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The PEERS Story

Effective Services Sidestep the Controversies

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This article is based on the findings of three community action research projects conducted by one of the authors (Rabinovitch) in collaboration with sex trade workers in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, from 1996 to 2001. As a result of these efforts, the Prostitutes' Empowerment, Education and Resource Society (PEERS) developed as a successful programmatic and policy response to sex trade work. PEERS's success stems in part from the degree to which sex trade workers are involved in the planning, development, and delivery of its programs and services and in part from sidestepping the controversies that destroyed many sex trade worker organizations.

Keywords: *prostitution; sex trade workers*

Working successfully with women in the sex trade poses a number of challenges. Like women who are being battered, sex trade workers often find it difficult to access support. Many are reluctant to divulge information about the extensive violence in their lives. They cope with their daily experiences of abuse by dissociating and denying them. When faced with interlocking issues that may include violence, substance abuse, homelessness, and physical and mental health problems, sex trade workers need programs that offer a nonjudgmental and holistic approach. Most important, programs for women in prostitution must meet them where they are, whether they are seeking to exit or wanting to survive more successfully in the trade. These considerations, as well as political pressures to support, alternatively, either the abolition or the legalization of sex trade work, raise complex service-delivery

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issues for every program serving prostituted women and girls. This article focuses on how the PEERS program (Prostitutes Empowerment, Education and Resource Society), located in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, has for a number of years successfully charted a course through these difficult waters. A note about terminology: Although in the United States those who use the word *work* to describe prostitution are usually trying to promote its legitimization or decriminalization, in Canada the descriptor *sex trade work* is widely used across the debate. Most important, it is the term used predominantly in this article because it is the choice of the women who created, and who come to, PEERS.

THE PEERS PROGRAM

PEERS began in 1995 with a small group of dedicated volunteers, most of whom were survivors of sex trade work, many quite recently exited. One of the authors, Rabinovitch, worked closely with the original group. The group of a dozen incorporated and received some funding for participating in research projects during 1996. PEERS was granted \$200,000 in 1997 from the provincial government to develop an agency to provide training and employment for survivors of prostitution and programs and services for sex workers. Five of the core group were hired to create and develop PEERS. Over the years, the core operating grant of \$200,000 has been maintained—not without much effort—and additional program dollars have been received for several time-limited projects. The federal government, through Human Resources Development Canada, Justice Canada, and Health Canada, have supported projects such as preemployment, youth employment and training, men at PEERS, national fetal alcohol prevention, and Aboriginal and public education. As well, PEERS has received support from a number of private foundations for its work. Currently, a group of business leaders is meeting to discuss how the local community can economically support PEERS in a more substantive way. Although government funding is always uncertain, the PEERS experience is that even in a conservative political climate, a commitment can be generated to support alternatives for sex trade workers.

Almost all of the staff are survivors of the sex industry. Working at PEERS is a stepping-stone out of the trade and into mainstream employment for many. More than 60 women (and a few men) have been employed at PEERS, most of whom were on welfare at the time of employment. In addition, 250 women and men have participated in the various employment training projects PEERS has offered over the years at an approximate cost of \$6,000-\$10,000 (Canadian). Of these, 86% have moved on: directly into employment, further training or education, into a treatment program for alcohol and drug misuse, or into mental health services. For some, the process takes less than a year, whereas for others it may take several years before they make the decision to enter one of PEERS's more structured programs. Currently, PEERS has 15 full-time staff, each paid \$18 an hour plus benefits. For many, this is their first regular employment.

One author, Rabinovitch, has been involved with PEERS since its inception, and both authors have served as members of the PEERS's board of directors (Rabinovitch since incorporation in 1995 and Strega for the past 2 years). Strega, in keeping with PEERS's commitment to involve former sex trade workers at every level of the organization, became involved with PEERS partly because of her own adolescent experience as a sex trade worker.

