

Violence against trans sex workers

STIGMA, EXCLUSION, POVERTY AND DEATH

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Andrea is in her early twenties. She comes from a poor family in the provinces of a Southeast Asian country. Unlike most women, she has a male birth certificate. She is a transgender woman. Andrea has felt female as long as she can remember, and began living a female life as soon as she could. For this she was insulted by neighbours, teased by teachers and classmates at school, beaten up and raped by a bunch of young boys one night, and eventually beaten and disowned by her father. She dropped out of school, left home and migrated to the city, to stay with an older transwoman from her home town who, it turned out, was a transgender sex worker working the streets. Andrea didn't much like the idea of sex work, but without education or connections was unable to get a job. Being 'trans' worked against her. No one wanted to employ her, even as a waitress or shop assistant. She turned to the 'entertainment' sector. Unable to get a job as a bar dancer or hostess, and barred from nightclubs and discos (all because she is trans), she too began to work on the streets. She has done it for five years, earning money for food and lodging, and a little extra for hormones and new silicon injections for her hips and breasts.

Andrea's story is one of many thousands of transwomen worldwide (especially those like Andrea who are rural, less educated and socially isolated) who turn to sex work, not as the most attractive of a range of job options, but as the sole viable option for survival. Doubly stigmatised as transsexuals and as sex workers, pushed into street work, they become victims of abuse and violence perpetrated by bystanders, customers, their own 'sisters', and (sadly) even by those who should be protecting them – the police.

As Andrea soon found out, competition on the streets is tough. There are too many trans sex workers and too few customers. Increasingly, her competitors are younger and more attractive. There have been fights over customers. Bystanders often abuse her verbally. Customers sometimes refuse to pay, angrily claiming they did not know she is trans. She has been beaten a few times. She knows others have been murdered. Nowadays, in order to avoid violence, she makes clear to every man who approaches her that she is transgender, even if that loses her customers.

Discrimination, Abuse and Violence

Latin America perhaps presents the most shocking examples of violence against transwomen, especially sex workers. Possibly hundreds of travestis have been murdered in recent years. But the situation in Asia, with which we are more familiar, is pretty bad too. Continent-wide conservative attitudes and religious beliefs fuel intolerance and stimulate discrimination, abuse and

violence against transgender people; particularly against transwomen. All three thrive because concepts of individual rights and equal opportunity are often undervalued or unenforced.

A few recent cases from the first half of 2010 illustrate the situation well. An ultra-nationalist group in Mongolia has beaten, abducted and raped transwomen, and has issued death threats, all because they consider these persons un-Mongolian. A Vietnamese woman was gang-raped, her case making news because her legal status (male) invalidated any rape charges against the perpetrators. In Bali, transwomen have been pursued, assaulted and humiliated by young men who have shaved the hair from their victims' heads. In Turkey there has been a long series of incidents involving thugs beating transwomen on the streets, and police arbitrarily arresting, beating and humiliating transgender activists. In a most recent incident, just a few days before completion of this article, a Turkish transwoman was found murdered; stabbed twelve times and with wounds from her throat to her stomach. Finally, across Indonesia, thugs have broken into meetings of transwomen and driven away the participants, chasing them into the streets, all on the grounds that they are un-Islamic.

Partner violence against transwomen seldom makes it into the newspapers or web blogs. And yet it is a major problem. Many transwomen drift into abusive and violent relationships through low self-esteem. Once there, many feel unable to leave their partners. Beliefs about gender roles foster an even higher tolerance for violence. One South Asian transwoman admitted: 'I don't mind if my girya (man) beats me up. It only shows how manly and powerful he is.' Another

claimed: 'When my parik ("husband") beats me, I feel as helpless as a woman. Since I want to be a woman, it actually makes me feel good.'¹

As is already apparent from the Turkish example above, abuse and violence are often perpetrated by state organs supposedly there to protect the weak. In Kuwait, Nepal and India there have been clear cases of organised police violence against trans communities; so organised as to take on the appearance of 'sexual cleansing' programmes (apparently aimed at instilling fear into transwomen intending to come out of their homes). In some countries anti-homosexuality laws have been used to oppress transwomen, and anti-sex work laws have been used to oppress transgender sex workers (along with others). In Cambodia, programmes of forced occupational rehabilitation for sex workers have resulted in transwomen (and other women) being placed into training programmes aimed at providing workers for the garment industry. Not for nothing does APNSW (the Asia-Pacific Network of Sex Workers) feature a 'no sewing machines' image as its logo.

