⁵ Breaking Free, grassroots Afro-Centric U.S. agency that supports women to leave prostitution

Stepping Out of the Binary: Deepening the Dialogue on Prostitution

“Like slave women on the auction block, African-American women are displayed on the streets or in strip clubs, surveyed like cattle, and selected to perform at the orders of a stranger. They are routinely berated and shouted at while being sexually assaulted, and are often slapped, beaten and pushed from cars. It is not difficult for thoughtful people to see the connections between slavery and prostitution.”

Aboriginal women in North America and black women in the US are indeed highly over-represented in the prostitution industry. [Aboriginal and Metis youth and women made up 55% of participants in the 2006 Justice Institute of BC Report “Violence in the Lives of Sexually Exploited Youth and Adult Sex Workers in BC”.] We also see today the rapidly increasing numbers of indigenous girls and women around the world forced or pushed into the industry, while global economic forces create the conditions for prostitution to become legitimized and entrenched in the economic structure of various Nations.

What About Choice?

Choice – agency - are particularly important values held by many feminists. WAVAW believes strongly in women’s right to self-determination and self-definition. Whether or not women choose to enter into prostitution has no bearing on WAVAW’s advocacy for women’s rights, nor on our support of individual women. We support women to determine their own course and pace of action; to make those choices even when we do not support the actual decisions made. For example, when women are living with abusive partners, we do not tell them we support the choice for them to continue to place themselves at risk by their partner. Instead, we offer support and advocacy for their safety, justice and human rights.

Given that most women enter into the industry when they are under age, and therefore under circumstances of exploitation, it’s a huge stretch in logic to then argue that the very same women, once they have reached age 19, have chosen to be involved in the industry.

In the capitalist marketplace, demand determines the goods or services for sale and their value. While a few women may choose to enter the prostitution industry, we suggest they do not have the power to choose what service or activity they will provide. The customer has that power. Again, the array of choices available is determined by someone other than the woman who will be delivering the goods.

The argument of supporting individual women’s choices pales when one considers the way in which prostitution plays out in the global arena. As a global phenomenon, it must be analyzed in its capacity to enhance women’s lives and in its capacity to end violence against women. Viewed in the broad social context, and not in the context of individual choice and unique experiences, prostitution operates as a function of capitalism, colonialization and slavery. It destroys cultures, communities and women through objectification, sexual violence and exploitation.

Effects of Prostitution on Women in the Industry

Violence in Prostitution:

Large numbers of women in prostitution are regularly assaulted by customers and those who control them. Women who work in Brothels, on the street, in pornography and in other areas of prostitution report extremely high levels of physical, psychological and financial abuse from their customers, pimps and managers.

The 2006 Report on Violence in the Lives of Sexually Exploited Youth and Adult Sex Workers in BC [produced by the Justice Institute of BC] describes the role of violence in recruitment of youth from small communities:

“ ... [Sic: the research participants] may have left home for the promise of excitement, opportunity and a better life in the city. “... young girls being raped or assaulted during their first few days downtown, which then spiraled in to a dependence on a “boyfriend” or group of friends for protection, often entrenching them in sexual exploitation and street life.”

Ex-Prostitutes Against Legislated Sexual Servitude (X-PALSS) offers us critical insight from a group of women who have personal experience of prostitution. They explain that:

“We are women who have been harmed by prostitution. We believe that no amount of changing the conditions or the locations in which we were prostituted could ever have significantly reduced that harm. We experience the normalizing of that harm by calling it “work” insulting at best.”

“It matters very little to us whether we were prostituted on the streets or in the tolerated indoor venues and escort agencies of Vancouver. Our memories are not of the locations but of the men who consistently acted as though we were not quite human. We remember the countless other men and women who daily averted their eyes. We remember the utter lack of services or options that made any sense and the blatant denial of access to any kind of help or justice. We remember the need to “dumb down” our sense of entitlement to a better life so we could bear the one we were in. And we remember too well the numbing despair that came when we finally lost faith that there existed in this world anything decent and good.”

