



CASE STUDY: DEVELOPING A PARTICIPATIVE INTEGRATED APPROACH TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND HEALTH PROMOTION WITHIN THE SEX WORKER COMMUNITIES OF THE MID WESTERN REGION.

GOSHH

GOSHH stands for Gender, Orientation, Sexual Health and HIV. We are a charity working in the Mid-Western Region of Ireland. Our offices are based in Limerick City and we cover counties Clare, Limerick and Tipperary. We have been known as GOSHH since 2013 after Red Ribbon Project (sexual health and HIV) amalgamated with Rainbow Support Service (gender and orientation). Since then we have developed a new vision and an integrated way of working with all these areas.

CONTEXT



GOSHH as an organisation has always supported sex workers (SW). We have provided sex workers with support, information, advocacy, empowerment and condoms.

(photo by Dolf Patjin, ILoveLimerick.com – ‘The Beginning of My Girl Life – 1990’s’, photographic exhibition by Maite Logia).

In 2012, in response to a sudden increase in street sex work, we started to improve service provision for sex workers. A new full-time support position, Community Support Project Worker, was created which covered sex

work, people living with Hepatitis C (PLWHCV) and Rapid Testing.



1992
STEADY WORK
Provision of condoms
Access to support and information



2012
CRITICAL RESPONSE
Provision of condoms
Access to support and information
Street Outreach Service

We observed that the (mainly women) doing sex work on the street in Limerick City were Eastern European, and that we had no existing knowledge of their situation or formal contact with them. Due to low levels of English, and obvious male presence, GOSHH were concerned that the women were being controlled and may be victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Up until this point the majority of contact with sex workers was through our drop-in service and condom provision. These services were mainly accessed by Brazilian sex workers and rarely by Irish sex workers, homeless sex workers, or sex workers with addictions.

We needed to identify and eliminate the barriers to accessing condoms and services through GOSHH and find a way to work with the new cohort of sex workers in Limerick City. We wanted to make our services more relevant for sex workers of all genders, including female, and develop relationships that would help us to expand our services to include those who are experiencing homelessness, addiction or other compounding issues.

Approach, Strategy and Tactics

We decided to split our focus between street based sex workers (SSW) and indoor sex workers (ISW) in order to understand the specific experience of, and needs of, SW who live or work in Limerick City.

We were aware that we would need to establish a trusting rapport with current SW and we hoped to increase access to non-judgmental support service for SW in Limerick City. We particularly wished to develop and improve the service provision for street workers.

We focused on Limerick City because it was the place that was easiest to start, and many SW we had contact with were passing through on tours. Online advertisement websites suggested the highest numbers of escorts advertising in the mid-west, were based in Limerick City.

Development Strand 1 – Indoor Escorts who Advertise Online

Step 1 - Gathered local knowledge from ISW clients - asked one question "most sex workers do not use our services, why do you think they do not come in for condoms?"

Step 2 - Identified key people working with the escort community of Ireland through listening to voices of people currently working in the field

Step 3 - Arranged to become a "special user" on escort forum. Put up a post explaining the process so far, what we were trying to achieve, and posed three questions.



2014
PHASE 1
Provision of condoms
Access to support and
information
Street Outreach Service
Gathered local knowledge
Made contact with sex
worker activists
Special user profile
established

Strand 1 – Process and Outcomes

Step 1 - was inspirational. We discovered that people mainly buy condoms on line but one piece of information we received turned our whole thinking on its head.... "we work hard for our money, when we spend it we like to spend it on luxury things, things that make us feel good. I go for a massage then into Brown Thomas and then when I am finished I go to boots and buy a beautiful pack of condoms, coming here to buy*¹ condoms, loose, in a brown bag makes me feel cheap." The ISW were also very excited to be asked their opinion and gave their knowledge to us honestly and took the process very seriously.

It was suggested that we sell branded condoms in packs on the website or in reception. We were told that the escort community is mainly an online community, if we were to increase participation of sex workers in the decision making process of our project then we needed to be where they were; online. We were informed that we had been ignoring the voices of a valuable asset (ISW) for too long.

