

# Second class citizens...second class women:

## The impact of gender inequality and gender based violence on transsexual women



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### References

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### Authors and acknowledgements

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# Second class citizens...second class women: The impact of gender inequality and gender based violence on transsexual women

## Background

In 2010 the LGBT Domestic Abuse Project and the Scottish Transgender Alliance published research looking at transgender people's experiences of domestic abuse (Roch et al, 2010). The research found extremely high levels of domestic abuse and lifted the lid on an area of gender based violence that we knew little about in Scotland. One of the most worrying findings from the research, however, related not to domestic abuse, but to another form of gender based violence. When respondents were asked about violence they had experienced from someone who was not a partner or ex-partner, 10% of people said that someone had forced or tried to force them to engage in sexual activity for money. This research project sought to obtain a better understanding of issues around sexual exploitation for transsexual people.

## The study

This project explored the very specific ways that transsexual women experience gender inequality and sexual exploitation. Of particular interest was the way that the sexism they experienced and their increased vulnerability to gender based violence was compounded by transphobia. The research comprised interviews with four people who identified as women with a transgender identity or history. All identified as transsexual women and were aged between 38 and 65. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, by advertising the research through LGBT and trans groups, and through services that work with transgender service users and individuals involved in prostitution. The option of face-to-face interviews, phone interviews and online interviews were offered to participants, but all took place in person. All of the names within the study were self-chosen pseudonyms. Any personal details that could identify individuals were removed to ensure the anonymity of the women who took part. Throughout the research there were difficulties in recruiting participants, due to various reasons, including the sensitive nature of the research and the levels of marginalisation felt by many trans people, resulting in a small number of people who felt able to take part.

## Key points

- There is pressure on trans women to conform to very traditional feminine forms, particularly in the early stages of transitioning when they are trying to access medical treatment.
- Transphobia and discrimination is a reality for many transgender people.
- Trans women do experience sexual harassment and sexual exploitation based on their transgender identity.
- Unemployment amongst trans people is high. Involvement in prostitution can be seen as an attractive option because of limited employment options.
- The costs involved for trans people in transitioning and the pressure to do so in a way that conforms to society's expectation of how they look and behave can be restrictively expensive.

## The findings

### Pressure to conform

The women who took part in the study all talked in detail about the pressure on trans women to present in very traditionally feminine ways (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Although this was seen to be true for all women, participants talked about the additional pressures and potential for harassment for trans women who fail to do so. These societal pressures seemingly come from all directions and are placed on the women from diverse sources, such as the medical profession, the media and strangers. The ability to live up to these expectations and the importance of doing so was a topic that was also brought up frequently. Fitting into a traditional feminine role was seen to allow women to be able to get on with their day to day lives, avoid harassment and have the opportunity to access vital medical treatments.

The pressure to conform was seen, by some of the women, as being more pronounced when they first began to transition,

## How does this research contribute to what we already know?

Very little research has been done looking at the specific and unique experiences of transgender people in Scotland, and less still that focuses on their experiences of gender based violence. Most of the evidence looks more generally at LGBT people's experiences with lesbian, gay and bisexual people outnumbering transgender participants. Recent research in Scotland has begun to focus more exclusively on trans people's experiences and has either directly or indirectly looked at experiences of gender based violence. Research looking at the lives of transgender people in Scotland found that 62% of respondents had experienced transphobic harassment from strangers and 46% of people had experienced transphobic abuse in relationships (Morton, 2008). Research looking more

specifically at trans people's experiences of domestic abuse found that 80% of respondents had experienced some form of abusive behaviour from a partner or ex-partner, the most common type (73%) of which was transphobic (Roch et al, 2010). The research also found that 10% of people reported someone forcing, or trying to force them, to engage in sex for money. Although extremely valuable for highlighting the abuse experienced by trans people in Scotland, the statistics do not provide insight into the personal experiences of the participants. This research reports the experiences of four trans women. While this number is small, given the paucity of research is it important that their voices are heard.

particularly when trying to access medical treatment. Assumptions by medical professionals that women should fit within very strict binary understandings of gender were highlighted within the interviews, which included pressure to wear make-up, have long hair and undergo specific medical treatments.

The ability to 'pass' was seen both as a source of pressure for many trans women, but also as an important way to avoid harassment and violence.

I've been told on the street, to my face, that c\*\*s like me should be rounded up in a field and shot, erm... more than once. Or the alternative is to be shot at birth... it comes back to men own the pavement. It is their given right to be lord and master of everything they see, whether it is their business or not, they feel free to comment on it, they feel free to interfere, they feel free to judge. They feel free, basically to do whatever they want. (Kate)

This ability to 'pass' as a transsexual person was seen as something that the women should aspire to, even though it was not necessarily something they felt comfortable with. While conforming was seen to have its benefits, for some, particularly Jane, it caused other problems. Presenting in an overtly feminine way meant receiving attention from men, which jarred with her identity as a lesbian. There was also concern that once a man found out that someone had, to use Kate's phrase, "tricked them", then they would experience violence and abuse.

