

THE HOUSE GROUP
P O Box 18557
Hillbrow, Johannesburg
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September 1996

The Deputy Director: Policy
Secretariat for Safety and Security
Private Bag X61
MARSHALLTOWN
2107

Att: **Mr Sylvester Rakgoadi**
The Deputy Director: Policy

Re: **Submission - Draft Policy-Decriminalising Sex Work**

Dear Mr Rakgoadi

The Hillbrow Drop-in Centre is the first organisation of this sort in South Africa and has been in existence for six years. We handle as many as 10,000 visits per year. The Drop-Inn and The House became well known by featuring numerous times on TV and in other news media. The Hillbrow Drop-in Centre is one of several projects run by The House, a private group of welfare organisations that needs no introduction. The Hillbrow Drop-in Centre is well known by the prostitutes of other major cities, Gauteng and especially of Hillbrow and surrounding area. These girls come to the drop-in to find a haven of care where they receive unconditional empathy and counselling [HIV/Aids, drugs, sexual abuse, rape, assault, etc., etc.]. We also offer sandwiches and hygiene facilities.

It is with surprise that we learned from unofficial sources about the draft bill regarding the decriminalisation of sex work. We obtained a copy of the submitted draft policy document which we read with misgiving. The drafters of this document seem to be poorly informed. If an on-going study and investigation of the needs and problems of prostitutes were made, we would have known about it. Such research usually starts at The House (as many doctorates and thesis researched from this base will testify). Most definitely none of the sex workers frequenting Hillbrow Drop-in Centre has been approached, nor do they know of any other prostitutes having been approached for any research with regards to decriminalising prostitution. As far as we could ascertain during the past two years research was conducted on issues such as Post

Traumatic Stress Syndrome in this trade and HIV/Aids related studies (we certainly hope that you have taken these very important internationally recognised studies into consideration). As far as we understand only one HSRC study was done on prostitution *per se*. Based on this now archaic study, which does not take into account the vastly changed circumstances since the introduction of crack cocaine, some suggestions are made with regards to decriminalisation of the trade. We appeal to the legislature to reconsider their research resources and to note that the interests, views and experiences of the thousands of prostitutes working the clubs, agencies and streets of Hillbrow, are being ignored. The draftees of this pending policy do not know these girls, these childlike beings that are supposedly to benefit by decriminalising sex work.

After reading the draft document I staged some questions to several of the girls known to us. Not wishing to take up too much of your valuable time I will endeavour to describe the general attitude of the girls actually working the streets, towards the subject of decriminalisation.

Questions asked were such as:

How do they conceive the decriminalisation of sex work? What does it mean? How will it affect their lives? Do they see benefits, etc.

The general response can be summarised in the following answers/queries obtained from these girls:

- Are drugs going to be legal, and if not, how can we work?
- Regardless ... the police will continue to allow the drug dealers to sell their drugs.
- What about the steamers (sex buyers) or in other terms, the men 'nicely' referred to as clients by you.
- It makes no difference ... the steamers will still beat us up, and the cops will still take from us.
- Why not issue permits to steamers so we know if they are safe to do business with, protect us, not the perverted men out there.

The draft mentions the '*massive burden*' on the state having to cope with all the prostitutes in prison. Not one of several girls could recall any girl that they know of that is in prison for prostitution. For drug abuse, yes, for prostitution, no! What happens to girls arrested for soliciting? They pay an admission of guilt fine, varying between R75 - R300, or, they 'pay-in-kind' in the back of the police van. Every now and again an official 'bust' is arranged and ten or twenty girls will be picked up and jailed for twenty-four hours, after which they are released, an inconvenience that has to be put up with.

Will Pimp, brothel owner and police harassment stop if prostitution becomes legal?

The prostitutes think not and seem to agree that the 'protection' game will become more severe, resulting in them having to pay for protection. The general feeling is that the present on-going brothel war will escalate.

It would seem that the prostitutes do not care about most of the benefits proposed as possible in the draft document.

The idea of subscribing to an old age pension-fund the prostitutes find particularly laughable as none of them expect to ever become old enough to benefit. Eighty percent and more of the street workers are drug addicts and few of them have any hope for a better future or long life.

What do they think of the idea of paying towards a social security benefit funds or an unemployment fund; this question caused little or no response, from some merely a shrug of the shoulders.

To a medical aid; the idea of a medical benefit that will perhaps allow them to enter a rehabilitation centre does have some appeal, for at the moment the Welfare system take their time with the 'paper work' and while waiting, you can die on the streets.

When asked if they are willing to pay income tax on their earnings they thought that I was joking. Can we blame them if they laugh at the idea of paying taxes? Most of these girls earn thousands of Rands a month, risking their lives. Do we really expect them to pay of this 'hard earned' money towards taxes? Do we realise how much drugs can be bought for that money? We must be stupid! Why do they come to the Hillbrow Drop-in Centre to have a sandwich ... because they have spent all their money on drugs. The sad reality is that without being drugged they cannot sell their bodies, and without the sale of their bodies they cannot afford the drugs.

Most of the girls are against the idea of registering as sex workers. They dislike the idea of being on record and many associate this permit with carrying a 'pass' as in the previous regime.

It will not be necessary to continue with this line of thought, as it must be as clear to you as it is to me, a lot of investigating and assessing will still have to be done before a policy on Decriminalisation of Sex Workers can be accepted. This is an issue of tremendous complications.

We at the Hillbrow Drop-In Centre care for the plight of exploited women and we endeavour to improve their quality of life.

At your service

Adèle du Plessis

Public Relations Officer