Four significant components of the PEERS policy and mission, which will be discussed below, enhance an understanding of the complexities of sex trade work and the difficulties involved in helping women and girls in prostitution. Over time, PEERS has developed a deeply textured understanding of marginalization and its relationship to sex trade involvement. The organization has an ongoing and unwavering commitment to peer-led services, administration, and policy development. It is dedicated to shaping the organization in response to the experiences of sex trade workers, whether that information is anecdotal or derives from formal, collaborative research ventures. Finally, and significantly, PEERS has refused to align itself with either of the two dominant discourses on sex trade work: the protrade prostitutes' rights position and the abolitionist antiprostitution position.

SIDESTEPPING CONTROVERSIES

As befits an organization concerned with the complicated lives of those in the sex trade, PEERS has developed a complex analysis of the factors that interact to involve and keep women in the trade. Wahab (2002) notes in discussing the relationship between social work and sex trade workers that service providers rarely see sex trade workers as the “experts” of their own lives. All three of the explanatory analyses—that is, that it is a result of immorality, that it is borne of pathology rooted in traumatic childhood experiences, that it results from gender and/or economic oppression—that have shaped approaches to working with sex trade workers (redemption, therapeutic interventions, or consciousness-raising) have been authored from outside the trade. From inside the trade, where PEERS is located, there is recognition that the search for explanatory variables is useful insofar as it contributes to, but does not constrain, the development of programs that are responsive to the needs of sex trade workers. In other words, interest in whether sex trade work is constructed as “work” and, therefore, is seen as a matter of choice, or constructed as evidence of oppression or of psychopathology, must never impede the provision of services. PEERS has always positioned sex trade workers as the experts, using their wisdom, knowledge, and experience to inform service and program development. Sex trade workers participate in and value these programs because they see them as reflecting the realities of their lives.

Understanding the evolution and history of PEERS provides a basis for understanding how it has been able to continue to develop as an organization rather than becoming mired in the struggles that have beset other prostitute organizations. The development of PEERS is a story about successfully sharing power. The PEERS project began with grassroots community development with sex trade workers themselves, as an outgrowth of a successful community development project developed with homeless women. Essentially, PEERS did not exist until sex trade workers created it. It is *their* organization. PEERS has incorporated marginalized citizens into a process of creating healthy and effective programs and public policy not through soliciting their peripheral involvement but by centering them in every aspect of the organization’s work.

However, PEERS's existence is due in large part to its continual refusal to accept any one of the various theoretical positions as sufficiently explanatory on its own.

Theories of how and why women become involved and stay in the sex trade have influenced PEERS programs and policies. Some feminist theorists suggest that sex trade work is a legitimate career choice for women, and thus, feminist efforts regarding sex trade work should be devoted to improving working conditions and decreasing the stigma associated with sex trade work (Lerum, 1998; Simmons, 1998). Socialist feminists contend that choosing sex trade work is related to women's oppression under capitalism and patriarchy (Jaggar, 1991; Lerner, 1986). Others (e.g., Brown, 1979, and Schaffer & DeBlassie, 1984, both cited in Bell & Todd, 1998) have suggested that financial gain is the primary motivation, without mentioning capitalism or seeing sex trade work as a legitimate occupation. In taking account of all of these positions, PEERS responds in several ways. The organization works with police and other agencies to reduce police harassment of street people, including sex trade workers. PEERS supports the provision of condoms and clean needles and maintains "bad trick" sheets. It also offers educational and training programs, with incentives for participation; for example, at Second Chance, a 6-month full-time training and education program, all the participants are paid an hourly wage.

Alternatively, radical feminist theorists (Barry, 1995; Dworkin, 1993; MacKinnon, 1987) position sex trade work as part of the panoply of violence against women that exists in the heteropatriarchy and always, or by definition, harms the dignity and personhood of sex trade workers. PEERS acts on these ideas by making alliances with other feminist organizations, taking public positions on issues affecting all women, and through its educational programs.

