



## Trip Down Memory Lane

**SWWOP's 15th Anniversary** and I have been around for eleven of those productive years, I began working with PRAIS in 1996, as one of two outreach workers on temporary contracts helping to provide two outreach sessions per week, then as part-time development worker in 1997, development manager in 1999 and as overall manager since 2001 on full time hours. So please join me in a trip down memory lane.....

### 1990 January

Tracy Nathan, Detached Outreach Community worker for Sheffield Aids Education Project (now Centre for HIV) was employed to reach 'hard to reach groups' not accessing sexual health. This meant working with young people, homeless, prison leavers and 'prostitutes'. By March Tracy had carried out the relevant initial planning i.e. aims/objectives, visits to GU, reading/watching relevant videos, understanding the current laws on prostitution and writing a project leaflet and set off to access the areas to be worked in. At this time women were found to be found working in the Broomhall area of Sheffield. Tracy and her colleague walked around the area just the once!

Second time out they made contact with one woman, a very successful contact and history was made. By 1991 they had made contact with 152 individual women but Tracy's remit was around sexual health and the majority of the women used protection with 'punters' (not necessarily with their partners). It was soon recognised that the women had greater issues to be looked at than sexual health, for instance DHS, housing, small drug misuse mainly cannabis, speed and for a smaller percentage heroin.

### 1992

Due to the needs of this vulnerable group and not able to meet them through the sexual health remit, Tracy made the decision to develop a small voluntary sector project to work with this group and decided to name it PRAIS (Prostitutes Rights & Information service). This name was given to inform other agencies that this group of women did have rights and with support would be able to access these rights. In order to be practical with this group of women, the workers recognised from the beginning that they had to be clear to see the women in the context of their whole lives and not just recipients of sexual health. The steering group was made up of probation, social services, health workers and community workers. Health employed Tracy and provided condoms. Other funding came from Grant Aid (Education monies) and social services. The HIV centre bought a van shared with many other groups and with two sessional outreach workers, PRAIS was up and running.

**National Award** – A drop-in was established at the HIV centre for the women, but drop-ins for vulnerable groups were very hard to maintain and times attending the drop-in meant women weren't earning their money. At this same time PRAIS was recommended for a Healthy Education award from the Department of health for their astounding work with this group of women. They won and reports about the work of this Sheffield based project were reported in the Star and salaciously in the SUN.

**Ugly Mugs** – women began talking about attacks they had been involved with while out on the streets. The workers invited the women to provide descriptions of their attackers and also at this time the police were giving the project information i.e. number plates of men to be aware of. This information was placed on a board in the van and passed on to all women accessing the service. Nowadays we call it the 'Dodgy punter' board. Tracy left the project in 1995 and I am sure she was greatly missed but very proud of her achievements.

### Change of Name

In 1996 the project discussed a change of name. Funders were looking for projects providing 'opportunities', women were

describing themselves as 'working women' so we came up with the name SWWOP (Sheffield Working Women's Opportunities Project) encompassing both. The women were aged between 25-50 yrs and there were around 150 individual women. There was a sense of community; women looked out for each other, there didn't seem to be much competition between them. Discussion with the women at that time suggested that some drug and alcohol misuse actually acted as an enabler making it easier for the women to work. Back then in a response to a growing drugs issue amongst the women we attempted to provide them with drugs information but some of the women had acquired much more drugs knowledge and experience through their own drug use and actively educated us.

### Development of SWWOP

By 1997/99 we had one paid part-time outreach worker and I was a part-time paid development worker and outreach worker (7hrs development & 3.5hrs outreach), the Health Authority donated the 'johnny-van' to us and this became our most valuable asset. Health advisors from GU medicine also joined the outreach sessions one night per week, this followed a sharp rise in the local incidence of gonorrhoea, and street sex workers who were described as (untraceable) contacts. By joining the outreach team, GU hoped to alert women to the risk and invite them in for routine check-ups. GU also aimed to gather identifying information (names, ages, description and address if possible) which would help to inform individual women of their exposure to infection should they be identified in the future. We had also recruited a couple of volunteers enabling us to carry out outreach three evenings per week. We also developed strong links with the Child Protection workers in Sheffield due to small numbers of younger girls/women engaged in street sex work.

**Healthy Action Zone Funding** – Through the development of a business plan incorporating weeks of extra management meetings putting together a funding bid, we were granted funding for three years from the Healthy Action Zone Sheffield. This was a major accomplishment as although we were the only project in Sheffield working with street sex workers funders were very difficult to find. I was then employed as a nearly full time development worker still incorporating one outreach session per week. The Domestic Violence Forum in Sheffield had an office in the centre of Sheffield and offered SWWOP space there. Things were happening ..... Middlesex University and SOVA had funding to research young women 14-17yrs and the routes into prostitution in collaboration with Tower Hamlets London. SWWOP were to be working very closely with the researches, and we also made the decision to seek charitable status later in the year.

2000/2001, and based in the centre of Sheffield, our volunteers become paid part-time outreach workers and with GU we had the equivalent of 6 outreach workers, SWWOP was now in its most secure financial position since being established in 1992. That year we had made contact with 264 individual women working on the streets, of which 90% (237) were already substance misusers, 96% (253) were between the ages of 17-28 and 138 of these women were new to us. Many older women were leaving the beat, not necessarily sex work (some entered saunas others worked from their 'pay as u go' mobile), this was due to younger women entering, serious drug use and competition re the pricing of sex work. For older women their children were growing up and it was time to make changes. Violence against was on the increase, abduction and rape often by more than one 'punter' was happening frequently and street robberies by the partners of other women inc 'taxing' by the women themselves, against other working women was becoming a daily occurrence.