«Не говори мне о швейных машинках. Расскажи мне о правах трудящихся!»



Andrea has had her share of police encounters. The police often harass her and have arbitrarily arrested her. Police extortion is a problem too (either after arrest or as a condition for not arresting her). A few times they charged her with being a nuisance to tourists (though in each case it was the tourist who approached her). At other times they found her in possession of a condom and charged her with prostitution, which is illegal in her country. She now does not carry condoms anymore, and often has unprotected sex. She had twice been sexually assaulted in a police station, once by two police officers, and another time by a male inmate with whom she had been locked up. In each case there was no condom used. She recently found out that she is HIV positive.



High-risk Sex

Worldwide, HIV prevalence rates for transwomen are commonly found to reach double figures. One suspects that the precise figure often depends in part on the proportion of the sample involved in sex work. High HIV infection rates, often coupled with lack of access to HIV/AIDS care, arguably represent the most glaring example of violence perpetrated against transwomen. This is not just about commercial sex or receptive anal intercourse; transwomen's HIV rates are sometimes higher than those for female sex workers or men who have sex with men. Rather they are the inevitable consequence of widespread prejudice that frames transgenderism as unnatural, immoral or mentally disordered; of legal frameworks that view transwomen as men, denying them respect, equality and dignity as women; and of laws that criminalise sex between transwomen and men as same-sex activities.

In these circumstances many trans sex workers drift or get pushed into high-risk sex. Water-based lubricants may be too expensive. Some substitute them with oil-based lubricants (including engine oil), which are known to corrode condoms. Sex work on the street may be hurried (leaving less time

for a condom anyway). In any case, trans sex workers like Andrea often avoid carrying condoms and lubricants as a way of depriving police of evidence of sex work. Rural migrants, often cut off from family, and less educated and informed than their urban counterparts, are particularly at risk for unsafe sex. Drug and alcohol use, which are quite common among those involved in transgender sex work, exacerbate the problem. Viagra and its analogues, making for longer and repeated sexual intercourse and raising the risk of anal wounds, also increase risk.

Many trans sex workers, despite being poor, need money for hormones, silicone injections or surgery. The associated costs increase their poverty, making it harder to refuse a customer who does not want to use a condom. And then there is the pervasive problem faced by many (trans)women worldwide: low in self-esteem and desperate for a life partner, glimpsing an opportunity for a long-term relationship, wanting to put trust in someone, they cease to use condoms all too quickly.

Human Rights

The organisers of a recent Barcelona conference on transgender rights (the first truly global conference organised by

and for transpeople) were keenly aware of violence in the lives of transpeople, especially of trans sex workers.² Several sessions touched on sex work and violence issues. A document on violence and criminalisation, widely endorsed in a plenary final session, declared a set of basic rights relevant to all transpeople, but often denied to them – especially to those in sex work.³ With regards to violence, the document calls upon Governments:

- 1 to recognise and condemn as human rights violations all cases of trans-related violence;
- 2 to investigate such cases of violence (including when perpetrated by organs of the state);
- 3 to provide fully funded trauma counselling and care for survivors of trans-related violence;
- 4 to enact laws providing protection against such violence;
- 5 to provide free and equal access to the justice system for transpeople; and
- 6 to provide administrative, security and legal personnel with sensitivity training on trans issues, as well as on human rights standards on trans-related issues.

In Asia we are a long way from implementation of the list of principles and recommendations produced in Barcelona. Hopefully, some day in the future, properly observed and implemented, they will contribute towards a much needed improvement in the quality of life of Andrea, other trans sex workers, and of transgender people in general.

About the Authors

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Notes

- 1 Cited by Shivananda Khan in a paper presented at the 2nd International Expert Meeting on HIV Prevention on MSM, WSW and Transgenders, Amsterdam, November 2009.
- 2 The International Congress on Gender Identity and Human Rights, Barcelona, June 2010. A key feature of this conference, drawing participants from six continents, was that almost all attending were transpeople, and many were sex workers.
- 3 *Violence, Criminalization, and Gender Identity* (2010), available from: <http://web.hku.hk/~sjwinter/TransgenderASIA>