

# Sex work

## *a new dispensation?*

The Gauteng Department of Safety and Security has decided to deprioritise the policing of sex work. A Task Team appointed by the Department's Policy Secretariat recently organised a workshop with sex workers to allow them to share their experiences. The Task Team report emphasises the need to extend human rights and work benefits to sex workers.

The Gauteng initiative is the first move in decriminalising sex work. Provinces do not have the right to change the law, and the final decision will have to be taken at national level. The ANC has thrown its weight behind Gauteng and has called on the government to do away with legislation which makes commercial sex illegal. The issue is clearly on the national agenda.

Sex work has always been illegal and a fertile breeding ground for stereotypes. Apartheid South Africa, driven by Afrikaner Calvinist perspectives, categorised sex workers as 'prostitutes', and stereotyped them as immoral, degenerate, and spreaders of disease. These views remain the norm. More sympathetic views have themselves produced stereotypes - for example, the sex worker as passive victim, whether of patriarchy or capitalism, or both. Even this, more informed perspective, needs qualification.

Interviews conducted with sex workers in Johannesburg provide some insight as to how sex workers perceive themselves and their work and their needs with regards to working conditions and legal protection.



*The Gauteng government has taken the first steps towards decriminalising sex work. Sasha Gear strips away some of the stereotypes to take a look at the lives and needs of sex workers.*

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### The workplace

The two sites of sex work most familiar to South Africans are the streets and escort agencies. This article focuses on workers working from upmarket houses and escort agencies. The majority of workers interviewed are house workers. The conclusions drawn cannot be applied to the industry as a whole.

The houses where sex work takes place clearly distinguish themselves from escort agencies and clubs, chiefly through the environment they offer. They are literally houses, situated in Johannesburg's wealthiest suburbs, and appear no different from those surrounding them. They are situated on large properties, which ensures privacy. Ample parking space on the property, inconspicuous from the street, means that attention is not drawn to many cars parked outside for short periods.

Tanya<sup>1</sup> says she likes working at a house 'because it is so discreet... My parents would freak [if they knew I was doing this].



My Dad's...very upstanding in the community"

By contrast, escort agency workers feel very exposed. Women who left the agency briefly to go to a nearby cafe paused at the door: "See, its so embarrassing. You first wait for the cars to drive past before you go...just now, my brother dropped me here. I said, 'Just wait for the robot to change, then I'll go inside. I don't want everybody to see me.' People stare at you when you stand by that door."

The escort agencies in the sample were on busy roads in blocks of shops and were signposted as escort agencies.

### Protection

Working from a house also means that the only way clients can access the sex worker is by telephone. Workers are able to screen clients before the face-to-face encounter.

Tanya takes a call from a prospective client who wants to find out if he could have a session without a condom. She says no. She is able to settle the issue over the phone and deal with his complaints in a brief and direct way, a situation which might have been more difficult had she been dealing with him in person.

While the telephone is an important part of the operation of escort agencies, the fact

that an agency is visible as such from the street means that clients often just walk in.

Where one works from also determines how safe you are. All those interviewed mentioned the danger involved in a 'travel booking' (when the worker travels with or to the client). The illegal status of prostitution has meant that workers have no recourse in cases of harassment or rape. Workers allege that members of the police themselves rape or abuse workers, demanding free sessions and threaten them with arrest.

Working from a house or an agency provides a modicum of safety, although most bookings through escort agencies involve travel. There is also the 'comfort' of knowing that somebody else is around. Mandy, who works from a house, says: "They ask you 'Are you totally private? Are you sure there's nobody else there. But its actually dangerous to really be on your own, so you tell them you are...but you know there's somebody around."

### Pay

At some of the houses, workers are allowed to charge their own prices. Most, however, follow standard rates which differ according to the service purchased.

The women earn between R200 and

### Survey

Prostitution is a hugely varied and stratified industry.