Some libertarian feminists have posited sex trade work as sexual expression, marginalized and degraded less because of the conditions of the work itself than because it represents an unacceptable female sexuality (Rubin, 1984). This position fails to recognize the confusion that sex trade workers themselves express over whether sex trade work is sexual behavior. Prostitution forces (e.g., "Sex trade work is just like any other work") also seem uncertain about this; they are in part aligned with the sex radicals

but generally describe sex work as work and nothing more. Thus, although most of the major theoretical positions may be of some influence at PEERS, overall, the organization takes Lerum's (1998) position that "the argument over whether sex work is *either* exploitative *or* liberating is a ridiculous one . . . and has little relevance to the complex, contradictory, and widely varied experiences of sex workers" (p. 8).

In addition to these political and philosophical pronouncements about women's involvement in the sex trade, a plethora of psychological explanations has also been advanced, chief among these childhood antecedents, such as poor attachment experiences and childhood sexual abuse. The search for psychological explanations tends to construct sex trade workers as if sex trade work were the totality of their existence, rarely seeing them as women with families, children, and social networks. (Dalla's [2001] qualitative study of the lives of sex trade workers is a notable exception.) Most present-day service providers would be careful to distance themselves from the moral redemption efforts of their predecessors at the turn of the century. Nonetheless, ascribing involvement in the sex trade to unresolved childhood traumas suggests that those who are involved are "damaged." Thus, stigma is created and maintained by positioning the life experiences of sex trade workers as significantly different from those of other, "normal" women, increasing rather than reducing the distance between sex trade workers and those who provide services to them.

Given that PEERS concentrates on sex trade workers' strengths and survival skills, it has been concerned that focusing on causality and antecedents contributes to a view of sex trade workers as women with underlying pathologies rather than as women with strengths and survival skills that can be extrapolated to success in the "straight" world. Thus, although therapy or counseling may be an important component in an individual's efforts to stay out of the trade and is, as noted earlier, supported by PEERS, it is not the focus of the organization's work. PEERS is convinced that what sex trade workers need more than anything is practical help and practical skills: drug and alcohol treatment, a way to make a living, a safe place to live. The women who created PEERS knew from their own experience that as O'Neill and Barberet (2000) suggest, intervention strategies must be free from value

judgments as to whether sex work is intrinsically harmful and instead target women's needs. If PEERS has any position at all, it is that sex work represents a less-than-optimal survival strategy or employment choice.

Although it does not align itself with any particular political or psychological position on the sex trade, PEERS as an organization and through its various projects engages in and contributes to analyses of sex trade work. For example, PEERS's publications discuss the interrelationships of gender, race, and class with childhood and adolescent experiences, and research projects explore personal, economic, and political correlates of involvement in the trade. PEERS may be more successful than other organizations in that the development and circulation of any analysis that is intended to support large-scale reform, such as decriminalizing prostitution, have never been part of the organization's focus. Part of this may have to do with PEERS's never having been, even in the beginning, either exclusively an organization of sex trade workers or exclusively a feminist organization. Instead, it is an alliance between the two.

Three factors have contributed to the success of this alliance. First, the analysis held by the feminists involved with sex trade workers in founding PEERS acknowledged that although sex trade work was often particularly dangerous, dehumanizing, and demeaning, it really was not that much different from a lot of other terrible work that women, particularly women of color, do all the time in the world. This decreased the distance that frequently exists between feminists and sex trade workers. Another was that a mutual respect was established and an atmosphere of learning was fostered; there was a clear understanding that each group needed and wanted to learn from the other. Finally, from the beginning, the locus of expertise was acknowledged to rest with the women who had been in the sex trade. If the enterprise was to be successful by any criterion, they had to provide the direction. The work of the feminists involved was to facilitate whatever the women identified as needing to happen.

These positions emerged from a commitment to really listen to the results of the research that PEERS undertook to understand what was important to sex trade workers. They may also relate to developing a definition of sex trade work that is perhaps broader than that embraced by many other "prostitute" organizations.

