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Media Release

Vancouver sex workers improve their lives by being organized

Researcher says ability to negotiate despite mistrust of police is a significant accomplishment

ST CATHARINES, Ontario — May 27, 2014 — Being well-organized has allowed sex workers in Vancouver to both improve protection for themselves and make an important contribution to changing the laws with regard to sex work in Canada, says a Vancouver researcher.

Genevieve Fuji Johnson is an associate professor of political science and an associate faculty member of the Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University.

At the 2014 Congress of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, she is presenting the preliminary results of a study of the regulation of prostitution in Canada.

Johnson became interested in the issue after doing some volunteer work in Vancouver's downtown east side, a centre for sex workers in the city.

She found that what she calls "the community of policy actors in Vancouver" – which includes sex worker organizations, social service providers, advocacy groups and the Vancouver Police Department – is very well organized.

"This is an important finding for me," she says. "In this community, actors have been very successful in contributing to the constitutional challenge of the Criminal Code (with regard to prostitution in Canada)."

Johnson says she is not able to give an estimate of the number of sex workers in Vancouver, though she says other studies have suggested the number is between 1,000 and 2,000.

"It's a very difficult community to study," she says, explaining that many sex workers do not want to self-identify because of the stigma attached to the work.



Yet the community has members who are active and who see the importance of taking a public stance.

“The level of organization among the sex workers themselves is very impressive,” she says.

She explains that though sex workers have historically been a marginalized community, they have been pushing for policy change at the federal level through the courts.

(Late last year, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down Canada’s anti-prostitution laws and gave Parliament one year to come up with new legislation, should it choose to do so.)

Closer to home, Johnson says Vancouver sex workers are negotiating with the city police to implement concrete actions that will improve their safety.

Their success in doing this is all the more impressive, she says, since the organizations for sex workers are voluntary organizations operating on shoestring budgets, in a city that has in the past seen extreme violence against sex workers.

Vancouver-area serial killer Robert Pickton was charged in the deaths of more than two dozen women, many prostitutes from Vancouver’s downtown east side, and was convicted in 2007 of the murder of six of them.

Those deaths created a feeling of “enormous distrust” of police among sex workers, says Johnson. And yet, she says, the sex workers have been able to work with police on guidelines for protecting sex workers. And the police now have a sex worker liaison officer.

Out of that mistrust, says Johnson, have come specific measures to improve the lives of sex workers.

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For more information, or to schedule an interview, please contact:

Nicola Katz
Communications Manager
Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences
C: 613-282-3489
nkatz@ideas-idees.ca



Mélanie Béchard
Communications Officer
Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences
C: 613-894-7635
mbechard@ideas-idees.ca



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DES SCIENCES
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300-275 Bank, Ottawa, ON K2P 2L6 613.238.6112
info@ideas-idees.ca www.ideas-idees.ca