My own sample is itself partial: I approached my interviewees through *The Star* classified columns. This immediately eliminated sex workers who do not advertise their services in this way.

Workers who advertise in the classifieds operate from one of four main locations: escort agencies, clubs (where clients mix in an environment which offers other facilities such as drink, food, and shows with sexual services), houses (literally houses in

residential areas), and private (individuals working from home).

The place of work significantly influences work experience and pay. The experiences of someone working on the street differ substantially from those working from an upmarket house which serves a wealthy clientele.

Sex workers are also individuals. They are all very different people, coming from different backgrounds and understanding themselves and their experiences in different ways.



R450 per session, depending on the client's needs. Male workers charge between R150 and R250. If the worker is required to travel to the client, a R50 travel fee is added.

The women in the survey who work at an escort agency charge R250 per session.

Women who operate from houses report that they sometimes earn thousands of rand per week. Business is not as good at the escort agencies.

### Management

At both houses and escort agencies, the agent/manager takes a cut of the workers' earnings. At a house where the women charge R350 per session, R100 has to be paid over to the agent.

The agents also lay down the rules, such as a ban on drugs, and noting all sessions in a central appointments book.

Relations between the workers and the person in charge vary. In some cases the workers expressed respect for the manager and thought their demands were reasonable, while others found their work environment demeaning. One interviewee said he was "mentally" abused" by the agent. House workers have the option to live in the house, in which case they pay rent.

### Motivation

Workers' reasons for becoming sex workers, and the degree of choice they have, differ substantially. For the majority of those working in a house, their work constitutes a *choice* in that they are qualified to do other work where jobs are presently available. Sex work was a choice to improve their



*Sex workers operate from a variety of locations.*

earnings. Many plan to stay in the industry only a short while and to leave once they have achieved their financial goal.

Tanya: "After matric I did a two-year course in beauty therapy... I was also doing a bit of secretarial and computer work... my husband and I were talking... he really wants to start his own business. The salary I was earning was pathetic... it was a mutual agreement that I would do this for a few months for him to get his business off the ground."

Karin, also working from a house, started sex work when she was 15. She stopped for eight years while she trained and worked as a nursing sister. She decided to re-enter sex work because her nursing salary was not enough for her to provide for her child in



the way that she wanted to.

The key reason Simon started selling sex was to save money for an overseas trip, but he also found the idea interesting in terms of the problems he was having with his relationships: "I'm a gay guy and with the gay scene, the experiences that I have, people are psychologically too intense or not intense enough for me. So I was finding I was having like *moerse* psychological revolutions in my mind...but physically, they weren't satisfying me or the other way around. So I figured, if I went and worked in an industry like this, I would get sort of physical whatever, 'cos not all the clients are disgusting like everyone thinks, and the psychological stimulation of people who work in this industry tends to be above average..."

### Survival

Many escort-agency workers saw sex work as their only chance for survival. Rita has been working as a sex worker since she was 22: "I've tried to get jobs... I left school in Std 8... I stopped doing this for two years when I fell pregnant with my first child ..(my mother was helping me out)... I started doing it again because I can't get a job and I've got a child now... I'm just doing this for my children... If there were more jobs, a lot of girls wouldn't be sitting here."

In other cases, parents or boyfriends had pushed women into the industry. Some started sex work in order to sustain a drug habit.

### Clients

The clients of both male and female sex workers are mainly married men. Workers working from houses stressed the prominent social standing, power and wealth of their clients.

### Rights

All those interviewed insist on the use of condoms (saying that they are "offered

fortunes" to do otherwise). Workers also place limits on the types of sexual services they are prepared to offer. The ability to impose limits is, however, influenced by which sector of the market the worker is situated in, and what their financial situation allows.

### Stereotypes

The dominant view of sex work (immoral, dirty etc) was a particular target of resentment. Workers continually defined themselves against this.