This broad definition is a rejection of the artificial virgin/whore dichotomy that divides sex trade workers from other women and embodies an understanding that within a capitalist heteropatriarchy, the difference and distance between women who exchange sex for money and women who survive in this system through other systems of exchange are so small as to be nonexistent.

As a result, PEERS did not—and does not—engage in questions about choice and therefore stays away from promoting prohibition or legalization and decriminalization. The focus has been, from the beginning, more on changing the conditions of sex trade workers' lives through their individual actions (increasing their choices and capacities) and through social and political actions that are intended to change the conditions of *all* women's lives. The organization is dedicated to increasing options not only for women in the trade and for women seeking to leave the trade, but also for all women. It also strives to be cognizant of which options are realistic, and this is where the commitment to having those with experience in the sex trade, or experiential people, at all levels of the organization has proved to be so critical.

There is also some doubt within the organization about whether large-scale legal reform efforts, such as decriminalization or legalization, will ultimately benefit women/sex trade workers. Certainly it is true that some of the other legal changes to which women have devoted a tremendous amount of time and energy have, in their application, not necessarily benefited women very well (child support laws, for example). Priority setting has come through a deliberate and sensitive listening to sex trade workers. Thus, concern about sexually exploited youth gave rise to quite a few successful efforts, such as the recent "Men at PEERS" project, but these were also centered on what was so powerful in the beginning of PEERS: creating a place where people who were or had been involved in the trade could safely talk to and help each other.

Most of PEERS's efforts have been directed at small-scale or local change rather than addressing more global concerns. In large part, this is due to the clarity with which the women who developed PEERS saw their own circumstances and the limits placed on them because of their experience in the trade. At the same time, some of the recognition of the importance of working

at the grassroots level came from the experience of one of the authors (Rabinovitch) who, as a community organizer, believed that the material conditions of peoples' lives can only be changed at the community level. Some examples of initiatives that have stemmed from a local focus include improving how sex trade workers are treated by the local police, changing and improving attitudes among service providers and among police, and developing a more positive relationship with the local business community that significantly improved their willingness to hire ex-sex trade workers. Liaison building and relationship building with all segments of the community are a key part of PEERS's work. Establishing and maintaining links with faculty at local postsecondary institutions (University of Victoria and Camosun College) help reinforce improved community relationships. PEERS's efforts to provide practicum placements for students, speakers for classes, and information for students are examples of emphasizing small-scale change. There is an analogy here with the work that PEERS does with clients in terms of capacity building: starting with small changes and building on them.

A final contributing factor to PEERS's ability to avoid being destroyed by internal controversies has to do with some of the concerns of the feminists involved with founding PEERS. Having seen many feminist organizations destroyed by ideological debates, they were determined that PEERS not be set up to self-destruct through similar processes. This reflects a deep desire on their part to have the organization survive as a source of hope and a place where sex trade workers could go. In a way, PEERS's ability to foster choice and capacity is helped immeasurably by the fact of its continued existence as a sex trade workers' organization, as it is the efforts, skills, and abilities of former sex trade workers, working with community activists, that gave birth to, nourished, and developed PEERS.

MARGINALIZATION AND THE FAILURE OF TRADITIONAL SERVICES

Program and policy designers rarely develop programs specifically for sex trade workers, perhaps because they assume that sex trade workers will make use of existing services (e.g., transition houses, sexual assault programs, employment programs)

targeted at marginalized women in general, or perhaps because sex trade-specific services are often unsuccessful. But for a multitude of reasons, sex trade workers do not make use of generic services (Dalla, 2001; Hood-Brown, 1998), and they are even more reluctant to visit services specifically aimed at sex trade workers, fearing that they may face unwanted attention from child welfare authorities or even arrest (Weiner, 1996). Primary among the reasons women give for avoiding social service agencies is the failure of most service providers to understand either sex trade work itself or the complex and interrelated reasons why women enter and remain in the trade.