Step 2 - was slow but worth it. After reflecting on the information from step 1, two things became obvious:

1. The ISW community, being transient, is local to everywhere and it is the same people, so we can access Limerick ISW in Dublin, Cork, England, Germany etc.
2. We only need to find the key people to work with. They had access to a wider community.

We attended local academic forums to meet with activists from around the world and establish relationships, to talk about what we were trying to achieve and connect with people who could help us. Eventually we found the people who run the SW safety forums in UK and Ireland. After a couple of meetings, they introduced us to the people who run the escort forums in the biggest national escort site. They were excited to meet people who wanted to provide a quality service and appreciated our honest efforts to improve. They gave us a "special user profile" and introduced us to the private escort forums, where only escorts have access.

Step 3 - was so quick and easy it practically ran itself. We posted a thread introducing the community support worker and explained what we were trying to achieve. In that post we also included a link to the sex work page of our website and brief information about our current condom provision.

We asked three questions:

- What type of condoms do you use?
- Would you buy condoms from us?
- Would you use flavoured condoms?

19 people answered in less than a day and it was viewed 349 times. Each answer was an active escort, currently working, who toured in Ireland. Some of them lived in Ireland also. (This was all the information we gathered as we felt it was intrusive to check their profiles until we had established relationships with the community).

Each person stated that it was great to see agencies asking them what they wanted and thanked us for asking them. They detailed the types of condoms they usually use. In some cases they detailed experiences they had of our project and a discussion about providing oral sex to a man, without condoms, ensued. This acted as a two way communication. ISW can contact us directly with requests for support or information and we can ask for participation in decision making and development of resources.

¹ *condoms are bought in bulk and separated in to bags for sale to sex workers at cost price (50 for €10)



Development Strand 2 – Street Workers

We contacted the manager of a local homeless hostel which we knew, from our past research, was the accommodation of many Irish SSW in Limerick City.

The hostel was aware of the women who lived there and also sold sex on Limerick streets. They had various loose arrangements in place already to increase support and safety for the women (no men were identified) and were struggling to get the women to engage. It was decided that beginning the work with the women needed to be subtle and done in a way that any woman could access without fear of disclosure or stigma. It was also recognised that only focusing on the women would create a negative and potentially damaging focus within the hostel.

We started by providing a Rapid Testing service in the beginning of March 2014, to introduce the community support workers name and face. During these tests, literature had been left around about sex work and support. These sessions were open to all service users from relevant agencies.

We followed with a sexual empowerment workshop at the end of March 2014. First for men only, then for women only. This enabled the community support worker to introduce themselves and talk about the kinds of services that were on offer. The community support worker then visited the hostel to drop-in and chat, for a period of 4 weeks and was able to establish a base line of communication. These sessions were open only to residents of the hostel.

We then used our combined knowledge to ‘request help’ from the known SSW around developing our services and making them better. We organised a focus group, which we called a sexual empowerment workshop for women, and 5 SSW arrived to the group. One of these was an ex-resident and the other 4 were residents at the time.

The focus group lasted for 2 hours and at the request of the women we then had another group meeting for 2 hours, every Friday for 3 weeks.

Strand 2 - Outcomes

Four of the five street workers in the focus group have got STI tested. 2 positive results, one for HCV. HCV information supplied to staff in the hostel. We confirmed our suspicions about levels of trauma and violent experiences of SSW. We gained a very clear understanding of the levels of knowledge about condom use, etc, within the SSW in Limerick City, and the lack of solidarity and support within the demographic.

It was decided that 6 weekly once off programs would begin, starting with contraceptive advice, that would be supplied by a female doctor. One street worker interested in training to become a facilitator / leader.

SSW are now independently referring themselves to GOSHH for support, we are receiving more referrals from other agencies and SSW are now accessing counselling, condoms and female condoms, as well as lube. Stay safe – street wise booklet is being provided to all new women who are identified as SSW and new SSW are now being informed about GOSHH services by experienced SSW.

