

# **Sex Work and Harm Reduction: Tips for Working with Individuals in the Sex Trade**



**A Presentation for the Midwest Harm Reduction Conference  
September 13, 2016  
Sex Workers Outreach Project - Chicago**

# Agenda

- Introduction to SWOP-Chicago
- Defining Sex Work—why people enter, what it is, what it is not
- Criminalization and Sex Work
- Harm Reduction and Sex Work
- Trafficking in the Sex Trade
- Issues with End Demand Policies
- Final Points
- Interactive Activities
- Q&A

# SWOP-Chicago is...

A grassroots organization, run by & for individuals in the sex trade, devoted to improving the lives of current & former sex workers through peer-support, public education & advocacy.

# SWOP-Chicago's Core Beliefs

- Trading sex for money is not inherently harmful, damaging, degrading, or empowering.
- Stigma and its byproducts are at the root of harm experienced by individuals involved in the sex trade.
- Intersecting oppressions compound the harm.
- The experiences of individuals involved in the sex trade are complicated and diverse. One individual's experience does not equal that of all individuals in the sex trade.

# SWOP-Chicago Services...

## For Workers

- Legal Clinic with the Community Activism Law Alliance (CALA)
- PROS Network Chicago
- Trainings (taxes, safety, etc.)
- Community Building/Peer Support
- E-Resources (screening, safety tips, etc.)
- Street Outreach in West Garfield Park

## For Non-Workers

- E-Resources.
- Trainings / guidance



# Legal Clinic with Community Activism Law Alliance

- Legal clinic specifically for individuals engaged in the sex trade, or unstably housed individuals. Criminal and civil defense offered.
- Next Date: **Wednesday October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016**  
**6-9 pm 405 W. Superior**
- See us after the conference if your organization wants to host an outreach clinic!

# Sex Work 101

## What is sex work?

- Sex work is a commercial exchange of a sexual services for money or other benefits like housing, transportation or other survival needs.
- Sex work is used to refer to a broad range of transactions. Sex workers are not a homogenous group. People of all genders and ages, and backgrounds are involved in the sex trade.
- This term has been adopted by health, labor and human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, and the World Health Organization.
- We believe that incorporating sex workers into public health policies and discussions can be a gateway into community health.

# Choice, Circumstance, & Coercion

An Individual's involvement in the sex trade can be broken into three broad categories-

- Choice- fully consenting to the work, can leave for other employment options but chooses to stay for various reasons.
- Circumstance- Consenting to work in the sex trade but wants to leave, or would prefer other work. Needs to stay, usually for financial reasons.
- Coercion- Individual is not consenting to work, being tricked or forced by another individual(s). Also called trafficking.



# Sex Work is Not:

- Child Labor/Child Prostitution
- Human trafficking
- Exclusively women and girls
- Always exploitation
- Necessarily any more risky than sex that is not exchanged for goods and services:  
MANY sex workers practice safer sex

# Reasons for Entering Sex Work

- “[For Southside Chicago Street Workers], Sex work offers just enough money and flexibility to make the job worthwhile, and just enough autonomy and professional satisfaction to make it more attractive than other options..” (Rosen and Venkatesh, 2006)
- “Given the gendered disparities of postindustrial economic life, the relatively high pay of the sex industry (compared to other service sector jobs) provides a compelling reason for some women from middle-class backgrounds to engage in sexual labour.” (Bernstein, 2007)
- Levitt and Venkatesh (2007) break down the economics of street prostitution in Chicago and, essentially, these women make *four times* what they would at “straight” jobs.
- A 6000-sample study of Indian prostitutes, found women earned *five times* as they would in "straight" jobs.

# “True” Harms That Sex Workers Experience

- Discriminatory laws
- Perception of being “diseased”
- Stigma—limits access to services
- Even for sex workers who work in legal establishments, workers are vulnerable to abuse

# Criminalization and Sex Work

- Prostitution is criminalized in US, except in rural Nevada, where they have a legal brothel system.
- Illinois Laws Around Prostitution: “Any person who performs, offers, or agrees to perform any act of sexual penetration for any money, property, token, object, or article...or any touching or fondling of the sex organs of one person by another person for any money, property, token, object, or article or anything of value, for the purpose of sexual arousal or gratification commits an act of prostitution.”
- Class A misdemeanor and despite efforts to decriminalize the seller, prostitutes still get targeted and arrested
- Deferral to prostitution courts (if no other charges), which take place at the Domestic Violence Court