Most sex trade workers at PEERS state that they discern significant social distance between themselves and social service providers. Both youth and adult sex trade workers state that they perceive what amounts to cultural and language barriers between themselves and straight service providers. Both youth and adults frequently sense a fear or reluctance on the part of service providers to hear the nature and extent of their experiences of violence, degradation, and humiliation. Sex trade workers are also reluctant to share accurate information about their lives with service providers because they manage to stay "in the life" in part by dissociating from and denying their negative experiences and thus distancing themselves from the stigma and trauma associated with sex trade work. The ability of sex trade workers to simultaneously acknowledge the danger and degradation of the work and see it as a source of power and self-esteem is difficult for service providers to comprehend. For example, a recent informal PEERS survey of 19 women working in various locations in the trade found that they perceived their work as "interesting," "independent," and a way to feel "special and wanted" concurrent with observing that it was "disgusting and unsafe," "high risk," and "violating."

Some researchers believe that stigma is the primary barrier that sex trade workers face in accessing services that might help them better survive or exit the trade (Foundation for Women, 1995, and Sloan, 1997, both cited in Sloan & Wahab, 2000). Sex trade workers are sensitive to acts or words on the part of service providers that further stigmatize their work. Those who use generic services state that they rarely reveal that they work in the sex trade for a number of concrete and practical reasons, including that they

may be denied services or reported to authorities such as child welfare or public health (Sloan & Wahab, 2000). Most communities have no safe place where former sex trade workers might meet, and those using generic programs often experience negative responses, from both service providers and other program participants, if they “come out” as sex trade workers.

For many, the greatest fear is that revealing their involvement in the sex trade may result in the loss of their children (Dalla, 2001; Shedlin, 1990, cited in Weiner, 1996; Weiner, 1996). Although sex trade workers with children are to some extent protected by the misconception that most of them are childless, they are at the same time vulnerable to the perception that a mother working in the sex trade is by that activity alone endangering her child. These stereotypes are ironic, given that many women are involved in the sex trade as part of their efforts to feed, clothe, safely house, and otherwise provide for themselves and their children. As a number of researchers have noted (Dalla, 2001; Hood-Brown, 1998; Weiner, 1996), most women in the sex trade have children, and most women in the sex trade are poor (Benoit & Millar, 2001; Hood-Brown, 1998; Lowman, 2000). Sex trade work is not a way out of poverty for most women who engage in it; the income of most sex trade workers is well below the poverty line (Benoit & Millar, 2001). Most female sex workers report that they were enticed into or chose to enter prostitution as a response to economic duress (Benoit & Millar, 2001; Carter & Walton, 2000). Research consistently shows that women victimized by poverty and abuse are vulnerable to recruitment into prostitution (Assistant Deputy Minister's Committee, 2001; Davis, 2000; Flowers, 1998). At the same time, research contradicts the myth that poverty is alleviated by sex work. Although prostitution is a significant source of income and, in many cases, the primary source of income for most sex trade workers (Benoit & Millar, 2001; Carter & Walton, 2000; Chapkis, 2000; Rabinovitch, 1996), it rarely alleviates women's poverty. High-end sex trade workers—that is, those who are able to provide well for themselves and their families—represent a small minority of those engaged in the trade (Benoit & Millar, 2001; Hood-Brown, 1998; Lowman, 2000).

Their marginalization is compounded by the isolation they experience. Most sex trade workers tell PEERS that they contemplate exiting from time to time, and it is in large part the isolation

and stigma of the work itself that keeps them entrenched. Many women have limited contact with the “square” world beyond their tricks, and what contact they have is most often involuntary and negative. They are intentionally isolated by their pimps and functionally isolated by their poverty and their belief, borne out by experience, that there is “no going back.” One of the founders of PEERS describes a 2-year period in which she lived in a medium-sized city and had absolutely no contact with anyone outside the sex trade. For many, a lack of education or training and a sense of hopelessness add to the stigma.

