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On March 12th, POWER facilitated a discussion at the local drop-in center OASIS in order to collect answers to the questions posed in the Department of Justice's "Public Consultation on Prostitution-Related Offenses in Canada." Below are the unedited answers given by the women who participated in the discussion.

The consultation closed on Monday March 17th, 2014.

Question 1: Do you think that purchasing sexual services from an adult should be a criminal offence? Should there be any exceptions? Please explain.

No, with no exception when the people involved are both consenting adults. Sex work is an agreement between both parties. If you make it illegal for clients, it's negative because we wouldn't have clients anymore and if we need the money to survive, it means having to resort to stealing or other crime. We need money to live, to pay rent, to survive. Who can live on a 500\$ welfare check when you have to take care of rent, food, bills, transportation, kids, etc.

Participant: "I have been waiting for three years to get on disability and can't make it work on Ontario Works money. I have a physical disability; this is my only way to get the money I need in a way that I'm ok with".

Also, what we do is important. If we can't do it, there will be more rape and more violence in families and on the street.

The cops in Ottawa pick up clients now in the sweeps but they still harass us, ask for our names, "what are you doing here", tell us to get off the street. The relationship is no good, they still harass us, there is still violence from police and threats even though they say they only target clients right now.

It wouldn't stop prostitution. It would never disappear. It is a crime right now and they harass us all the time but that has not made it disappear so it won't either if you go after clients.

If you need the money, you need the money, any programs like 'Jane School' (diversion programs or exiting programs) don't change anything about that. You just got back to working after you're out because you need to.

Not all clients are violent or attackers. Not all clients are bad dates.

Participant: "I had two or three bad dates in over 15 years, one said he wouldn't pay and had planned it all. If they are going to attack you, it's not arresting our good clients that will change that, those who want to hurt us, they plan it."

Question 2: Do you think that selling sexual services by an adult should be a criminal offence? Should there be any exceptions? Please explain.

No, with no exception when the people are two consenting adult. It is an agreement between two adults and we still get arrested for it. We go to jail and have records because of it, which makes it almost impossible to get any other jobs. We are fending for ourselves and still, it gives us records to go out to get money. Getting arrested, it destroys your name, any chances of moving on. You try to hide from police all the time and clients are afraid as well. If we see cops around, that means we have to refuse dates until they leave or have to go hide. That's a bad thing because then we don't get the money that we need. We have to wait longer out in the cold. The longer you are out there, the more chances you have to run into a psycho. Police treat us like crap, they treat us like we're piece of dirt because of something we have to do to survive. They treat us like we have killed people, like we're real criminals.

Question 3: If you support allowing the sale or purchase of sexual services, what limitations should there be, if any, on where or how this can be conducted? Please explain.

No limitation for adults. Most of us are really careful about where we do it. We don't do it in front of children and that's why it's on Montreal road where there are stores or in other spots where we try to be discrete.

Question 4: Do you think that it should be a criminal offence for a person to benefit economically from the prostitution of an adult? Should there be any exceptions? Please explain.

No. Of course, pimps should not exist. Pimps encourage drug use and beat girls up. There are not many of them out there, especially compared to 20 years ago, but when the girls are insecure and they feel unsafe on the street by themselves, not knowing their rights and all, afraid of clients and police, pimps say they will protect you so that convinces some girls to work for them. They don't actually protect girls, they say they will though. They are not deserving of the money the girls give them because they take advantage of how it is dangerous out there with the police and having to hide and all.

Other people who are working for sex workers should be allowed to do it as long as they are doing what they say they will, then that's fine. Like security guards or secretaries. If its legal people could check on them and make sure they don't scam us. If they are not doing it, then they should not benefit from the money.

Participant: “Many people work with us that are not pimps. My boyfriend was taking down plate numbers. One time I got attacked and the guy had planned to attack me. He had stolen plates so the car wouldn’t be tracked (the police told me after) so he knew he wanted to do something to a girl. It was all planned out. That guy didn’t know but my boyfriend was watching out for me. There were lots of empty parking lots of Nelson before and when he attacked me, I managed to punch him back and unlock the door. My boyfriend heard me scream and came running. Neighbours also heard. The police came.”

Question 5: Are there any other comments you wish to offer to inform the Government's response to the Bedford decision?

We agree with the decision from the Supreme Court. It shouldn’t be a crime as long as it’s between consenting adults and the majority of us are consenting mature adults. It is negative for us that it is a crime. Because it makes us feel like we are doing something wrong when deep down, it’s not wrong. The decision should be ours. We don’t think it’s a crime and we should get support when we need it instead of being jacked up.

From the women of OASIS, collated by POWER.