

A Media Perspective

Stewart Lawler talks to Rights for All Male Sexworkers spokesman Robin Svendsjaryd and discovers some of the politics behind prostitution. Re-printed with permission of Campaign Australia Inc.

Well, I guess I must have arrived in the big city, then. Here I am in the Oxford Hotel chatting with a male prostitute. Six months ago this would have been a very unlikely happening. The man in question is more than a prostitute though. He is Robin Svendsjaryd, founder of Rights for All Male Sexworkers

I thought I had a pretty ideologically sound attitude but only a few minutes into the interview and already I'm a changed person. I have discovered my latent prudery and thrown it out the window.

The reason is that Robin (I'll call him by his first name) is a very impressive speaker. He is intelligent, articulate and very persuasive. It is impossible not to be convinced that he is right. He sees the world the way it is and, what's more, he knows what has to be done about it.

This explains why he formed RAMS, not as a personal soap box but as a collective self help group because he is genuinely concerned for the situation of men in the sex industry.

The picture that emerges as he talks is not a pretty one, and the worst part of it is that the gay community itself must shoulder some of the blame. So sit down, take a deep breath and prepare to feel a bit guilty.

RAMS first gained major publicity with their high profile at last year's Fred Nile rally at Kings Cross. The counter rally organised by Robin and RAMS members, probably didn't have much effect on Fred and his cronies but it was significant in that it highlighted the attitude of some of the police towards the gay community. Most would agree that some very positive things have come from that whole incident. And so RAMS proved itself as a powerful political organisation.

But first and foremost RAMS is a self-help organisation. Members are free to come and go as they wish. The group exists to serve men at all levels of involvement in the sex industry - from street workers to concubines of the rich and famous. RAMS will also help anybody wishing to stop working or who needs help to stay in work, or even someone who wants to start work. These are broad aims for any group but the sex industry exists on many and varied social strata, so RAMS exists to serve and to be an effective voice for all male sex workers.

Prostitution, it could be argued, is political by nature. This is only because it has for years existed in the shadowy grey areas of legality and morality. It is only a relatively recent phenomenon that has actually seen prostitutes speaking out in public about their needs. This has become even more important in recent years as the debate over legalisation and/or decriminalisation of prostitution increases. Moves afoot in NSW state parliament in this regard have made RAMS rise to prominence even more timely.

It sounds odd at first, but there are good reasons for not legalising prostitution. Robin says simple decriminalisation is enough because it allows sex workers some measure of legal respectability, while full legislation would impose bureaucratic restraints on an industry that has run itself quite

well without such intervention for hundreds of years.

But as things stand at the moment, being not illegal any more does not make a male sex worker's life much easier. After decriminalisation came the real work of gaining community acceptance and, in an ideal world, respect. There is a direct parallel here with the homosexual law reform movement. As an ex-Tasmanian, I know all too well how little effect a mere deletion in the law books can have on community attitudes. Decriminalisation is necessary to make a point and so that bigots no longer have a legal argument to back them up. Groups such as RAMS can then work for acceptance within a tolerant legal atmosphere.

When they can't argue with the law, the bigots and moralists may then turn to the issue of health and the spread of HIV. However, those who suggest prostitutes help spread HIV won't get very far in their argument with Robin. He says that sex workers are obliged to be at the front line of sexual health awareness. HIV, he says, is merely one of a myriad of STD's that a sex worker has to be aware of. Furthermore, maintaining his health, both sexual and general, is crucial to the worker's ability to continue working, so he must be doubly conscious of health issues. Robin believes that most workers are actively involved in their own health care, and RAMS exists to support those who need help in this area as well.

However, there is much to be done. It appears that the gay community, often itself the victim of brutal physical and moral attacks, does not hold the male sex worker in fair esteem. Another of RAMS' aims is to make the gay community aware of its obligations to what is essentially a minority group within a minority group.

The gay community is subject to much abuse from fag bashers and the like and sex workers, particularly those working on the street, take the brunt of this violence. But in addition to this they are often victims of abuse from within the gay community itself - and sadly that can include bashing.

Robin points out that most male sex workers are members of the gay community and are important contributors to it both socially and financially. This should be obvious really, but most people still see sex workers as over-sexed sluts who can't get it anywhere else. This is not true for the majority of workers, says Robin. It takes a special kind of confidence to be a sex worker and not all are forced into the work by circumstance. Most are simply in the business for economic reasons. Some even see the work as a means to an end - saving for something special that they would not be able to afford otherwise. For the rest of us, that overseas holiday remains but a dream.

So for the future, RAMS will continue to maintain a visible and vocal presence both within the gay community and the world at large, campaigning for a fair deal for all. If you haven't guessed already, they have gained one more sympathiser to their cause already. They deserve our support and encouragement. What more can I say?