The three primary places where sex trade workers interact with societal institutions are contacts with the police, hospital emergency rooms, and child welfare services. These interactions tend to be involuntary, resulting from crisis situations, rather than from choice. In all three situations, women state that they experience contact that is punitive and hostile: For example, police sometimes arrest streetwalking sex trade workers for littering or jaywalking in an effort to get them to relocate or refuse to pursue sexual assault cases involving sex trade workers; assaulted workers are sometimes subjected to insulting comments while being treated in hospital emergency rooms; and women have lost custody of their children solely on the ground that their involvement in the sex trade constitutes child endangerment. Fear of being linked to these institutions and repeating earlier negative interactions creates a significant barrier to accessing what might be appropriate and helpful services. Some of the women who were instrumental in starting PEERS did try to access existing services, and their experiences provide an unfortunate illustration of what often happens. Having decided to hide their sex trade histories, they would find themselves enmeshed in a series of lies and stories that were difficult to keep track of and counterproductive in environments designed to support people through the processes of growth and self-discovery common to life skills, counseling, treatment, and training programs. One woman described not being able to remember her fictional husband’s name or how many children she had said she had. When they made the decision to tell the truth about their histories, they were isolated by most people in the group or program, including many staff members, and approached sexually by male participants. As a result, most decided to quit attending.

The unwillingness or inability of program designers and service providers to understand the interconnections between poverty, homelessness, mothering, and sex trade work contributes to the gulf between service providers and those they are supposed to help. This lack of understanding operates as strongly among service providers who see involvement in the sex trade as analogous to other work and thus a "choice" as it does among workers who favor pathological explanations for entry into the sex trade. These factors combine to create a situation in which sex trade workers rarely seek out mainstream social services and are not well served by them when they do.

PROGRAMMATIC RESPONSES

Over time, in response to information gleaned from both formal research projects and from anecdotal evidence provided by sex trade workers, PEERS identified four critical program principles to counteract these problems and to ensure the development of an organization that could and would respond to the complexity of sex trade workers' lives: choice, capacity building, harm reduction, and trust.

CHOICE

Although recovery from sex trade work is an important focus for PEERS, the organization supports both women seeking to exit and women who want to continue to work. The intention is to enhance women's power in the trade and to increase their options beyond it (Chapkis, 2000). Although PEERS does not subscribe to a particular explanation of why women enter or stay in the sex trade, and thus does not see women's involvement as necessarily a result of choice, it is committed to seeing the women it works with as capable of making choices. Part of the principle of choice is a commitment to work with women wherever they may be in their relationship to sex trade work. Women are entitled to as many or as few of PEERS's services as may be useful to them without having to leave the trade or even express interest in leaving. PEERS also understands that leaving is a complex process and that women may leave and reenter the trade many times before finally exiting.

From PEERS's perspective, the belief that getting out of the trade is the best or healthiest choice degrades both sex trade work and sex trade workers. Implying that sex trade work is degrading can suggest to sex trade workers that they are unworthy of help, when feeling worthwhile is an important component in making better choices. At PEERS, all clients are treated as if they are entitled to dignity, respect, and having their basic needs (shelter, food, and clothing) met. Thus, a major focus at PEERS is the provision of concrete, practical, and accessible help without value judgments attached. Both sexually exploited youth and adult sex trade workers state in interviews (Benoit & Millar, 2001; Kingsley & Mark, 2000; Rabinovitch, 1996) that practical supports and services, such as housing, life skills, counseling, training, and help finding employment, make all the difference and are essential for exiting.

Although the necessity of providing such services may seem obvious, the moral or pathological analyses underlying much social service provision has meant that providing practical help (condoms and lubricant, bad trick sheets, clean needles and bleach kits, clothing, and food) has sometimes been labeled as encouraging sex trade work (Weiner, 1996). Such controversy creates funding difficulties for agencies that attempt to provide practical help or harm reduction services.

