

## Letters from the front – accounts of the work of transgender activists

Dear FamilyHope things are well for you in your lives at the moment and that you are safe from prejudice and hate and marginalisation. I am still finding my way to the battlefield everyday where I see how transgender people have to bear other people's gender illness. But I can tell you they are putting up a brave fight and daily I see resilience that gives me insight alongside some of the despair I feel at times. Many trans people are downright inspiring!

Working for the rights of trans people has opened so many tightly shut doors in my head. As a transgender person I have shifted from dealing with my own internalised transphobia (yes I believed I was wrong to change my gender even while I was doing it) to understanding the important lesson the whole of society could learn from us. One of these openings in my thinking has come from working with the transgender women support group at SWEAT. SWEAT is an organisation who works for the decriminalisation of sex work. (Sex work Education and Advocacy Taskforce)

When I learned that there are sane people in the world who want to turn something criminal into a respectable job I experienced one of many jolts into the sense and real reality which this work has brought me! I remember having the same revelation when I heard that trans people could change their gender in their ID documents without forced sterilisation. Yes let me find my identity without cutting my flesh- rather cut a piece of paper! And yes sex work is not always the best job on the market but let's remove our childish moral issues from this and examine how making it a crime has served no one in history, on any practical level! Discrimination hate and prejudice is not useful. I would say those are the things that criminalisation of sex work has produced – not solutions for those challenged with and by this work.

SWEAT and Gender DynamiX initiated a support group for transgender women in Cape Town who work as sex workers. Every Tuesday transgender women sex workers from different areas of Cape Town come to the SWEAT offices to gather and talk about their challenges. Twice a month we go out in the SWEAT-mobile (a nice van with a sound system and a Whitney Houston CD) to find transgender women who work on the street, brothels or clubs. It is not always easy to find them. The transgender women who lead the group often know them already and will make the van stop to talk to them on the street. Sometimes they are not that visible. Many transgender women do not work as she-males (where people know they were born male) but work as women. Working this way makes them highly vulnerable, should their clients and/or others discover their birth sex. We all know this makes them susceptible to people's insane need to punish gender variant people for reasons which make no sense. No sir or madam, feeling embarrassed due to your own gender illness is not a reason to perpetrate violence. Sorry to inform you – that is a crime.

As we drive through the streets of Cape Town the transgender women sing with Whitney "…the greatest love of all is..." Their gazes do not leave the road, looking feverishly for their sisters to tell them about support group on Tuesday. We drive to the next hot spot and Whitney sings "...you can't take away my dig-nit-teeeee..." If you read the other articles in our newsletter which deals with why sex workers are highly vulnerable people and how the system we call society has made them that way and why transgender women are the most vulnerable in this picture, you will gain more insight into why transgender activists have to give specific attention to sex work issues.

Many transgender women include sex work in their survival strategies from a very young age when they are rejected from their homes and schools for insistently expressing their gender. Other research has shown that because transwomen are considered less human than others people, it is hard for them to negotiate their safety and subsequently results in high rates of HIV.

In my own journey as a transman I have realised the privileges we gain and lose (or not) as men and women and as transgender men and women. These privileges are revealing of how society's systems cause pain and suffering for people so as to keep order in place. It somehow does not seem so orderly when you are one to be singled out as disorderly when all you were doing was being yourself without hurting anybody else. Above all I learned that transgender women are the most vulnerable and frowned upon because this order believes men are superior to women and changing a man to a woman causes a deep rooted primitive anger in people.

Our work together with transgender women who do sex work is most important because if we looked at society from their perspective and not from the people who are safe and if we made the world safe for them, everybody else would be safe too.

Hope to be united with you soon.

Your brother

Robert Hamblin

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