Social activities such as a trip to Dublin to watch ‘The Game’ (a play about sex worker voices) were organised.

Overall Outcomes:

We have completely changed how SW, working or living in Limerick engage with us. This process has prompted different thinking about how and why SW chose to engage with projects and ways that we can universally promote safety, non-judgemental service and support for sex workers that they get to assess. SW from both the street and indoors now access most areas of our services.

We have a regular presence on website with year round access to both ISW and buyers of sex. We are able to communicate instantly for

Billie - support@goshh.ie



2015
PHASE 2

Provision of condoms
Access to support and
information
Rapid Testing Outreach
Sexual Empowerment
Focus Groups
Needs Assessment
Addition of Sex Work
section in Annual Report



PORTUGUESE - Para ver esta página em Português, clique [aqui](#)
ROMANIAN - Pentru a vedea această pagină în limba portugheză, click [aici](#)

GOSHH are committed to providing a service to women, men and trans* people working within the sex industry.

All of the services we provide are completely confidential.

Connect





feedback and ideas. We are provided with opportunities to advocate for sex workers on a personal, local, regional and national basis. ISW now access email support and give feedback about referrals made to doctors and STI clinics, etc.

We were able to produce a webpage and a leaflet to promote our SW services. These were created in conjunction with SW and then translated by SW into Romanian and Portuguese.

Challenges

Our own assumptions were getting in the way of us approaching a group work scenario with SSW. In the hostel we struggled with confidentiality, and yet the women kept coming. The male residents of the homeless hostel were territorial over the women residents and the space. The only way to ensure they left us alone was to provide them with something, just for them, the week before. This also helped with giving the women something to say they were doing, that the men understood. It helped to keep anonymity.

Since this began in 2014, the numbers of male and trans* sex workers engaging with our services has dropped. We need to look into ways to increase male and trans* sex worker numbers engaging with our services. In removing barriers for some we may have created barriers for others.

Lessons Learned

Service users appreciate being asked for their opinion. Take every opportunity and don't get in your own way. We work with marginalised people who are excluded on a daily basis and we have failed to offer them an inclusive service because we have not asked them what they would like, how they experience life and what they want from us.

Confidentiality was a concern, yet the most important aspect of this piece of work was anonymity. Up until now, our SW services had run along for years, not really changing and nobody giving them any thought or attention. After a very small amount of work we now have direct access to hundreds of SW, who are happy to chat with us and in turn, they now have access to us. Up until we began this process, we were an organisation that could not be trusted and were unknown to most.

Talking about needs, can be traumatic and trigger terrible feelings, in this group, that definitely happened. We made sure to validate these, but also have lots of fun. It was loud, chaotic and entertaining.

- Being too obvious about sex can stop the work in its tracks for some people but is necessary for others. Targeting your language and approach to separate situations is essential
- They came initially because we told them we needed help, to make my service better. We told the street workers that we wanted them to teach us. This was the truth.
- Be honest about your reasons. Be honest about yourself whilst you are communicating and respect the sex workers enough to answer their questions honestly.
- Follow up, keep going back, keep it casual and be available.

Next Steps

Try to identify ways to communicate with indoor workers who advertise through different sources and also with people who work in other areas of the sex industry.

Monitor how the work changes given the new law that has just been introduced. This might mean that our services have to change to meet the different needs.

Continue to communicate and look for ways for the street workers and the indoor workers to meet each other and organise themselves together for their own safety and self-advocacy, include male and trans* people in our thinking.

Provide more opportunities for the discussions to continue, within agencies and society, to decrease stigma around sex work.



2016
SERVICE DEVELOPMENT
 Provision of condoms
 Access to support and Information
 Advocacy
 Self Referral Increase
 Better relationships with SW agencies
 SW accessing a diversity of supports within GOSHH



2017
ESTABLISH REPUTATION
 Provision of condoms
 Access to support and Information
 Advocacy
 Self Referral Increase
 Better relationships with SW agencies
 SW accessing a diversity of supports within GOSHH