From: No Legal Brothel in Vancouver;
December 2007 article at: <http://www.sisyphe.org>

Studies by Melissa Farley, PhD and others tell us that women would rather not be involved in prostitution if they had other choices. Their 1998 study describes some of the psychological effects on individuals from their involvement in prostitution:

We interviewed 475 people (including women, men and the transgendered) currently and recently prostituted in five countries (South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, USA, Zambia). Across countries, 73 percent reported physical assault in prostitution, 62 percent reported having been raped since entering prostitution, and 67 percent met criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD. On average, 92 percent stated that they wanted to leave prostitution.

From: Prostitution in Five Countries: Violence and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, USA, Zambia) by Melissa Farley, Isin Baral, Merab Kiremire and Ufuk Sezg in *Feminism & Psychology*, 1998, Volume 8 (4): 405-426.

More insight into the relationship between trauma and prostitution is provided by trauma expert Judith Lewis Herman, M.D.⁶ during her November 15, 2003 presentation *‘Recovery from*

⁶ Judith Herman, M.D. has provided considerable knowledge and guidance to feminist counsellors for women who have experienced sexualized violence and violence in intimate relationships.

Stepping Out of the Binary: Deepening the Dialogue on Prostitution

Trauma: Reflection from the Victims of Trauma Outcome Research Project to the New England Society for the Treatment of Trauma and Dissociation. An excerpt from the presentation was produced by attendee Patricia Papernow, PhD:

Dr. Herman stressed the reality of prostitution and its role in creating trauma. She reminded us that, “*The need for slavery is not gone,*” a point she made chillingly obvious with a quote about the pleasure of having someone to dominate. “*We are with prostitution where we were 30 years ago with incest—we are just starting to deal with it,*” she stated. “*The escort section of the Yellow Pages is as thick as the pizza section.*” “*We see it all around without seeing it,*” including the accepted ritual visits of sports teams to the whorehouse and the stripper at bachelor parties. Methods used by pimps to control prostitutes are similar to those used by torturers to force submission, and they are the same the world over: Isolation, degradation, humiliation, verbal attack, “*and, if you really want to break the spirit,*” forcing a person to sit by helplessly while loved ones are hurt. “*Then coercion is no longer needed; self-hatred will hold her captive.*”

In ‘Conversations with History’ by Harry Kreisler of the Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley, Dr. Herman describes the ways in which prostitution operates to control women.

Herman: *people learn to divide their consciousness under captivity, under conditions of coercive control. And since we don't even understand unitary consciousness very well, when people have double consciousness, double reality, I'm in awe. I think it's a fascinating window into how the mind works.*

Interviewer: *This experience that you're describing in your book; you quote extensively from the memoirs of everyone from a forced participant in pornographic films to a political prisoner. And there are common elements that run through their sense of this experience which you have just summarized.*

Herman: *That's not surprising, given that the methods of the torturer and the methods of the pimp or the pornographer are often similar. I think when we understand more about criminal gangs as an intermediary form of organization between, say, state-sponsored terrorism and one-family cells of domestic violence, we'll understand more about the transmission of methods of torture, methods of coercive control. But if you use the same methods on people, whether you're doing it in the name of the state, in the name of a criminal gang that's marketing your body, or whether you're doing it in the name of the authority of a father, or the name of some religious cult, the methods are the same and so the mental processes that they produce are likely to be the same.*

from: http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people/Herman/herman_con0.html

Melissa Farley, PhD and Howard Barkan, DrPH describe violence in prostitution in their research publication ‘*Prostitution, Violence Against Women, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*’:

- *Abstract: One hundred and thirty people working as prostitutes in San Francisco were interviewed regarding the extent of violence in their lives and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Fifty-seven percent reported that they had been sexually assaulted as children and 49% reported that they had been physically assaulted as children.*
- *As adults in prostitution, 82% had been physically assaulted; 83% had been threatened with a weapon; 68% had been raped while working as prostitutes; and 84% reported current or past homelessness.*
- *We differentiated the types of lifetime violence as childhood sexual assault; childhood physical abuse; rape in prostitution; and other (non-rape) physical assault in prostitution. PTSD severity was significantly associated with the total number of types of lifetime violence; with childhood physical abuse; rape in adult prostitution; and the total number of times raped in prostitution*
- *Of the 130 people interviewed, 68% met DSM III-R criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD. Eighty-eight percent of these respondents stated that they wanted to leave prostitution, and described what they needed in order to escape.*