The process of exiting the sex trade involves some of the same practical and psychological complexities involved in leaving any abusive relationship. Just as we now accept that it takes many years for most battered women to leave violent relationships and many services to heal from the abuse, exiting prostitution can require many different types and degrees of support, ranging from supportive housing to counseling to life skills training and employment. Before any of these services can be useful, sex trade workers have to believe that it is possible to exit and that someone will be there to listen to them and support them through the process. The provision of practical help is critical for a number of reasons. It makes clear that the organization has an understanding of the realities of sex trade work and thus makes it easier for women to talk about their experiences. By offering, though not imposing, such help, it lays the foundation for women to choose more involvement with the organization. And it creates the possibility

of nourishing and supportive relationships for women who, as Dalla (2001) notes, rarely have such relationships in their lives.

CAPACITY BUILDING

The intention of every PEERS program, including PEERS orientation to individual staff and to the agency itself, is to recognize and build capacity through a strengths-focused approach. Although PEERS documents and researches the disproportionate amount of violence that sex trade workers experience, clients are always regarded as survivors rather than victims. Services emphasize the strategies of resistance that women have employed to maintain their dignity and self-worth and the survival strategies they have employed to keep themselves (and often their children) alive. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the complicated balancing act that such a stance requires. For example, although PEERS is available to all sex trade workers (including those who do not identify as such), whether or not they want to continue in the trade and regardless of gender, race, or age, the agency has instituted over time some minimal behavioral expectations for those who visit the office or use the programs: Physical violence is unacceptable, as is theft. Thus, appreciation for women's ability to survive and an understanding of how sex trade-based behaviors can permeate all interactions have as a corollary an expectation of respectful behavior toward PEERS and those who use its services. Also, the understanding of sex trade work that has developed within PEERS because of the number of former sex trade workers involved with the organization and because of the research that PEERS has pursued means that PEERS understands the differences between sex trade work and other work and accepts that those recently exited from the trade need time to shed survival responses. Thus, PEERS offers both employees and those who attend PEERS programs education about and time to accommodate to "square world" expectations.

PEERS understands that sex trade work provides women with a number of skills that can be extrapolated to other work environments: for example, communication and interpersonal skills, adaptability, ability to work under pressure, experience with

difficult clients, and the ability to negotiate. PEERS also recognizes that sex trade work is often damaging to women's spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical lives. Thus, the organization commits resources to capacity building on both the individual and the organizational level. Capacity building has included employee therapy, counseling, or chemical dependency treatment that is paid for or supported by the organization; the use of outside facilitators to help resolve thorny issues among staff members or to assist the entire organization in decision making around difficult issues; developing a mentoring system for new employees and new board members; and assisting employees with job training and skill development. At an agency level, staff and board members have been mutually involved in continually assessing the organization's capacities and potentials. The focus on capacity building has brought with it an understanding of the dangers and complexities of the ex-sex trade worker identity, and although public education is a critical part of PEERS's mandate, individuals are discouraged from participating in public education if it might endanger their well-being.

HARM REDUCTION

PEERS is committed to harm reduction as a primary program principle. Harm reduction efforts directed at sex trade workers are often interpreted as the distribution of clean needles and condoms. Although these activities were among the very first in which PEERS engaged, the organization's understanding of harm reduction is broader and more complex. For example, it provides a variety of programs for people who are actively in addiction and working regularly in the trade. PEERS also hires people who come directly from the trade, despite their need for intensive training, mentoring, and support. Allowing staff some time to adjust to the square world, although they sometimes exhibit behaviors that would not be acceptable in other workplaces, is also understood as part of harm reduction. Finally, PEERS has adopted a harm reduction approach not just in its approach to sex trade workers but also in its work with other organizations and levels of government. As a result, PEERS has built ongoing relationships with members of the local business community; local,

regional, provincial, and federal governments; and a wide range of service providers throughout the region.

