

Coyote/National Task Force on Prostitution

Purpose

The purpose of the National Task Force on Prostitution is to 1) repeal the existing prostitution laws; 2) empower prostitutes to bargain with their employers, when they work for agencies, in order to improve their working conditions; 3) inform the public about the reality, as opposed to the various myths, of prostitution; 4) educate to prevent the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases; and 5) end the stigma associated with female sexuality and earning power (i.e., money).

The NTFP's goals include the repeal of all laws against soliciting, engaging, or agreeing to engage in sex in exchange for money or anything of value. In addition, we believe that no mutually voluntary aspects of prostitution should be criminal, including relationships between prostitutes and third-party managers (also known as pimps, panders and procurers), renting a premises for the purposes of prostitution, residing in a place where prostitution occurs, or similar aspects of prostitution. Existing laws dealing with assault and battery, kidnapping, and sexual assault should be enforced in cases where violence, or the threat of violence, is used to force someone to engage in prostitution or to work in pornography. Immigration laws which prohibit anyone who has ever worked as a prostitute, whether legally or not, from entering the country should also be repealed, as should domestic legislation prohibiting prostitutes from crossing state lines to work within the United States or sending money earned through prostitution across state lines. Laws dealing with sexual abuse of juveniles should be enforced against those who profit from the sexuality of minors.

The NTFP makes a distinction between voluntary and forced prostitution. Voluntary prostitution is the mutually voluntary exchange of sexual services for money or other consideration; it is a form of work, and like most work in our capitalist society, it is often alienated (that is, the worker/prostitute has too little control over her/his working conditions and the way the work is organized). Forced prostitution is a form of aggravated sexual assault.

The NTFP supports the development of programs to assist adult and juvenile prostitutes in changing their occupation, as well as programs to provide shelter and support for any prostitutes who are victims of violence, whether the violence is ongoing or random.

The NTFP is working to prevent the scapegoating of prostitutes for AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and to educate prostitutes, their clients, and the general public about prevention of these diseases.

The NTFP calls on local, state and national governments, as well as private foundations, to fund programs which provide services to prostitutes and ex-prostitutes.

History

COYOTE was founded in San Francisco in 1973 by Margo St. James, an ex-prostitute, because although there were many organizations working for women's rights, no organization was addressing prostitutes' issues. More importantly, no one was speaking about the issues from the perspective of the prostitutes themselves. Similar organizations sprang up in other parts of the country, including New York PONY, Massachusetts PUMA, Hawaii DOLPHIN, Detroit CUPIDS, Michigan PEP, Florida COYOTE, Kansas City KITTY, Los Angeles CAT, New Orleans PASSION, Sacramento COYOTE, San Diego OCELOT, Seattle ASP, and others. Most of the organizations consisted of a single activist who was able to come out of the closet and speak publicly on the issue of prostitution. Others consisted of small groups of activists. PUMA, in Massachusetts, eventually began to focus more and more on the issue of violence against prostitutes, and is now devoted to providing services for battered prostitutes. CUPIDS continues to meet in Detroit and to speak out against police harassment of prostitutes. CAT, in Los Angeles, began to work primarily with minors and is now Children of the Night, a service agency for juvenile prostitutes. Most of the other organizations eventually ceased operating as the active core members drifted on to other things. A major factor has always been the difficulty in obtaining funds, either from foundations or the government, to continue public

education and/or service-oriented projects. A second and equally important factor is that speaking out about prostitutes' rights when you are a prostitute involves a good deal of personal risk; it is difficult to sustain the effort without financial and political support. For many people and organizations, prostitution is still an extremely controversial issue. For most legislators, it remains a joke except when it is used to gain prominence by attacking prostitutes.

The most politically active of all the chapters have been the San Francisco and the Atlanta chapters. In 1979, the National Task Force on Prostitution was formed with the idea of eventually developing a formalized national network of prostitutes' rights advocacy organizations. In 1984, the first national conference was held in San Francisco, at the same time as the Democratic National Convention. Conferences have been held every year since. There is a similar network in Canada, Canadians Organized for the Rights of Prostitutes (CORP), which has worked with the NTFP on some projects. The majority of the active chapter members are prostitutes and ex-prostitutes, although some non-prostitute advocates also participate.

In 1986, the NTFP organized a meeting of prostitutes' rights supporters, including many non-prostitute women, in New York, with the goal of establishing a network of solidarity organizations tentatively named the Feminist Alliance for Prostitutes' Rights. At the present time, FAPR groups meet in New York, Tampa, and Seattle. There are also many service agencies loosely affiliated with the Task Force, including the Mary Magdalene Project, in southern California, and Genesis House, in Chicago.

In 1985, Margo St. James and Gail Pheterson formed the International Committee for Prostitutes Rights (ICPR), based in The Netherlands. The National Task Force on Prostitution — and its affiliates — are members of the ICPR, which sponsored the World Whores' Congress in Amsterdam in 1985 and in Brussels in 1986. In 1987, participating organizations plan to hold regional meetings, including the Americas Regional Whores' Congress in San Francisco. The next World Whores' Congress is scheduled for 1988, probably in Italy.

Becoming an NTFP Affiliate

In order to be an affiliate of the National Task Force on Prostitution, a local organization must adhere to the policies developed at the annual San Francisco meeting. Any public statements (to the press, government agencies, college classes, organizations, etc.) made by anyone representing the local affiliate and the Task Force must be consistent with those policies.