In *Women & Health*, 27 (3): 37-49. The Haword Press

According to Melissa Farley, PhD et al, sexual violence and physical assault are the norm for women in all types of prostitution:

Stepping Out of the Binary: Deepening the Dialogue on Prostitution

Of 854 people in prostitution in nine countries (Canada, Colombia, Germany, Mexico, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, United States, and Zambia), 71% experienced physical assaults in prostitution, and 62% reported rapes in prostitution (Farley, Cotton, et al., 2003). In the Netherlands, where prostitution is legal, 60% of prostituted women suffered physical assaults; 70% experienced verbal threats of physical assault; 40% experienced sexual violence; and 40% had been forced into prostitution or sexual abuse by acquaintances (Vanwesenbeeck, 1994).

Eighty-nine percent told the researchers that they wanted to leave prostitution but did not have other options for economic survival. To normalize prostitution as a reasonable job choice for poor women makes invisible their strong desire to escape prostitution.

In: Prostitution & Trafficking in Nine Countries: an Update on Violence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder by Farley, M., Cotton, A., Lynne, J., Zumbeck, S., Spiwak, F., Reyes, M.E., Alvarez, D., Sezgin, U. 2003

Certainly the data demonstrate that violence against women is prevalent in the industry and the tactics used to control women are the same classic methods of violence used against women; i.e. physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and financial and other abuse. Given the high frequency of PTSD found in women who have been in prostitution, the data also support the understanding that prostitution is, in and of itself, violence against women. Further evidence is apparent from the fragmentation of self and identity that result from the sexual objectification at the foundation of the prostitution industry.

The profit of the industry comes from the sexual objectification of women, without which the full range of prostitution activities would not exist. The process of sexually objectifying women in our society through music video imagery and other media is demonstrated in the DVD Dream Worlds 3 developed by Sut Jhally of the Media Education Foundation in Massachusetts. A clip from the DVD can be viewed at: [Http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDMo5cIjN3A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDMo5cIjN3A).

Transitioning out of Prostitution

When women try to leave prostitution, they are met with barriers that seem insurmountable. There are significant practical matters to consider. There are psychological considerations. There may be addiction issues that must be attended to. And for some women, their physical safety and security can be under threat from pimps, managers, boyfriends, brothel owners and others, even some family members. Transitioning out of prostitution may require police protection and housing that is safe, secure and at a far distance from those who control the women, but also away from her friends, supporters and family.

For women who have been involved in prostitution for sometime, the way of life and the community in which they operate have their own cultural hold. Adaptation to mainstream living is extremely difficult and frightening to approach. Some women have only ever known living in community on the margins. Rather than attempt to climb the steep mountain into more mainstream lives, they may decide instead to enter into other forms of criminalized economic generating activity, such as drug dealing or fraud. It's more than bringing in an income though. It's about how one lives their daily life, who one feels comfortable around, familiarity with social cues and social skills in the particular social milieu.

Bringing in the money is also a major hold and major barrier to leaving, since women have no options for earning the kind of income generated in prostitution. Big money jobs are gendered in favour of men and are male-dominated. For a woman leaving the prostitution industry where it was men who paid for the use of her body and who exploited her, working in male-dominated work environments can be very threatening and may also create temptation to

Stepping Out of the Binary: Deepening the Dialogue on Prostitution

abandon her goal. Finding employment requires references, work experience and stable addresses. Women with criminal records have even higher barriers.

More critically, women who disclose their status of transitioning out of prostitution are sometimes declined services available for other unemployed and low income people, dismissed as not employable and denied choices that would permit them to meet their chosen employment goals. If their immigration status is not secure, they may risk deportation if they request financial assistance or seek employment. Managing solely on income generated from straight jobs is very difficult to get used to, previously having had the ability to pick up quick money through sex work. Managing financially on government assistance is virtually impossible, given the paltry rates available to unemployed people in this province, and policies that make access to government assistance difficult or non-existent.

While not all sex workers require housing when they decide to exit the industry, for many, finding and maintaining housing is a critical challenge as most women face poverty when they leave prostitution. So housing is often too expensive or too far away from needed community supports. Women then find themselves having to live with roommates or family members just to have a place to stay. If they have children, supports and housing become even more critical. Entering into addiction treatment, if needed, can put housing at risk and may require placing children in the care of others.