TRUST

From the perspective of the women who started PEERS, the only way to establish an organization that sex trade workers would trust was for it to be a peer-led organization. In addition to relying on the expertise of sex trade workers to inform its program development, PEERS has taken, from its inception, the position that peer-led services will be the most effective services, and insofar as possible, it draws its workers at all levels of the organization and in its administrative structure (including its board of directors) from those who have worked in the trade. Rather than working to get sex trade workers involved in the organization through outreach, PEERS is an organization of sex trade workers. The distinction is fundamental to PEERS's success. Sex trade workers *are* the agency: They design the services, they know what is needed to support each other in exiting, they talk and listen respectfully, and they develop new programs based on what they hear. Thus, sex trade workers can trust PEERS despite differences in their past experiences and current circumstances.

The insistence on the involvement of experiential people everywhere in the agency reinforces the message about the dignity and worth of sex trade workers and allows PEERS to fully implement its principles of choice, capacity building, and harm reduction. Acting on the position that people with experience in the sex trade must play a significant role in every aspect of the organization has never been easy, either organizationally or individually. There has been considerable debate in the organization over the years about the meaning of "experiential": What qualifies as sex trade work? Does stripping count? Phone sex? Is there a place for professional social service providers in the organization, and, if so, what is it? Should organizational decision making be weighted along experiential and nonexperiential lines? Such questions require that individuals come out about their experiences in the sex trade. Issues of trust must be constantly negotiated and renegotiated as part of decision-making processes. It requires that both sex trade workers and professionals examine

their assumptions and be patient with one another. PEERS recognizes that it needs not just those who are long out of the trade but also those who are recently out of the trade on staff because this decreases the distance between worker and client.

Although the women and men at PEERS are clear that an essential aspect of PEERS's continued existence is that it is a peer-led agency, they also recognize that PEERS would not exist without the involvement of professionals. This was especially true during the birth of PEERS, when additional expertise in proposal writing, organizational development, individual counseling, strategic planning, and fund-raising was required to create and build the agency. However, from the beginning, PEERS committed itself to the idea that anyone working directly with sex trade workers had to have personal experience in some aspect of the trade. On the few occasions when nonexperiential staff were hired for direct service work, the experiment proved to be unsuccessful. The understanding underpinning the commitment to peer-led services is that women and men who come to PEERS with a long-term resistance to services do so because PEERS is unlike any other service. They know they will be understood and listened to because the staff have walked in their shoes.

The benefits of peer-led services are many, not the least of which is the ability to see sex trade workers as people with hopes and dreams, children, families, social networks, and lives lived in addition to and separate from their lives in the trade. Peer-led services reduce or remove the cultural and language barriers that most sex trade workers experience when trying to communicate with those whose education about the trade has been academic and professional. Talking with peers, or even talking to a nonpeer in a predominantly peer-led setting, lessens sex trade workers' fears of confessing to a stigmatized identity and producing in service providers a range of reactions from horror to titillation. For sex trade workers with children, peer-led services create the possibility of talking openly about their lives without immediately being reported for child endangerment, knowing that they are talking to other women who also had and sometimes raised children while working in the trade. By employing former sex trade workers in key positions and recruiting them as members of the board of directors, PEERS shortens the distance between sex trade workers and service providers/service provision. It should also

be noted that PEERS's staffing by a mix of experiential and non-experiential people opens up for sex trade workers the possibility that non-experiential service providers can understand and respond empathetically and appropriately to their needs. Other services and opportunities may then become more accessible to them, and they may feel more able to insist on being treated respectfully by other service providers.

CONCLUSION

The complexity of the issues that PEERS has dealt with in constructing services for women and girls in prostitution in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, illustrates the difficulty that women have in exiting sex trade work and the variety of issues that they must resolve. As in domestic violence, isolation, denial and coping skills, trauma from violence, and self-medication with drugs and alcohol all mean that holistic, nonjudgmental services need to be provided, giving women multiple opportunities to become empowered over time to make real and true choices. In addition, sex trade workers experience marginalization due to the stigmatization of the work itself, which compounds the difficulties for them. These women will remain trapped in sex trade work, despite a desire to exit, unless their specific needs can be met. This is a challenge for feminists and violence-against-women experts—one that they, in the main, have not even begun to meet.

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