

# PROJECT PORTRAIT

## Female Transgendered Sex Workers and Support Strategies #129 (2014)

### What is this project about?

This is a gender study unpacking the intersection of female transgender identities and sex work in Cape Town; it uses a feminist and queer theory lens. The study was a collaboration between the Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Task force (SWEAT) and gender Studies at UCT.

The project attempts to:

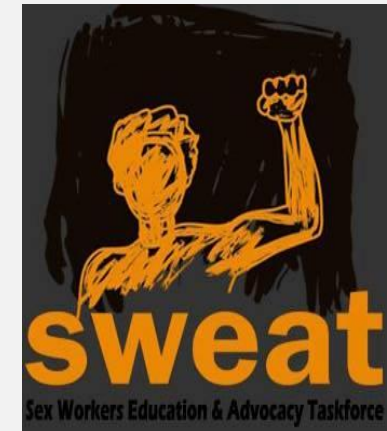
- Highlight directions for more valid research into sex work;
- Explore the voices and lived experiences of female transgendered sex workers; and
- Unpack their strategies for coping, the support mechanisms available for them, how they are viewed, and how they can be supported.

### The research

The study started with an extensive review on literature around sex work and female transgender identities. This showed the problematic and limited lens commonly used in existing research.

A qualitative study was then carried out with interviews of 8 individuals who were part of SWEAT's support group *Sistahood*. The approach followed was informed by queer theories, within a feminist and constructivist framework.

The common elements in relationships with the self, police, clients, family, partners, other sex workers, and SWEAT were looked at; while keeping in mind that each person's story and experience is unique.



Logo of the NGO SWEAT who requested this study.

**What you need to know:** *For sex workers who are ALSO female transgendered, this double marginalisation shapes their experiences, needs, and threats. **Sex work research** needs to take this intersection seriously; and has to foreground THEIR voices as a way to understand their unique lived realities.*

*To **provide effective support** to such marginalized groups setting up relationships with other actors, groups, or spaces is not enough; it has to include understanding and navigating the power dynamics within those relationships.*

## The research findings

*Existing sex work research either ignores transgender women or stereotypes them only as high-risk and extremely vulnerable.*

-----  
This study focused on relationships, finding that:

\*Having a strong sense of self & self-reliance is essential. But this can conflict with seeking support;

\*Clients discriminate against them;

\*Police often act abusively & violate their rights without accountability;

\*Support or lack thereof from families & intimate partners depend on particular dynamics;

\*Relationships between *sistas* within support groups can be undermined by lack of confidentiality & involvement, as well as jealousy or competition;

\*Groups like SWEAT can support them by offering practical information, and spaces to learn & freely express their views.

## Using the research

In order to improve sex work research, the study stresses the need to go beyond limited approaches. The focus ought to be on sex workers' relationships to unpack lived realities.

For improving conditions and support for (female transgendered) sex workers, the study found:

- Need for education of the public & police officers.
- Abusers have to be held accountable.
- Decriminalizing sex work remains key.
- Solidarity networks between female transgendered sex workers are crucial.
- Support groups such as *Sistahood* need to:
  - Be maintained and enhanced;
  - Encourage importance of self-reliance and finding oneself;
  - Use methods that create trust within groups and outside solidarity as well.

The study was completed in **November 2014**.

## Want to know more?

A Gender Studies Honours student, Amy Webber, completed this study in partnership with SWEAT. She was supervised by Dr Adelene Africa. The thesis is available on the Co-op website.

**Keywords:** Sex Work, Female Transgendered, Queer Theory.

To **reference** this Project Portrait, cite UCT Knowledge Co-op as the author.

Project portraits are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike license: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/za/deed.en>

## The Knowledge Co-Op at the University of Cape Town

The UCT Knowledge Co-op aims to make it easier for community partners to access UCT's skills, resources and professional expertise. It helps initiate joint projects that benefit both the community partner and the university. The Co-op links community groups with appropriately qualified staff and students at UCT, and supports both partners throughout the project – from initial planning to final product.

[know-op@uct.ac.za](mailto:know-op@uct.ac.za)

| [www.knowledgeco-op.uct.ac.za](http://www.knowledgeco-op.uct.ac.za)

| Tel: 021 – 650 4415

