

Some Mother's Daughter

**The hidden movement of
prostitute women against violence**

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International Prostitutes Collective*



CROSSROADS

The John School: A diversion from what's needed

Diversion programs have been in existence in the US criminal justice system for some time. One of them, the John School, is for men accused of being clients. They are given the option of attending a course for which they must pay a fee, instead of being prosecuted. The first John School, called the First Offender Prostitution Program (FOPP), was set up in San Francisco in 1995. In 1998, like most things made in the USA, the programme was replicated in Britain — a John School opened in Leeds, called the Kerb Crawlers Rehabilitation Project.

Men are told that if they pay a fee (\$500 in the US, £110 in the UK), attend counseling and don't get arrested again in a year, their first arrest will be wiped off the books. They are threatened with heavy penalties if they "re-offend".

The John School in San Francisco has been used to oppose sex workers' demand for decriminalization as it gained wider public support. Property owners who wanted more policing joined with the head of the vice squad to form the first John School.

Glowing reports have credited the School with lowering street prostitution, rehabilitating clients and bestowing untold benefits on sex workers.

While claiming to be an alternative approach to criminalization, the John School has gone hand-in-hand with repressive policing, increased street sweeps and undercover decoy operations in which prostitute women are always the first to be arrested. And while police time and resources are

poured into picking up customers, protecting sex workers from violence continues to be a low priority.

Safe, regular customers are driven away, and women are forced to move to unfamiliar, often isolated areas to try to avoid arrest. With fewer clients, women have to work longer hours and take more risks in order to earn the money they need to live and to pay their fines. They have less time to check out clients before jumping into their car, as the men are nervous about being picked up by police. All this has made women more vulnerable.

The courses at the John School have promoted the same dangerous lies and sexist stereotypes which the prostitute women's movement has always fought to destroy. Clients are told that prostitutes spread disease, and that clients risk picking up life-threatening infections. Pictures of male genitalia in the last stages of syphilis (a disease almost wiped out in industrialized countries) are displayed. Such misinformation was regularly circulated at the height of public alarm about AIDS. It resulted in increased attacks against sex workers.

In Britain, the School is reported to include lectures from health workers but many have so far refused to be involved. One project worker who didn't agree with the School was told that his funders would be informed about his lack of co-operation.

Much has been made of the John School being an innovative programme, a creative solution to the old problem of prostitution. While we support alternatives to criminalization, we have seen little other than a crude puritanical mix of moralism, intimidation, and financial and emotional extortion. An attempt to shame, embarrass and humiliate men so they won't see a prostitute again.

Men are lectured to and shouted at. "This is about women and children who have been abused by you . . ." They are told by police that "Men like you abuse, rape and kill prostitutes. When that happens you'll be suspect. We will come and knock on your door. It's only a matter of time."

Making no distinction between violent men (who may or may not be clients) and non-violent clients is very dangerous. It promotes the myth that men who pay for sex are "perverts" while those who don't are "normal". This is not women's experience: an informal survey in Birmingham, England, found that 80% of men have been clients at some time or other — we have no reason to doubt this. Does that mean that 80% of men are "perverts"? If they are, shouldn't they be arrested for violence rather than for consenting sex?

Every prostitute woman knows there is as much difference between clients as there is between men generally — some are straightforward, some are masochists, some are sadists . . . Recent figures on domestic violence in Britain show that it takes an average of 35 assaults against partners before the man is prosecuted. Are these men being violent because they are clients or because they are husbands allowed to get away with it again and again? Ironically, even though so much of the so-called training is about violence, the John School in Britain specifically excludes clients who have been reported as violent.

The John School assumes men are guilty even if they have committed no offence. And police enforcement targets specific communities. In the US, police decoy operations take place in predominantly low-income Black and immigrant communities, where racist policing and civil rights violations are rampant. In Britain, some working women report that the police are more interested in arresting customers who are Black or who appear to be immigrant or refugee.

In San Francisco, US PROS defended a young Latino man who was falsely arrested in a decoy operation. He spoke no English and had been solicited by a policewoman posing as a hooker while he was riding his bike. He didn't understand what she said or what he was arrested for. He got a letter from the John School asking for the money to enrol him. He was never given the option of pleading not guilty. The representative of the John School attended court pressurizing

him at every hearing to sign up. He was told that if he went to court he would be exposed in the media as a client, and if found guilty he would be recommended for deportation. US PROS encouraged him not to give in to intimidation, and got a pro bono attorney to represent him. He was able to fight the case and the charges were dropped. Without our help he would have paid the fee he couldn't afford, gone to the school, and got a record.

Prostitute women have protested that while claiming to help sex workers by changing men's attitudes, the School deprives us of our livelihood without providing any viable economic alternatives. It is a waste of time and money which diverts attention and cash from the real problems we face of poverty, violence and criminalization.

The trainers at the School, including feminists, have attacked prostitutes' rights organizations while building their own careers on passing as experts in prostitute women's suffering. Widespread police abuse and other violence against hookers is never mentioned — it may jeopardize this nice little earner which is fast becoming the latest pimp industry to be built on the backs of prostitute women.

When the program was first introduced in San Francisco, the Public Defender's Office (state-funded defence lawyers) filed legal challenges claiming FOPP constituted illegally discriminatory prosecution targeting one class of individuals. Although the challenges were lost, opposition to the School has continued. Opposition has also come from outreach HIV/AIDS, drug/alcohol, youth and local community education projects — but most publicity never mentions it.

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