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Education, Employment and Changing Gender

Evidence of Widespread Discrimination against Transgender People

by Roberta Perkins

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What is it about trannies that alarms others to such a degree that her/his new gender takes priority over their scholarship or work skills?

Joan won the University Medal for her B.A. Hons. dissertation in Social Work three years ago at the University of Sydney. One by one she watched her fellow students obtain employment until

she was the only one from her class still unemployed. This deplorable situation became such an embarrassment to the University department from which she received the award that they felt obliged to employ her as a part-time tutor. What was it that made this obviously outstanding scholar such a poor candidate for employment? Did she have leprosy? Did she have gaping pusey sores on her face and arms? Was her hair a mass of writhing snakes? No, none of these things. Joan had simply changed her gender some time in the past, and followed this with genital surgery. In the eyes of most of the prospective employers she approached, this made her ineligible for employment, regardless of her brilliant academic record, or the fact that she possessed the necessary skills to do the job.

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The problem facing Joan is a common one which most transgender people have to deal with throughout most of their lives. 'Transgender' is a term recently adopted by the new tranny rights movement whose advocates reject the existing medical terminology of 'transsexual' to describe someone who undergoes a 'sex change' operation, and 'transvestite' to describe someone who wears the clothing appropriate to the gender opposite to that assigned to them at birth, regardless of whether or not this is a permanent adjustment. The term 'transgender' refers to one who crosses their gender regardless of whether surgery is involved or not. Because one tranny can afford \$10,000 for a 'sex change' operation and another cannot is no criterion for distinction. Then there are scholars, like Marjorie Garber (*Vested Interests*, Penguin, London 1993), who argue that outer symbols of gender appropriateness changes so frequently that all such terminology is irrelevant.

A recent project funded by the Federal Department of Health and Human Services, which I carried out at the University of New South Wales, provides ample evidence of widespread discrimination against transgender people. In the project's report *Transgender Lifestyles and H.I.V./ AIDS Risk* (Department of Health and Human Services, Canberra, 1993), 55 percent of 146 transgender people surveyed across Australia were receiving Social Security benefits, 21 percent were currently involved in sex work, and 8 percent were working in the theatre chiefly as drag artists. A further 7 percent were employed as welfare workers to the tranny community, less than 30 percent were employed in jobs outside traditional tranny occupations. Table 1 shows the dramatic decline in employment dating from before the gender change to the present. These figures leave little doubt that discrimination is the cause of high unemployment in the tranny community. Whilst table 1 indicates that trannies possess the skills to do various occupations, table 2 shows that they have received high education too. By comparison, in the general Australian population 40 percent never reached the highest secondary schooling, 13 percent attained the highest secondary schooling, 13 percent received a trade certificate, 19 percent a diploma and 9 percent achieved a tertiary degree (A.B.S. Social Indicators 1992: 147)

Table 1 shows the work experiences of 146 transgender people.

Type of Occupation:	Before Change	Before Change %	Current Employment	Current Employment %
Own Business	27	18.5	12	8.2
Factory Work	40	27.4	1	0.7
Service Industry	38	26.0	6	4.1
Transit Industry	9	6.2	3	2.1

Sales Work	47	32.2	3	2.1
Skilled Trade	31	21.2	4	2.7
Nursing	16	11.0	6	4.1
Teaching	11	7.5	2	1.4
Office Work	34	23.3	6	4.1
Administration	21	14.4	5	3.4

These findings illustrate an abysmal situation of blatant discrimination and the deprivation of a group of people whose gender change is an obvious negative factor in their attaining a livable income. Nearly half the sample had resorted to sex work on the streets as a survival strategy. This brought many of these vulnerable desperate people close to the drug scene, their fragile self-esteem plunging them into heavy addictions to heroin, cocaine, amphetamines, 'crack' or barbiturates. Their addictions made them even more unemployable, and worse, it eliminated them as candidates for a 'sex change' operation, even if they could afford it.

Table 2 shows the education level achieved by 146 transgender people.