Workers handle the stereotyping of their work differently. A minority are completely open to their friends and family about the work they do. Mandy explains why she chose to 'come out' about her profession: "When I told my mother she nearly had a heart attack. She wouldn't talk to me for two weeks... She's never been too healthy...so I imagined something happening to me in this business, blown up in the headlines '*Escort dead*' ... and she sees my face. Imagine the shock. At least now she knows what I'm doing and if something like that happens, they're prepared for it... I don't have a problem with what I'm doing."

The majority of those interviewed only feel able to tell a select few of their friends and family. Still others live in total secrecy. This includes workers who claim they entered the industry of their own free will and spoke of their work in positive terms, as well as those who said they had been forced into it due to the shortage of other options. Even at this relatively privileged end of the sex work market, therefore, dominant social prejudices impact very harmfully on the everyday lives of workers.

### Decriminalization

Workers who work at the houses are not convinced that decriminalization will change general attitudes about sex work.

The Deputy Director for the Policy



Secretariat for Safety and Security in Gauteng, Sylvester Rakgoadi, who headed the Task Team on sex work, disagrees. He is sure that public debate will encourage a rethinking of the stereotypes attached to people working in the sex industry.

After the first Task Team Workshop, where sex workers shared their experiences, church organisations who had been vehemently against decriminalization were prepared to rethink their positions. "Given the opportunity people can change their attitudes," says Rakgoadi. The Task Team hopes to "eradicate the stigmatisation (labelling) and marginalisation effects of criminalization that allows for the exploitation and harassment of sex workers."

The Task Team report prioritizes the granting of human rights and work benefits to sex workers. Rakgoadi points to a complex situation, where working conditions are hard to monitor, salaries vary and are not constant and there is a lack of any job security. Sex workers do not have access to medical aid schemes and pension funds. Many cannot even open a banking account. He cites a case where a worker was earning thousands of rands a week, but could not buy a car. She had to do it through someone else. This is enormously risky as there is no recourse for the worker if the agreement is not honoured by the person in whose name the purchase is made.



*Sex workers resent the stereotypes attached to their work.*

Sex workers who work from houses shrug off these difficulties. They say that as long as they can show proof of income such as a bank statement there is no problem. But these workers had bank accounts which they had acquired before becoming sex workers

Most house workers said that decriminalization would not affect them. They planned to be out of the business soon. They said, however, that it would benefit street workers. Janey wondered if decriminalization would not make business decline because "men like a challenge". Lee disagreed. She noted that after newspaper





articles discussing decriminalization, business had been very good.

All the sex workers interviewed said that decreased policing had led to improved business. Certain hotels are now offering their clients the service of calling a house with which they have contact. The hotels are doing this to stop their clients phoning around randomly for sexual services - thereby preventing sex workers who are recognisable as such from being in their hotels. There are certain advantages for the workers. Janey reports: "The hotels are getting so funny. One of the guys didn't have enough cash. So you know how you sign for room service, well the guy signed for it [his session with me] and the hotel paid me. That was a first but it's definitely becoming more acceptable. And the hotel can't say 'no' because the next time the guy won't book there... Those are the sort of advantages."

Workers at escort agencies were not keen on giving their views on decriminalization, mainly because their agent/manager forbade it. This suggests all is

not well at the agencies. Rakgoadi says that some of the women he spoke with who now work in houses had previously worked in inner-city agencies and had referred to abusive work situations there.

It is precisely such abusive situations that the Task Team is addressing. In consultation with other government departments and stakeholders, the Department of Safety and Security is in the process of researching the ways in which sex workers can be empowered and protected from exploitation, while at the same time, ensuring that laws are in place to protect children from prostitution; to prevent the exploitation of women, and to guard against health risks. ★

### Footnote

1. The names of all the workers interviewed have been changed.

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Sasha Gear is a junior researcher at the Electoral Institute of South Africa (EISA). This article is based on the updated findings of a third-year university research project.