

Over the Parapet: Summary Findings

a short study into the needs and aspirations of sex workers in Edinburgh

Prepared for SCOT-PEP by Stephanie Sexton, July 2009

Introduction

This summary provides a flavour of the needs, aspirations and ideas that sex workers discussed. It does not, however, convey the subtlety and complexity that can be found in the full study and which need to be understood for any action to occur.

The full study is available on www.scot-pep.org.uk where it can be downloaded in PDF format or by email to office@scot-pep.org.uk requesting an electronic or hard copy.

A short study was undertaken in the early stages of 2009 to identify the needs and aspirations of women working in the sex industry in Edinburgh. Women from all parts of the sex industry took part in the study – street based sex workers, those working in licensed and unlicensed premises and who work as escorts.

The study was commissioned by SCOTPEP as the organisation began to wind down its role as a service provider. Its purpose was to provide a resource for those who provide and commission services; advocate on behalf of sex workers; and sex workers themselves.

What it is - the idea

Over the Parapet has been written in such a way as to be useful for different audiences. It comprises four parts:

- Information about the study
- Study findings
- Groundwork for a Manifesto for sex workers in Edinburgh
- Taking the issues forward

Although service providing organisations were involved in the study, the idea behind the commission was to articulate the issues for sex workers as they identified them. A point in time where the women's voices are heard unchallenged and unfettered by professional voices be that in the public or voluntary sector.

Women talk about their needs and aspirations not as sex workers, but as women who work in the sex industry. They are women first, partners, parents, members of social networks and they work in the sex industry.

They talk about their concerns about services and policing; about friendship and family; and about their children.

Over the Parapet should be used as a resource, a place where key issues that women working in the sex industry identified can be found.

It is intended as a *catalyst* for providers to ask of themselves 'Are we really meeting the needs of the women we serve?'; for commissioners to ask 'What will make a difference?'; and for women to ask 'How can we make life a little easier for ourselves?'

What it is not – what it doesn't do

The study was not a review of service provision from the point of view of women working in the sex industry. Service providers, while offering help in the study, were not asked for their perspective about the use of their or others' services. *Over the Parapet* does not provide a series of packaged recommendations to address the issues raised. It is more subtle and complex than that – *it seeks to reflect women's lived experiences.*

What the study identified: Key themes

'Sex workers operate in an environment which is hostile; rarely valued for who they are; they experience explicit and implicit messages that reduce them to people who represent parts of society that others would rather keep hidden or lose altogether – the implicit message in that is for them to keep hidden or stop work altogether.'

Women feel socially isolated: Sex workers have difficulty in social networks where they can feel unable to talk openly and honestly with others about their work and life. 'It's difficult to say you've had a shit day' or about problems with work when they are talking to people over the school gate.

Looking for family support: In common with many women, sex workers find it difficult, sometimes, to support their family in a way they would like. That could be finding babysitters who can be flexible enough to work with a woman's work needs; or find a place for their children to talk openly if they are aware of their mother's work; or when dealing with children's anti social behaviour.

Women in relationships: Partners can inhibit some women from achieving their own goals in relation to a range of issues, but particularly identified was successful engagement with drug treatment services

Drug services: Women need drug services that are sufficiently developed and flexible to meet their needs as 'a whole person'; that are able to engage them at different points in a drug using career i.e. that do not represent the 'either/or' that abstinence or maintenance implies; and for services that meet a range of drug (including alcohol) related needs beyond that of injecting heroin.

Confidence in services and common assessment: On the one hand, women like all who use services find it frustrating to keep repeating their story. On the

other hand, they - like many of us - want to be in charge of what information is known about them, and by whom – they want to give the information themselves. Sex workers are only too aware of the stigma associated with their work. They are also familiar with views, held by some in psychiatry and elsewhere, that sex work is an expression of self harm. They are concerned about services and/or individual professionals being judgemental – it is their lived experience that they often are, albeit unintentionally.

Co-ordinated services: Women need to be up to date about new services or those that have developed their approach or remit and have confidence in the integrity of the information provider. Women would like regular communication produced by a reliable and trusted source to give information and insight about services.

Safety: Women would like the ugly mug scheme to be maintained in all parts of the industry. This requires them to have confidence in the service provider agency to enable them to give that information in the first place. They would like panic alarms to be made available.

New to the sex industry: 'It's a steep learning curve'. 'You need to have someone who can tell you where to go for advice, supplies or help'. Women need different types of information to be provided at different stages of their work in the sex industry. It is necessary that women have confidence in the sources of information. It is important that they have access to supplies in a discreet way.

Sexual health provision: Women are looking for a vaccine programme to be provided at their places of work; for the delivery of supplies including condoms, sponges, dental dams, and pregnancy tests to be provided in a discreet way; and for a web-based message board where they can pose questions and have them answered in an accurate and non-judgemental way

Key Messages

Whilst each of the messages is targeted at a particular interest, it is not for their ears only; it is for all who are involved as service provider, as commissioner, as advocate and indeed for sex workers.

For providers - *being non judgemental in word and deed.*

All the services involved in this study work hard to do the best they can for the women with whom they come into contact. It is inevitable perhaps that the values of the service and/or of the workers will permeate their work with the women. What seems to be important is that women will pick up on those values. If they are not articulated, they cannot be explained or challenged. We must all (researchers included) realise that sex workers are highly attuned to 'the unsaid' and that will inform their decision to engage with a service probably more than what tangible services are available. All need therefore to be aware that our service or resource can be construed as 'judgemental' and take steps to address that.

For commissioners of provision - *services need to be quality assured, co-ordinated and long term.* This is as much a commissioning issue as one of direct provision. Common assessment and co-ordinated provision have many advantages – for services and in some aspects for women. However, for these two areas to be developed further, providers need to have confidence in each other, and those who use services must have confidence in both individual services and service provision as a whole. Such areas cannot be achieved without investment over time.

Sex workers identified the need to access mainstream services, albeit with specialised aspects to make them psychologically accessible; they are looking for a wider range of provision (particularly in the area of drug treatment); and they are looking for stability. This in part requires a strategic commissioning response.

For those who advocate for sex workers - *the message behind the message.* The key characteristic of women who participated in this study was pragmatism – just getting on with it. They talked about living in a hostile world, where they face discrimination, generally and at a certain level, in the services they use.

Legislation and regulation plays a significant part in creating the environment in which sex workers operate – not purely as sex workers but as women with roles as mothers, partners, friends and contributors to the social fabric. Those involved in the study 'accept their lot' but all their needs and aspirations have a basis in the way legislation and regulation is formed and implemented.

By women for women in the sex industry - *peep over the parapet.* The women involved in this study were thoughtful, able to talk about the issues that affect them, and had ideas about what could be done to make a real difference in their lives. Some have taken the difficult step of talking to a stranger and allowing silenced voices to be heard - taking small steps safely - others will follow. Take larger steps, with support from colleagues and advocates, and *things can and will change.*