Education Level:	Number	Percentage
Below School Certificate	32	21.9
School Certificate	47	32.8
Higher School Certificate	48	32.8
Trade Certificate	32	21.9
Tertiary Certificate	42	28.8

Even those trannies who have changed gender whilst in tenured employment are not impervious to threats of unemployment. They are often faced with disintegrating support from colleagues in their workplace until they often discover they are alone in a hostile environment. They may be barred from entering toilets appropriate to their new gender, or find their desk has been moved to a less conspicuous corner of the office. In the case of Helen, an airline mechanic who had changed from male-to-female, the harassment and isolation was so severe and relentless that she was forced to resign for the sake of her health after twenty years of service for the company. Neither the company, nor any of its staff were prepared to listen to Helen's pleas to be judged solely on her productive output. Instead, they began finding fault with her work. Under such pressure, a tranny's quality of work will actually begin to deteriorate, so that a boss has a 'legitimate' reason for sacking her/him. But even in work situations where a tranny has the support of work colleagues and her/his job itself is not under threat, she/he may find that her/his advancement in the company has suddenly grounded to a halt. In many subtle ways the tranny is made aware that he/she is regarded as a lesser being, and will end up being grateful for having a job at all, let alone expect a promotion.

What is it about trannies that alarms others to such a degree that her/his new gender takes priority over their scholarship or work skills?

Is the kind of irrational fear of change that gripped 15,000 Sydneysiders recently when the State Governor status change, causing them to publicly demonstrate with Aussie flags fluttering, despite the fact that probably fewer than a handful of them even knew the Governor's name before the hysteria? Fear of change linked with a challenge to their own gender identity may cause them to react insensitively towards trannies. And they can do this without guilt because they have already depersonalised and dehumanised trannies in their minds, not to mention an inner comfort in believing they are doing God's work of punishing the deviant.

If people's attitudes remain stagnant then it is left to liberal-minded legislators to hurry social change along with new laws. And new laws are on their way, with amendments to the existing Anti-Discrimination Act and Births, Deaths and Marriages Act, due to occur in the next sitting of state parliament. These laws have passed through caucus and will be in force within a few months. It will then become illegal to dismiss a person from their job or deny employment on the basis of their transgender.

The law, however, is not the only mechanism for change, as the following recent of two trannies refused service in a Kings Cross nightclub illustrates. They took the matter to Clover Moore M.P., the tranny action group, Transgender Liberation Coalition, and the media. The media pursued the club's manager to the point of forcing him to agree to make a public apology to the two trannies, and give restitution (a 'tranny tax') by agreeing to allow a tranny pride fund raising event to occur in his bar free of charge. The funds from this event were used to pay for a float in the Gay Mardi Gras. Thus, the fruits of this man's discrimination was seen by millions on the global media network.

The point to this incident is that trannies are 'coming-out' politically. They are no longer prepared to slink away with feelings of guilt when they are confronted by such blatant discrimination.

Macquarie University is, in principle, opposed to tranny discrimination under its Equal Opportunity Policy, which is 'one of equal opportunity in employment and education'. At present this depends on the good intentions of this policy. After the passage of the amendments to the N.S.W. Anti-Discrimination Act, however, its position will then be enshrined in law under section 2 of its own social legislation.

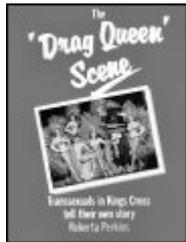
Any tranny student or staff member on campus who feels they are being discriminated against (including harassment) on the grounds of their transgender status should seek the assistance of the University's E.E.O. officer, Sarah Levin. A system of dealing with grievances

of this nature already exists on campus.

In *The Australian* on 28th February 1996, a story appeared about Economic Professor Donald McCloskey of University of Iowa, a world renowned academic who has written 20 books and 200 journal articles in his discipline, and who recently changed his sex, and his name to Deirdre. Her academic colleagues were shocked. Her sister tried to have her committed, and a Psychiatrist declared Deirdre was 'manic' but not a danger to herself or others. Yes folks, it can even happen to highly respected academics.