Support services for women transitioning out of the sex industry are paltry, if they even exist at all. In 2007, a significant portion of government funding was removed from one of the few organizations in Vancouver dedicated to assisting sex workers to leave the work. Funding to those agencies that do the work continues to be based in the competitive grant process and project based, and not sustaining of the organizations. Outcome measurements are not adapted to meet the reality of leaving the prostitution industry. Instead standard measures are used by funders to assess success of programs, when transitioning programs see that the real goals for program participants are not even included in the measures. Non-existent is residential support or programs for women that provide long-term assistance for sustaining them to develop ease and confidence in the social world outside of the prostitution industry. Many women prefer to stay out of the downtown eastside when they are in the process of changing their lives. Yet support services that are focused on supporting them to transition out of sex work are not available in other parts of the City.

There is little if any political will to support women to leave prostitution. In fact there appears to be more political support to make the industry a more accessible avenue for income generation. With so little support from government and funding bodies for women who want to transition out of prostitution and the movements to legitimize and integrate the industry into the Capital market place, women are given a clear message from our society that this is the work we are expected to do, that is meant for us.

Analysis

As a rape crisis centre, violence against women occupies the centre of our feminist anti-oppression analysis. We understand that violence against women is fueled by the misogyny and sexism that are fundamental to the colonialist-racist foundation of the Canadian state. Ending violence against women requires that full value, respect, social and economic rights are enjoyed

Stepping Out of the Binary: Deepening the Dialogue on Prostitution

by women the world over, that women occupy our rightful positions of leadership in equal partnership with men, and control of indigenous lands be returned to indigenous peoples.

Violence against women is the use of power and privilege, almost always by men,⁷ to control women and those less powerful than them. It demonstrates the stratified power structure of our society which favours men over women, Caucasian people over people of colour, and many other stratifications, all designed to maintain power and control of resources in the hands of a few. Sexualized violence is used for the express purpose of reifying the power structure through control of women's bodies. In the prostitution industry, women are controlled by the demands of the buyers, by those who sell their bodies and by the forces of imperialism that create the conditions compelling women into the industry. Most women in prostitution have been assaulted or abused while engaging in prostitution activities.

As discussed in previous sections, sex labourers experience extremely high rates of violence and high rates of post-traumatic stress from involvement in the industry and prostitution itself is a form of violence against women. The prostitution industry makes its money directly from sexual objectification, sexual exploitation and violence against women. A feminist anti-violence organization such as WAVAW cannot endorse the prostitution industry in any way and is compelled to challenge any initiatives that support the continuation of such activities. To do otherwise would be to fundamentally contradict the mission, vision and values of our organization.

WAVAW values health and wholeness, physical, spiritual, emotional and mental. Sexual assault and violence against women fracture women both in ourselves and in our relationships with others. The deepest goal of recovery work, through counselling and other supports, is to assist women to reconnect with themselves, their bodies and their world. This is the wholeness we intrinsically seek as human beings; this is WAVAW's goal. In contrast, prostitution by all accounts facilitates objectification, fracturing and disconnection from self and others.

The foundation of our feminist anti-oppression analysis of women's experiences is the information and wisdom given to us over 25 years by women who have been assaulted by the by their intimate partners, acquaintances, occasionally strangers, and by agents of the State; 90% of the offenders being male. We know that violence against women is a gendered crime in our world where women across the globe are devalued as human beings and are subjected throughout our lives to misogyny, sexism, and often to racism and other forms of oppression.

The organization also situates itself in this framework because the creation of the nation of Canada was a racist project that continues today, that racism and sexism define the experience of every Aboriginal woman. Colonizers demanded the removal of aboriginal peoples from their lands, their resources, their languages, their families and their cultures, and ultimately a dislocation from their fundamental identities as Aboriginal people. Once Aboriginal women were objectified and disenfranchised, the conditions that supported violence, sexual exploitation and physical, spiritual and emotional degradation were created and allowed to flourish, and they continue unabated to this very day.

