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Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Email: fpa.sen@aph.gov.au

Submission: Inquiry into Domestic Violence and Gender Inequality

About SWOP

The Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP) was established 25 years ago and is Australia's largest and longest established community-based sex worker organisation focused on HIV, STI and Hepatitis C prevention, education and health promotion for sex workers in NSW. A key element in the success of SWOP's work is the building of strategic, collaborative and multidisciplinary working relationships with sex workers, and other key health, government and non-government organisations, advocating for a holistic approach to the health services provided to sex workers.

The stigmatisation of sex workers, particularly women, reinforces gender inequality

SWOP at its most basic, is a health and anti-violence organisation. We work to address the inequities in health outcomes and levels of violence that sex workers experience, largely as a result of their work being highly stigmatised here in NSW.

Society tolerates violence against sex workers, particularly female sex workers, because of the stigma and myths that surround sex work. We believe that the stigmatisation of sex workers, and the even higher profile stigmatisation of women who do sex work, reinforces gender inequality and contributes to the prevalence of domestic violence in the broader community.

"I'm aware his previous victims in previous cases before Jill were sex workers, and I'll never be convinced that doesn't have something to do with the lenience of his sentence," he said.

"Put it like this: if he'd raped five people like Jill that many times in that brutal a fashion, I don't think he would have served eight years in prison."

He says that "sends a disturbing message".

"What it says to women is if we don't like what you do, you won't get justice," he said.

"And what it says to people like Bayley is not 'don't rape', but 'be careful who you rape!'."

Bereaved husband Tom Meagher made some sage comments following the death of his wife, Jill Meagher in 2012. Essentially when crimes against sex workers are not treated as significant, we effectively create an underclass of people that it is acceptable to be violent to, and in some cases, kill.

From our own work, we can tell you that in the last 12 months, SWOP provided 5,095 occasions of service (OOS) to NSW sex workers, and 4,574 of these people identified as women (89.8%), and 489 (9.6%) identified as men. In the course of the 4,575 OOS provided to women, 703 (15.4%) included discussions of safety and violence, or domestic violence. We also discussed safety and violence, including domestic violence with 64 men (13.1%), over the course of providing 489 occasions of service to them.

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Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP) | Level 4, 414 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010 | PO Box 1354 Strawberry Hills NSW 2012

Tel: (02) 9206 2166 (in Sydney/interstate) | **Freecall:** 1800 622 902 (outside Sydney in NSW) | **Fax:** (02) 9206 2133

Email: swopconnect@swop.org.au | **Web:** www.swop.org.au



While both male (including trans male) and female (including trans female) sex workers both experience violence at nearly similar rates, in a reportⁱⁱ we commissioned analysing data SWOP collected from sex workers between 2000 and 2006, all of the perpetrators of violence were male. Violence in sex worker workplaces may not be seen as domestic violence, but it certainly is violence that occurs in a private and intimate setting.

Media representations of sex workers, particularly murdered sex workers, needs tighter control

The stigmatisation of sex workers, particularly female sex workers, is entrenched in our social institutions, our media and our entertainment industry. Media stereotypes like the ‘dead hooker in a dumpster’ are employed to entertain us. Entertainment shows like *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, currently in its seventeenth season, use dead sex worker bodies to demonstrate over and over again that very bad things happen to bad women.

Similar tropes are used to sell newspapers, and are utilised as ‘clickbait’ to drive online website traffic to news sites. When a sex worker is murdered, further violence is enacted upon her when

inappropriate headlines and articles dissect her body, her job and her life choices, rather than focus upon the fact that someone (usually a violent man) has killed her.



Rarely has this been more obvious than in Queensland’s Courier-Mail front page reporting on the death of Mayang Prasetyo, under the salacious headline *Monster Chef and the She Male* (Tuesday October 7, 2014). This particularly horrendous coverage of a woman who was murdered by her intimate partner (not in the course of her job) inspired a petition signed by more than 25,000 people, and attracted the attention of Media Watchⁱⁱⁱ.

In addition, it would seem that sex work history is able to be trotted out salaciously in the media at any point in someone’s life. Even becoming, and working as a judge, is seemingly not enough to avoid your former work history being privileged in your obituary headline, as this recent piece demonstrated: *Stripper who became a judge found dead at home*^{iv}.

Addressing gender equality requires us to treat sex workers the same as other women

Gender equality cannot be achieved when one class of women, sex workers, are considered not only as not being equal to men, but less equal due to their occupations than other women. Nor can domestic violence be fully addressed whilst violence against sex working women is accepted as normal by society, and the media and entertainment industries.

SWOP requests that funds be made available to peer based community sex worker organisations across Australia so that public education can be undertaken to de-stigmatise female sex workers so that they can be treated as equal to women who pursue non sex working occupations. This would be done with the ultimate goal of equality within gender, and equality between genders.

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SWOP Recommendations:

- Decriminalise sex work across all Australian states and territories to reduce stigma against sex workers
- Increase Australian Press Council powers to impose penalties for sensationalised tabloid media articles about sex workers, particularly dead sex workers
- Bolster Australian Press Council's Statement of General Principles to include specific instruction about dealing with sex workers in the media
- Ensure headlines are treated with the same scrutiny as articles by the Australian Press Council
- Address the current journalistic practice of 'clickbait' where the general public is tricked into clicking on links that use violent or sexualised depictions, including depictions of dead or mutilated sex workers
- Fund SWOP and similar organisations around Australia who work to reduce stigma and violence against sex workers, ensuring they have the same health outcomes as other Australians

SWOP's recommendations are based upon our 25 years of organisational experience working with sex industry workers in NSW.

Regards,

SWOP Chief Executive Officer

ⁱ ABC News, *Jill Meagher's husband Tom Meagher says justice system failed her and Adrian Bayley's sentence is a disgrace*, 20 June, 2013, accessed online 24/03/16 at

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-06-19/tom-meagher-says-justice-system-failed-his-wife/4766620>

ⁱⁱ Elton Consulting, *Safety Issues in Sex Work Settings*, July 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Media Watch, Episode 37, 13 October, 2014, accessed online 24/03/16 at

<http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s4106158.htm>

^{iv} News.com.au, *Stripper who became a judge found dead at home*, 17 March, 2016, accessed online 24/03/16 at <http://www.news.com.au/world/north-america/stripper-who-became-a-judge-found-dead-at-home/news-story/a31c521ec491e12c735e1a3eb2aa812f>

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