Roberta Perkins

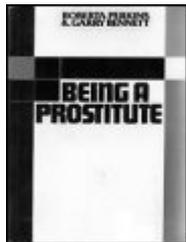
Roberta Perkins established the Gender Centre (then known as Tiresias House) in 1983. She is also a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at The University of New South Wales and has conducted many government-funded research projects into prostitution. A transsexual herself, she has the confidence of the people she interviews; a sociologist, she has counselled transsexuals for a number of years; an activist, she has worked with them in the struggle to overcome the problems they face every day of their lives. Roberta is also the author, and co-author of five books and scores of journal articles on sex work research in Australia and has also taught Native American Studies for many years in Sydney



The Drag Queen Scene: Transsexuals in Kings Cross
Author: Roberta Perkins Publisher: Allen & Unwin (1983)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0868610474

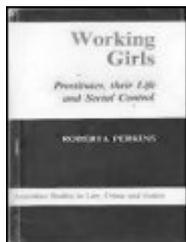
Through a unique series of frank interviews, *The Drag Queen Scene* deals with the experiences of male-to-female transsexuals who live and work in Sydney's Kings Cross area. It focuses on twelve people — showgirls, strippers, bar girls and prostitutes. Each of the twelve speaks for herself, providing first-hand insights into life and work in her world — a world a few people understand. Their stories uncover the raw reality behind the shallow popular view of the "Drag Queen". These revealing every-day accounts demonstrate how much accepted attitudes are based on ignorance,

prejudice and callousness. By offering the reader a rare opportunity to view a closed subculture as its participants see it, *The Drag Queen Scene* is an attempt to break down the resistance facing transsexuals, to influence changes in social attitudes and the law. In this book, twelve voices, hitherto silent, challenge the reader to question the stigmatising and ostracising transsexuals endure.



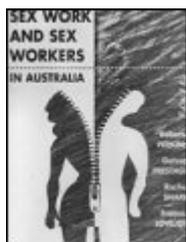
Being a Prostitute: Prostitute Women and Prostitute Men (with Garry Bennett)
Author: Roberta Perkins and Garry Bennett Publisher: Allen & Unwin (1986)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0868616780

Constant media coverage and popular concern about prostitution, recent changes to legal and administrative regulations governing prostitution in its various forms in its several States, and the emergence of organised groups to represent the views and interests of prostitutes in public discussions and to influence policy formation ensure that the subject retains a high level of visibility and social significance. At the same time there have been remarkably few empirical studies of prostitution in Australia and our knowledge is largely confined to sensationalised reports of criminal cases and media exposés. So a book giving detailed accounts of the perceptions and experiences of a variety of prostitutes, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, of different ages and background, and covering the diversity of forms of occupational types and organisational settings of prostitution at the present time would seem to be timely.



Working Girls: Prostitutes, Their Life and Social Control
Author: Roberta Perkins
Publisher: Australian Institute of Criminology (1991)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0642158765

From Abe Books:  This book has three objectives: 1. To demonstrate empirically that prostitutes are basically ordinary women with only their occupation distinguishing them from others; 2. To bring to the general public a balanced, well-informed view of prostitution, shed of its tawdry reputation; 3. To convince legislators to adopt a more practical method of dealing with prostitution.



Sex Work and Sex Workers in Australia
Author: Roberta Perkins
Publisher: University of New South Wales Press (1994)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0868401744

From Google Books:  *Sex Work and Sex Workers in Australia* is one of the most comprehensive books on the sex industry. This book's main focus is on prostitution and it is broken down on many levels: female, male, transsexual, health care, oral histories, and foreign workers (e.g.. Thai). It is very easy to read and one leaves this book with an excellent history lesson as well as viewpoints from both men and women which balances this book.

Call Girls: Private Sex Workers in Australia
Author: Roberta Perkins and Frances Lovejoy
Publisher: U.W.A. Publishing (2007)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 1920694913



From Booktopia:  *Call Girls* casts a penetrating, red light gaze upon the upper echelons of the world's oldest profession: private sex workers who use the telephone as a means to solicit clients. Containing frank accounts from women working in the Australian sex industry, *Call Girls* puts a human face on this hitherto shadowy, clandestine world as it documents how many women became sex workers; run their businesses; maintain their health; and how the call girls work affects their relationships with husbands, lovers and families. Far-removed from the moralising, victim stereotypes and *Pretty Woman*-inspired fantasies which pervade popular culture, *Call Girls* places the world of the sex worker within social, political and legal contexts which will surprise and change the preconceived notions of many readers.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.