Across Canada, more than 500 Aboriginal women are missing or have been murdered. Only 10% of Canadian women are aboriginal, while they make up 30% of women in survival sex work. Aboriginal women and particularly Aboriginal women in prostitution have been rendered

⁷ Stats Canada [in: www.criaw-icref.ca] indicates 98% of sexual offenders are male and 82% of victims are female

Stepping Out of the Binary: Deepening the Dialogue on Prostitution

invisible. The invisibility has put them in grave danger. The process of colonialization and dehumanization has objectified women and has provided rationale for ignoring our moral obligations for fair and just engagement with each other. Colonization has opened the gateway for theft of resources, lands and cultures in Canada and the world over. WAVAW is committed to standing in solidarity with aboriginal women in their struggle to end the colonization of their people and their land. We cannot stand in solidarity with aboriginal women and at the same time endorse or remain silent in co-existence with the prostitution industry that further dehumanizes them.

Individual choice, as discussed earlier, carries very little weight in determining the agency's perspective on prostitution. In fact, the people who do have choice are the men who pay for the use of the bodies of women in prostitution. Instead of choosing to exploit women, they should be initiating actions to end violence against women and to promote substantive equality of women.

Prostitution has become a force of the global market place which renders women to the state of sexual bodies or parts which are available for rent or sale. Women are forced to migrate and are regularly trafficked into sex work so they can secure enough money for the survival of themselves and their families. Women are removed from their communities and societies and their social roles within those societies.

The focus on legalistic arguments has shifted attention away from the socio-economic conditions of women's lives, lack of equality and the restructuring of economies into neo liberal market structures. Decriminalization or legalization of the industry of prostitution will promote the industry, increase profits from exploitation of women and children and will further objectify women in our society. Those changes will not provide more respect for women or greater safety and protection by police. As it stands, the criminal justice system responses to violence against women are limited at best, even when women are not criminalized.

On all levels, government must be held accountable for their lack of interest and action on violence against women, on women's poverty and on women's rights and the subsequent proliferation of the sex industry. As the enforcement arm of the State, police and the courts must also be held accountable for their complicity in the murders and assaults on women by their neglect and dismissal of our safety. Instead of criminalizing women in prostitution, our society needs to direct resources and attention to stopping the male demand for sex from women and to ensuring women are safe, respected and valued in our society.



women against violence against women

2008 Statement on Prostitution

1. The struggle for women's human and equality rights requires the critical knowledge and talents of women from all backgrounds and statuses. Feminist, anti-oppression activism must include the voices and experience of women from across the socio-political spectrum.
2. Violence against women is situated at the centre of our analysis as a Rape Crisis Centre. The creation of poverty by Capitalism through the neo-liberal policies of the corporate elite is a particularly virulent form of violence against women.
3. WAVAW will not support the continuing criminalization of women in prostitution, the last option for economic survival for many women and an industry that profits from sexual objectification and violence against women.
4. As a function of the Imperialist Corporate Agenda, Aboriginal women, women of colour and other disenfranchised women are pushed into the sex industry through sexist oppression that is driven by racism, colonialism and slavery. As feminist, anti-oppression activists, we know that violence against women is embedded in the broader oppression of indigenous peoples and peoples of colour throughout the world.
5. To endorse the prostitution industry or stand silent in co-existence with the industry would be incongruent with WAVAW's commitment to solidarity with Aboriginal women and communities and their goal of restoring health, wholeness and human rights to their people.
6. The objectification of women and the violence directed at women in prostitution are manifestations of intersectional oppression including misogyny, sexism, classism, racism and other forms of oppression
7. The foundation and practices of prostitution are in direct conflict with WAVAW's mission of ending violence against women and achieving wholeness and health in our society.
8. Individual men are responsible for their own violence against women and should be held accountable by the state for their crimes against women.
9. Individual men are further responsible for promoting attitudinal change in themselves and in others that support ending violence against women and the social conditions that underlie oppression of women.
10. The police, the courts and the State must be held accountable for their complicity in hate crimes perpetrated against women, including killings and maiming of women in prostitution.
11. The State (global, national, provincial, civic, etc.) must be held accountable for their actions and inactions that result in women having no other options except prostitution to provide them with income for survival.
12. The State carries ultimate responsibility for ending violence against women, for changing social attitudes towards women and for ensuring all women receive full equality and human rights, social resources and options for living our lives as valued members of our society

September 2008
Vancouver, Canada