# Sex Work and Law Enforcement

- High level of policing by cops and law enforcement
- Many sex workers experience violence, intimidation, arrest and humiliation at the hands of law enforcement
- Criminalization and arrest remains focused on cis and trans women of color that work in the street based economy

# Alisha Walker Case

- Alisha Walker is a woman who was sentenced to 15 years in prison in January 2016 for stabbing a client in self defense (the client was trying to stab her)
- Detained for two years without bond
- Support Ho(s)e, a Chicago based sex worker run organization has been organizing around her cause
- Prison Support via Support Ho(s)e and has been in contact with SWOP lawyers
- During trial was vilified as “heartless prostitute” and “hooker”
- Her client’s brother was a well-known political lobbyist and sister was judge

# Principles of Harm Reduction

- Like with drug use, sexual behaviors, and risk exist on a continuum
- Abstinence can be an end goal if the client so chooses—however, providers must remember that this is often an income generating activity and many people cannot just “quit their jobs”
- Sex work is what someone does, not who they are
- Sexual related harm cannot be assumed

# Harm Reduction Tips-Individuals in the Street Economy

- Workers should carry their own equipment at all times: condoms, lube, toys, etc.
- Female condoms (study by Lara et. al 2009 in AIDS Education and Prevention noted that among sex workers in the DR, introduction of female barrier methods reduced frequency of unprotected sex)
- If no condoms, PrEP, liberal use of lubricant, limit to oral sex
- Collect money upfront
- Avoid necklaces, scarves or dangling jewelry
- Pick your own parking spot or hotel
- Wave goodbye to someone and shout time of return (or pretend to)
- Arrange service and location outside car if possible



# Harm Reduction-Indoor Based Sex Workers

- Many of these tips can be applied to both indoor and street-based workers
- Encourage workers to screen clients: get full name and references—there are websites that assist with this (Verify Him, Safe Office, National Blacklist)
- Have someone that knows where you are at all times
- Don't allow clients to negotiate prices, time limit or unsafe acts (including restraint)
- For workers that engage in BDSM practices—I HIGHLY recommend a training if they are new to the practice. Fetlife has a mixed reputation, but they do have listings of trainings
- Utilize self-care—many workers are isolated and are unable to come out to their friends and family. SWOP holds sex worker only brunches, and has contacts with others across the city that engage in other events

# Barriers to Accessing Services

- Previous negative experiences
- Fear of stigmatization
- Fear of negative consequences (arrest, losing children, mandatory treatment/testing)
- Presence of police and security in health care facilities

# Barriers for Delivering Effective Services

- Lack of knowledge about population or needs of population
- Bias informed by mainstream stereotypes
- Non-disclosure
- Othering, or lack of exposure to population
- Dog and Pony Show—moral panic

# Tips for Outreach Workers

- Street-based workers may be cautious about outreach workers—many may cause issues (including increased police presence) or disappear
- They may not want or need your help
- Recognize that sex workers are not only condom users—they have families, lovers, partners, identities both within and outside sex work
- Listen and ask questions to help understand their situation as everyone has a different story
- Work on building trust, and be patient

# Tips for Therapists

- DON'T ASSUME SEX WORK IS THE PROBLEM—first goal should not be to get the client out of the industry if that is not what they want
- Issues that people encounter may not be solved by exiting
- Many clients who are sex workers may not want to exit, but may feel hesitant opening up about their work
- Sex worker friendly service provider may suggest taking up a hobby outside of work, or encouraging person to find sex worker support group to be in contact with other workers

# Case Study of Best Practice: Sonagachi Project

- Goal: reduce HIV vulnerability of sex workers in Kolkata, India
- UNAIDS “best practices” model
- 1. Facilitates sense of community among sex workers—community meetings where they discuss life as sex workers and also what is going on in the world
- 2. Micro-credit and cooperative banking
- 3. Increasing social participation in organizations of sex workers
- 4. Facilitating social acceptance of sex workers by actively involving sex industry and civil society stakeholders
- 5. Capacity building workshops and seminars

# Trafficking within the Sex Trade

*Trafficking within the sex trade*- any form of sexual labor performed under force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act is under 18

*Trafficking in persons* refers to the transportation and/or compulsion of another person into any form of labor/servitude through use of force, threats of force, fraud, or coercion, or debt bondage

An individual does not have to be brought in from another country to be a victim of trafficking.