To form an affiliate, look for other interested individuals and begin meeting. Ideally, a majority of the active members of the affiliate will be prostitutes and ex-prostitutes, who can speak and make decisions based on their own experiences. Some suggestions about what a local affiliate can do are listed below. Members of the Task Force are available for consultation (see list of affiliates at the end of this article).

After you have been meeting for several months and have developed some idea of what you would like to do, submit a formal proposal to the NTFP headquarters, in San Francisco, for approval. If possible, each affiliate should send at least one representative to the annual meeting of the National Task Force on Prostitution, held in San Francisco, California every summer.

SAMPLE PROJECTS

1. Find Out How Prostitutes Are Dealt with in Your Community

Police: Contact the local police department/vice squad to find out arrest statistics. Ask for the counts to be broken down into women and men, with each gender further broken down by race and by adult and juvenile. If they say they can't do it, ask for a copy of the statistical report they submit to the State Attorney General's Office and/or the U.S. Department of Justice.

Ask the police department how many prostitutes were raped the previous year, and how many were murdered. If they say they don't know, ask them why not. Ask them how they handle rape cases when the victim is a prostitute.

Find out if they confiscate condoms from individuals arrested for prostitution. If they do, try to work with your public health department to get the policy changed (condoms are essential to prevent AIDS; confiscating them during an arrest constitutes an increased AIDS risk).

Sheriff: Contact the sheriff's department to find out how prostitutes are processed in the county jail. Are they allowed to get out of jail, post-arrest, on their own recognizance? Do bail bondspeople post bail for prostitutes? How about for pimps? How about for customers? Are prostitutes ever given a citation instead of being charged with prostitution? Are prostitutes eligible for work furlough programs?

Judges: Contact judges to find out how prostitutes are dealt with in the courts. Are first offenders granted pre-trial diversion? How are rape cases dealt with when the victim is a prostitute?

District Attorney/Public Defender: Contact the district attorney

and the public defender to find out the policy regarding prosecuting people arrested for prostitution. Are customers and prostitutes dealt with in the same way? Are either or both urged to plead guilty to a lesser charge, such as disturbing the peace? Are they urged to plead not guilty? How does the district attorney handle complaints of rape or other abuse filed by prostitutes?

Pre-trial Diversion: Contact the pre-trial diversion project, if any, to find out if they accept prostitutes as clients. What kind of diversion do they set up for prostitutes? If they grant community service, see if they will place prostitutes to work with your affiliate.

ACLU: Contact the local chapter of the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) to find out if they have been handling any prostitution cases, or if they can refer you to ethical attorneys who do. If they have not done any work this issue, ask them if they would consider taking prostitution cases in an effort to get the laws repealed in the courts.

Battered Women's Shelter/Rape Crisis Center: Contact your local battered women's shelter to find out if they accept prostitutes as clients. Do they assume the problem is prostitution, or do they assume that prostitution is work and the problem is a relationship with a batterer? Ask if there are any prostitutes or ex-prostitutes on staff and, if not, whether they would consider hiring an ex-prostitute to work as a counselor with battered women. If not, why not?

Contact your local rape crisis program to find out if they get calls from prostitutes and, if so, are they able to help them? Ask if there are any prostitutes or ex-prostitutes on the staff and, if not, whether they would consider hiring ex-prostitutes to work as rape crisis counselors. If not, why not?

Health: Contact your local women's health center, public health unit, mental health program, and other medical agencies that offer services to women, to ask about their services for prostitutes. Find out what kind of AIDS prevention education is being offered to prostitutes and their customers.

Monitor the Media: Watch your local television news programs, and monitor your local newspaper, to see how they deal with prostitutes. If you find their coverage objectionable, see if you can get them to change their attitudes. In particular, watch how they treat the issue of prostitutes and AIDS. If they appear to blame prostitutes for heterosexual transmission of the disease, remind them that unsafe sex, not group labels, is what is responsible for transmission, and that prostitutes are significantly more likely to practice safe sex than non-prostitute women.

2. What Can You Do to Help Prostitutes?

Resource Guide: Put out a resource guide, including legal rights in your community, lists of agencies willing to work with prostitutes (health centers, shelters, mental health programs, lawyers, vocational counseling programs, displaced homemakers programs) as well as other women's programs. Include safe sex guidelines, as well as resources for further information about AIDS. If anonymous (not merely confidential) testing is available in your community, include that information in your resource guide.

Public Education: Hold community forums on prostitution. Possible speakers might include representatives of the ACLU, the National Lawyers Guild, the Public Defender's and District Attorney's Office, the Department of Public Health, your local AIDS education project, a staff person from the local pre-trial diversion program, as well as feminist attorneys, rape crisis counselors, counselors for battered women, and, of course, prostitutes.

Get Support Statements: Contact feminist and other women's organizations, gay and lesbian organizations, civil rights organizations, welfare rights organizations, criminal justice reform organizations, prisoners' rights organizations, and other progressive and/or civil liberties organizations in your area to find out if they have a formal position on prostitution. If so, try to obtain a copy of any resolutions they have adopted on the issue. If not, ask if they would be interested in having a speaker come to a meeting and/or if they would be willing to endorse a resolution calling for the decriminalization of prostitution.

Develop resolutions on specific police and criminal justice practices in your community, and invite other organizations to endorse/co-sign the resolutions.

Jail Project: Investigate the possibility of developing a project inside the women's jail. Such projects can include providing tutoring or other services, bringing concerts and other entertainment into the jail, doing volunteer counseling, offering safe sex workshops, coming in to talk about the goals of the National Task Force on Prostitution, etc.