If they, don't clock that you are trans straight away... and they come on to you, or they flirt with you or whatever, and then they find out, you are in trouble because you have tricked them... you have made them gay... And you're like no actually, I'm not actually sexually interested in you at all. (Kate)

However, for others being able to express their femininity was a positive experience. For Helen, being able to go about her daily life in a way that aligned with her gender identity was positive and affirming.

### Being online

The internet was mentioned by all of the women as having huge benefits for trans people in being able to find out information, speak to others and increase awareness of trans identities. It was seen as particularly important in Scotland due to the higher proportion of the population living in rural or isolated areas. However, there were also several stories of upsetting and difficult experiences online, where violence and harassment received was specifically because they were trans women.

This might seem strange to you, but as a female, I really felt quite violated. I didn't know where he was, he could have been thousands of miles away, it didn't matter. Y'know, it wasn't like he could touch me, but I really felt taken advantage of... he'd used me. (Helen)

Some interviewees feared the extremely sexualised portrayals of trans women within pornography encouraged men to have unrealistic expectations of trans women and their bodies, and led them to assume that they were sexually available, often at a price.

I don't know many trans women... who see themselves that way... just like non-trans women don't feel like porn stars either. (Jane)

### Vulnerability to exploitation

Despite none of the women disclosing ever having been paid for sex, they all have stories and experiences of how commercial sexual exploitation had impacted on their lives. Two of the women discussed experiences of being offered

money for sex and the assumptions men made about their bodies. All four also said that the market value of trans women is their unique bodies, specifically the fact that they are assumed to have a penis. It was noted that for trans women, involvement in prostitution was dependent on having a penis and that having gender reassignment surgery would mean losing their “market value”.

As soon as a transsexual sex worker has the operation, they lose their money-maker. (Kate)

Throughout the interview the women talked about the low incomes and high levels of unemployment of most trans people that they know. In their networks, transphobia and discrimination in the workplace is a reality for trans people, with reports of people having to leave jobs because of transphobic discrimination. Kate had not ‘worked properly’ in ten years and felt that there was no possibility of her going back to the career she had before she transitioned. Despite acknowledging that trans people in Scotland had far more options than many people throughout the world, the women interviewed conceded that due to the limited employment options for trans people selling sex may be seen as an attractive option when people were, to use Sam’s words, ‘desperate’. Other factors such as the high levels of substance misuse and mental health issues amongst the trans population in Scotland were also discussed as issues that make trans women more vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation, such as involvement in prostitution.

The costs involved for trans people in transitioning and the pressure to do so in a way that ‘conforms’ to societies expectations of how they look and behave can be restrictively expensive. It was felt by some of the women that the process of transitioning and the pressures to do so in a certain way limited their options and made them more vulnerable to being exploited.

People do it to raise money to buy... clothes because to have two wardrobes in some cases is expensive. To have the sort of secret life to be able to go and do things again costs money and people have, on occasion, done things to get things. (Sam)

## Conclusion

The women in this study experienced abuse and discrimination not just because they were trans people but because of their intersecting identities as trans people and women. Their experiences highlight the ways in which different forms of gender based violence connect with one another, and how gender inequality and transphobia connect with commercial sexual exploitation. As Kate describes in her interview:

Trans women aren’t just second class citizens, they’re second class women. (Kate)

The women’s experiences of pressure to conform and experiences of harassment, sexism and discrimination fit within a gender based violence framework. This research has highlighted the valuable contribution that trans women can make to our understanding of gendered abuse and suggests

## Policy implications

- Including the experiences of trans women will enhance all work looking at violence against women.
- Further research is needed on the commercial sexual exploitation of transgender people to further understand how services can provide the most appropriate support.
- Policies need to recognise the particular vulnerabilities of transgender people to poverty, substance misuse and gender-based violence.
- Trans women fear decreasing life chances if funding for tackling hate crime, gender-based violence services and healthcare for trans people is reduced.
- Further work should be done to ensure that transgender people feel confident and able to participate in research of this kind.

the importance of including their experiences within work addressing violence against women, whether future research or service delivery.

This research is an extremely small insight into the lived experiences of four trans women but it has highlighted many issues that we know little about. Further research looking in more detail at transgender people’s experiences of commercial sexual exploitation is needed to ensure their experiences are understood and that services working with people who experience abuse can support them appropriately.

The experiences of these women highlight the ways in which people can be more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. They support studies linking sexual exploitation and gender based violence with vulnerabilities such as poverty and substance misuse. It is therefore important that steps are taken at a local and national level to ensure that trans women are not made more vulnerable as a result of cuts to services, such as policing and support groups. This research recommends that funding towards tackling hate crime, gender based violence services and healthcare for trans people is continued. In the words of Sam:

But my main message would be please don’t go back to the old days where people can be exploited more than what they are now. Please do not go back. Look at the surgery, look at the waiting list, provide the support, give a little bit of money to support groups, that would help. (Sam)

<sup>1</sup>The term ‘pass’ was used by the women in the interview to describe when other people did not notice their transgender identity.