

HIV/AIDS, prostitution and the importance of education

The music is much louder than it should be at one o'clock in the afternoon, but the men and women gathered around tables and dancing on the balcony seem to prefer it that way. Bottles of rum, glasses of juice, and full ashtrays clutter the tables.

The wood-paneled walls are covered with images of scantily clad women. They hang almost out of place, like they were stuck up as an afterthought to fulfill expectations. Fair enough, this is a brothel, after all.

But there are other posters, posters with messages. They speak about the importance of using condoms and the dangers of HIV/AIDS. The posters hang with purpose, as if somebody on a mission put them up.

As Anita passes from one table to another, she sees me craning my neck upwards. She slows down, raises her voice above the blaring music, and tells me that she hung the posters.

I smile in recognition of her work, but she doesn't see it. She has already moved on to the next table of women and men — prostitutes and potential clients — to answer questions, hand out condoms, and watch the peer educators she helped train in action.

Ramona, Adrienne, Hannah, and Annie — the peer educators — are spread out at different tables, and

speak with everybody as though they're friends.

It's obvious that they've all spent time between these walls. Indeed, this is, or used to be, a place of business for all four women. But today they're here for a different reason. They've come to hold outreach sessions, to talk with whoever is willing to listen about topics such as HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, condom use, condom negotiation, genital hygiene, stigma and discrimination, confidentiality, treatment referrals, and male attitudes towards sex.

Before we left for the afternoon's outreach session, Ramona spoke of the reception they usually receive. "The girls never listen, like it's something strange I'm talking. No, they ask me to tell it over and over, like it's a story they enjoy hearing." Hannah and Adrienne nod their heads in agreement as Ramona continued.

"The girls are always asking for more sessions, and getting upset if one is scheduled and they can't make it." Anita assured me that the brothel and bar owners are fully supportive as well. "Sometimes, when a bar or club is planning an event, like a dance or karaoke, they'll call us and ask if we can come to educate the girls they expect to show up."

Anita volunteers in New

Amsterdam to do this work. In the beginning, she went to inform bar owners, brothel managers, and pimps, and then spoke with prostitutes and selected qualified women to be trained as health peer educators.

Anita listened proudly as Ramona, Adrienne, and Hannah told stories about their new roles in life. Because of the education they've gathered from being involved in the project, the three women have decided to stop sex work. All three women spoke of respect.

Whether respect is a quality of life they've never known or have just now been able to recapture is hard to tell, but it's something they all cherish, like a valuable gift that has been given to them. They are respected by colleagues, friends, and family, but perhaps more important is the new respect they have for themselves.

None mentioned this directly, but it was evident. It was apparent in their confidence, in the way they laughed so freely, and in the passion with which they talked. This self-respect is not just a gift that has been handed to them.

Through education, they saw how they could attain it and made conscious decisions to work for it. The peer educator explained that most prostitutes began working out of necessity, a need for survival. Some of the younger girls left home after disagreements with their parents, and realized they had no way to support themselves. Other women had husbands who left them with kids to feed and send to school. It is a job — like cutting cane or bagging rice — that provides food and shelter.

But it's also a job with risks and no training. Adrienne estimated that "Eighty percent of the women we talk to say they used to only think about the money."

When asked if she used to think about HIV/AIDS or other STIs when she was with a client, she didn't hesitate to reply for all three of them. "We never used to think about it because we didn't know about it." The prostitutes are also encouraged to go in for regular check-ups. They are given referral slips for clinics that provide free check-ups and treatment.

The referral slips are available, not only to the girls, but also to their clients, husbands, or partners. They are encouraged to pass on their knowledge to everybody they are having sexual intercourse with. This aspect of the project allows for a much wider impact in combating sexually transmitted diseases.

The project is working. Five women in Berbice and three in Skeldon, have since quit sex work — realizing the risks were not worth it. A 17-year-old recently quit the job, returned home, and is now taking night classes. Women are regularly refusing to sleep with clients showing symptoms of infections; clients are taking the advice of the girls and going in for check-ups and treatment. Even if it is just one person at a time, changes are happening.

Our last night in New Amsterdam was spent at a rum shop near the stelling. Hannah, Adrienne, and Ramona brought us there so we could

watch them do outreach. The tables were full of men and women, all there for their own reasons. I watched as Adrienne spoke to two prostitutes, who were eager to learn.

After 20 minutes of talking, the two women sat back in their chairs, deep in thought. One popped a piece of fried fish in her mouth, offered some to the table, and, with sincerity, said, "Thank you for your words of comfort and advice." The women then sat, quietly digesting the words along with the fish.

I could see slight concern on their faces. It's a result of the education, a by-product of learning. It's also a precursor to wiser decisions and positive change.

Road Closure Service Development Railway Embankment (EBD)

In order to facilitate the laying of cables for roll out of service in several areas on the East Coast, GT&T has scheduled road cuts on Sunday March 18, 2007 from 06:00 hrs to 18:00 hrs in the following areas:

- 1 Good Hope Entrance and Railway Embankment Road (North to South)
- 2 Agriculture Road Railway Embankment Road (North to South)

This is one phase of the project which will provide service to the following areas:

- East Ville
- South Annandale
- Good Hope
- Martha's Ville
- Mon Repos
- Mon Repos South
- Mon Repos Block 8
- Lusignan North & South

The public is therefore advised to proceed with caution since the road cuts will affect the smooth flow of traffic at the road cut locations.

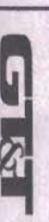
Two more minibus conductors...

From page 3

that Ramkaran was present when the incident occurred.

Burch-Smith rebutted Matthews and said that that was the most prejudicial and unfounded statements that he had ever heard. He challenged the prosecutor to prove that Ramkaran committed any such offence before since he has never been convicted. "The prosecution cannot prove that; the evidence does not exist. That is why it is not before you. In the absence of proof, please dismiss that assertion," Burch-Smith told Magistrate Sullivan.

Magistrate Sullivan refused bail to the two accused and



Getting better all the time!