**Drug Worker** – A Drug worker for Netherthorpe & Uppertorpe Drugs Outreach Project joined the outreach team one session per week in June 2000. The link between drugs and sex work has





always been widely recognised and many of the women work to fund not only their own drug use but also their partners. Street sex-workers have limited access to traditional 9-5 services given the hours they work so having a drugs worker on the team proved to be an important link into drug services for our clients.

**Registered Charity Status** – April 2001/02 and after numerous attempts changing the constitution to fit the relevant criteria SWWOP became a Registered Charity. Gail Smith (Chair of the Prostitution Forum 2001-02) manages to secure safe parking for our van at the Central Fire Station Division Street free of charge.

**Murdered** – November 2001, Michaela 24 yrs old, a pleasant young woman with a small son was brutally murdered on the 'beat' by a man who has still not been caught. This emphasises the real dangers the women working as street sex workers face every day.

**The Women's Health Bus** – Thanks to Community Transport four workers finally passed their driving assessment and were able to drive the Double-Decker Community Health Bus with confidence. The bus in conjunction with GU Medicine was used on a monthly basis providing the women with access to a full sexual health screening at a time that suited them with health workers they have come to know and trust without any fear of stigma or prejudicial treatment.

**10th Anniversary 2002**

The prostitution forum carried out a full review of its work leading to a multi-agency seminar the same year and the main outcome of the review was a 3 year strategy and an action plan for the first year, this enabled us to secure funding from Communities Against Drugs which helped to support the outreach and harm reduction work with the women.

**Exit Strategy** – The development of an Exit Strategy aptly named REST (Recovery & Exit Support Team) for women wishing to exit street sex work and substance misuse was conceived. A bid for funding to employ a part-time Exit Support worker to Comic relief was successful and we were granted funding for 3 years. This was a very exciting time and a major development as SWWOP took the lead in putting in place a multi-agency Exit Strategy consisting of providing intensive specialist support within a multi-agency setting to any female street sex-worker wishing to exit her previous lifestyle and make positive changes. A working protocol was developed with a number of agencies women would need to access including fast-tracking to drug treatment agencies as we knew through the women that they had no chance of exiting without their substance misuse being addressed.

**New Premises, New Van & SLA with the PCT's**

SWWOP undertook an extensive information and promotion programme. The outcome was a number of presentations, seminars and workshops being delivered by SWWOP to a range of statutory, voluntary and community based organisations. We also produced our first video which was used to promote our work, all with the aim of increasing awareness of the nature and extent of experiences of female street sex workers. New premises were found enabling activity and staffing to expand, a smart new van thanks to the Health Authority and Safer Communities Funding and further funding was successfully granted for a second Exit Support worker. A service level agreement with the PCT's made the recruitment of an admin worker possible (10 hrs per week) and we were extremely lucky in recruiting Lis who rose to the challenge of getting us all in order.

**Research** – This was undertaken by trainee Doctors at Guernsey House relating to: 'Does an integrated drugs treatment and prescribing programme for heroin dependent female sex workers enable them to exit prostitution?' (a pilot study).The

research found that our women who were receiving key working, support and help with housing and other issues according to the SWWOP EXIT programme were retained in treatment longer than someone with out the intensive support. Retention in treatment is known to be an essential feature of successful methadone programmes and the success of SWWOP in retaining contact with a hard-to-engage group may depend on its integrated approach.

**Training Pack** – 2004-05 we recruited a training consultant to develop a very substantial training pack to educate and help make all agencies aware of our work and the realities of our clients lives, enabling agencies to be better equipped to help the women. This training has been very well received by statutory and voluntary audiences such as the police, housing workers and local community groups. This training couldn't have been developed without the input from the clients themselves and the vast amount of information and ideas that have come from SWWOP workers, volunteers and partnership workers.

**Partnerships**

**Turning Point** appointed a female drugs worker whose sole remit was to work with street sex workers in partnership with SWWOP. This has positively increased the capacity of the REST Team.

**Action Housing** provides us with women only supported shared housing for any women exiting their current lifestyle. Workers from both projects provide shared support.

Guernsey House provide fast-tracking for exit clients in relation to drug treatment.

**Jessops Wing** – specialist midwives work in partnership with us regarding women finding themselves pregnant and wanting intensive support to help keep their babies. Sexual Exploitation Project-joint work with this agency in providing information/support to younger women being groomed or already working on the streets

**Haven House** – providing a bed space for one client at a time who is fleeing domestic abuse and exiting street sex work inc substance misuse

**GU Medicine** who have been with us from day one

There have been disappointments and lessons learned over the life of the project, but overall we have listened to our clients and changed the service we provide accordingly. Acquiring funding to work with such a diverse group has always been difficult to find, but the reality is that the impact of SWWOP not being funded would be devastating on our service users. Outreach is the core work of SWWOP; during which SWWOP engages women, gains their trust and addresses the high levels of violence, substance misuse and unsafe sexual practices experienced by this group of women. SWWOP promotes the sexual health of both the women and their clients ('the punters') by providing free condoms and working in partnership with GUM services. In fact the majority of our clients would not access any services at all without our outreach helping to make links.

Our aim is to support our clients to look after themselves, access mainstream services and lead normal lives. A successful outcome for our clients is being able to make informed choices about their lives. This will vary for individuals-for some it may be gaining housing, for others keeping a baby or leaving a violent partner. A first step for most is dealing with their drug dependency and any underlying mental health issues. A small proportion are supported to exit street prostitution altogether. For many of our clients, survival itself is a successful outcome given the dangers inherent in street sex work and drug addiction.

So I hope you enjoyed our memories and will continue to support us through the next 15 years.

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**Happy Anniversary SWWOP**