

# New city sex-work report raises concerns

## SEX WORK / Too much emphasis on enforcement and exiting: Hamilton

Natasha Barsotti / Vancouver / Thursday, October 06, 2011

A sex worker activist says the city's report and proposed action plan to address sexual exploitation and sex work places too much emphasis on enforcement and the exiting of sex workers from the trade.

That approach raises questions about the nature of the enforcement envisaged and whether it will lead to further displacement, says Jamie Lee Hamilton, who spoke at a Sept 22 city council meeting.

She says presentations before council, to a large extent, still reflected the view that sex workers need to be rescued. "That was mentioned time and time again, and that's very worrisome."

The report didn't acknowledge the possibility of choosing to be in the trade, Hamilton says. In her experience, many people engage in sex work by choice "for a multitude of reasons."

"I think if you look at most gay or lesbian or transgendered sex workers, I've never met anyone that hasn't said that they weren't there by choice," she says.

Even those deemed survival sex workers, Hamilton notes, are in the trade as a matter of choice in many instances.

"The rescue industry will say there's no choice because they're doing it against their will for survival, but again, those rescue industry workers, which include the religious elements, they are not in the shoes of those involved in the sex trade."

Determining what's right for another person is "obscene," Hamilton contends.

Hamilton wants city council to consider the question of sex workers' rights, absent from the report. "When you're looking at equality rights, you're looking at the Charter, which provides for life, liberty and security, and the municipal level of government has to follow that," she argues. "That's where I'll be going with all of this, because I think we can agree that the majority of sex work is based on choice."

"To engage in any other programs such as Shame the Johns or Johns' Schools, or only funding groups that will play along the line of 'everyone's a victim and needs to be saved,' is not acceptable," she adds.

Hamilton wants the city to explore private club licensing that allows people to meet in a safe environment.

That said, she's supportive of those who don't want to be involved in sex work and who need easy access to resources so they're not trapped against their will.

Hamilton says there are good aspects to the report, including the fact that there is a report at all. "That's a complete 180-degree turn; we just have to make sure it doesn't sit on a shelf somewhere and gather dust."

Hamilton also appreciates the report's recognition of the significant number of transgender persons and men in the sex trade. "They mention 20 percent, but I'd say it's even a bit higher than that," she says. "I would say that the transgendered community is 20 percent of the sex trade on their own."

Still, Hamilton remains concerned about a recommendation for the creation of a task force made up of researchers, policymakers and government personnel to implement the report's action plan; sex workers are not mentioned.



*Activist Jamie Lee Hamilton is pleased that the city has produced a report on sex work but has concerns about the direction it's taking.*  
(Jamie Lee Hamilton)

"Sex workers have to be an actual part of that task force, and I've asked for one spot to be earmarked for the transgendered community, someone who's been active in the sex trade," she says.

Hamilton says a broader and deeper consultation with different segments of the sex worker population is needed. She believes she's only one of two transgender persons initially consulted. "They can't look at that and think that they've consulted with the transgender community, because I'm only one person."

In an Oct 3 phone message to *Xtra*, the city's communications manager, Barb Floden, said there will be public consultation that will include "a wide, diverse group of people that represent members of the community."

Hamilton also objects to the push to criminalize the johns who pay for sex. This approach was adopted by Sweden in 1999, according to the city report.

Hamilton notes that Mayor Gregor Robertson indicated that he wanted johns to be exposed on social media. She says Shame the Johns campaigns, "which are really just shame the sex workers," are not effective.

She is also concerned about NPA city councillor and Vancouver mayoral hopeful Suzanne Anton's call for a Johns School.

*Xtra's* attempts to reach both Robertson and Anton were unsuccessful by press time.

"We're talking about a legal profession," Hamilton points out. "Providing sexual services for money is perfectly legal in Canada, and so you're stepping on people's civil liberties when you start to stir up debate about shaming people who are engaging in lawful activity. It's an infringement on people's human rights."