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A Life Cut Short: Gender Identity Discrimination and the Murder of Chanelle Pickett

In November 1995 Chanelle Pickett, a 23-year old African-American transgender woman, was beaten and strangled. At her memorial service, Chanelle's twin sister Gabrielle, also a transgender woman, remembered her as a vibrant person, "full of life... high-spirited... with many goals."[1]

The year before Chanelle's murder, the two sisters, both working steady jobs at NYNEX in Brookline, MA, were 'outed' as transgender, viciously harassed by a supervisor for six weeks, and then fired. Stunned, exhausted, and unable to find work elsewhere, both women fell quickly into desperate poverty. Chanelle became a prime target for crime and violence. She met and was murdered by William Palmer, a man with a predatory attitude toward transgender women. According to the coroner, Chanelle's body had severe bruises on the face, lips, and neck, a brain badly swollen from the strangulation, and hemorrhaging in her eyes.[2] Despite strong physical evidence against Palmer, he was convicted only of assault & battery. He received 2 years of jail time, a longer sentence than the prosecutor had requested, with Judge Robert A. Barton acknowledging the particularly "vicious" nature of the killing.[3]

The discrimination faced by transgender people amplifies our vulnerability to violent crime. Lacking clear legal protections in many jurisdictions, transgender people often face sustained harassment on the job. Transgender people are frequently fired without cause if they transition, come out or are outed by others as transgender. Often, transgender people are not hired, regardless of qualifications, for no reason other but transphobic prejudice. Beyond the workplace, transgender people are often denied housing, credit and educational opportunities. All these things combine to lead to high levels of poverty among transgender people, with few chances to climb out of it.

Chanelle's sudden fall from a steady job with a good future into desperation and violent victimhood is a reality faced by many transgender people. **Violence against transgender people is epidemic.** On average, 1 to 2 transgender individuals in the US are murdered each month. According to a survey of transgender people conducted in Washington DC, approximately 43% of

[1] *Transsexual Is Mourned At Service*, Boston Herald December 11, 1995, p. 12.
[2] *Transsexual Was Choked To Death*, Boston Globe April 25, 1997, p. B3
[3] *When is a Murder not a Murder? When the Victim is a Transsexual.* Kevin Rothstein, Boston Phoenix May 1997.

transgender people had been victims of crime. 17% had been physically assaulted and a further 17% had been assaulted with weapons.[4] The same survey also found a 42% unemployment rate for transgender people. As the Southern Poverty Law Center warns, transgender people, especially transgender women of color, are often viewed by criminals as 'disposable people'.[5]

Reducing discrimination through basic legal protections is one first step to reducing the poverty and violence faced by transgender people.

Chanelle Pickett was an ordinary woman working at NYNEX until transphobic attitudes made her a target for harassment. She sought help from a supervisor, but was ignored. She transferred to a different department, but harassment continued openly and unabated, and eventually, she was fired. Unable to find work and having exhausted her legitimate options, Chanelle finally turned to prostitution for survival – a dangerous last resort. Before her murder, she had likely been suffering and desperate for months and with no legitimate and safe workplace open to her, felt she had no choice but to take dangerous risks.

Chanelle Pickett's killer did not merely target a transgender woman – he preyed on a woman who had already been victimized because of her identity. Unprotected by the law, Chanelle's vibrant life was brutally cut short because so many doors had already been closed on her.

[4] *The Washington DC Transgender Needs Assessment Survey* 1999-2000. Funded by the Washington DC Department of Health.
[5] *'Disposable People': A wave of violence engulfs the transgendered, whose murder rate may outpace that of all other hate killings*. Bob Moser. Southern Poverty Law Center. *Winter 2003.*