Oftentimes, individuals are trafficked by individuals they know, such as a partner or family member.

# Common Indicators of Trafficking Victims

- Are always accompanied by another individual and are not allowed to speak independently to a provider/practitioner.
- Allow others to speak for them when addressed directly.
- Act as if they were instructed by someone else.
- Do not have money or identification documents.
- There is evidence that suspected victims cannot refuse unprotected and/or violent sex.
- Has limited or no social interaction.
- Work long hours or have few if any days off.

**Not all of these are exclusive to trafficking victims but are possible indicators of trafficking.**



# If you suspect trafficking...

- It should be the individual's choice whether or not to leave the situation/whether or not to call law enforcement
- Use motivational interviewing techniques and share information about options and resources available to the individual
- Provide information and support to keep the victim safe even if they remain in the trafficking situation, and help individuals create a safety plan for leaving if they so desire

# Services for Trafficking Victims

- Trafficking victims will not be charged with prostitution and can have prior prostitution convictions vacated from their record
- Undocumented immigrants will *not* be deported if they are trafficked (however, this is typically conditioned on a victim's cooperation with law enforcement in a criminal investigation (ACLU, 2014))
- Different immigration status or visas exist for trafficking victims (Continued Presence, T Visa, U Visa, Asylum). However, oftentimes victims will need to cooperate with law enforcement to obtain a visa.
- Many legal clinics are trained and can provide support (National Immigrant Justice Center, Legal Assistance Foundation, Community Activism Law Alliance)

# End Demand Illinois

- Campaign spearheaded by social workers and social service organizations that seeks to “end the demand” for sexual services by increasing penalties for clients/pimps/traffickers
- Some good: IL Safe Children’s Act of 2010, and Eliminating Felony Prostitution
- However, the idea of “abolishing” sex work really creates an environment where harms flourish—the demand for sex work does not lead to human trafficking, but it is rather the vulnerability of those seeking better lives or a way out of poverty or unemployment
- Problems with shutting down Backpage and other online forums
- Providing more labor and human rights to sex workers is a way to discourage sex trafficking

# As a Therapist/Service Provider, Why is it Important to Think About Sex Work?

*"I felt the need to educate my therapist about sex work so that she could understand what I was going through.*

*As a sex worker even to my therapist I did not feel valid. So I often tried to explain and over explain issues that sex workers deal with from a perspective that proved I had a good understanding of our collective issues, again to validate the experience.*

*I began to feel my therapist was sort of using the sessions to fulfill personal interest or curiosity about sex work. I did not want to talk about sex work all the time I am a human I have other human issues as well but never really got to them. This stressed me out so I quit going to therapy because it was not useful."*

*- Former Sex Worker*

# Final Points

- Being non-judgmental about number of sex partners or other behavior that is often judged will make a sex worker more comfortable disclosing their work to you.
- Learn more about their understanding of sex work before offering resources or making any statement or suggestion that could imply judgments.
- If a person discloses involvement, it's important that conversations about sex work are brought up by the client and are used to better serve your client...not out of personal curiosity.

# Final Points

- Meet individuals “where they are at”. Not all sex workers want to (or are able to) exit the industry, but need resources to stay safe from violence and abuse.
- Be sensitive with language. While not all prefer the term “sex worker”, calling someone a “prostituted person” can be equally offensive. Let client dictate what they prefer to be called.
- Seek to have a broader understanding of the sex trade and the reasons why a person is working in it. Oftentimes the sex work is not the harm, but the stigma and criminalization that allows abusers to prey on individuals involved in it.

# Additional Reading

- Chateauvert, M. (2014) *Sex Workers Unite*. Boston: Beacon Press
- Mgbako, C.A. (2016) *To Live Freely in This World: Sex Worker Activism in Africa*. New York: NYU Press
- Lutnick, A. (2016) *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rosen, E., & Venkatesh, S. A. (2008). A "Perversion" of Choice: Sex Work Offers Just Enough in Chicago's Urban Ghetto. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 37(4), 417-441.

# Additional Reading

- Rekart, M. L. (2005). Sex-Work Harm Reduction. *Lancet*, 366, 2123-2134.
- Lara, D. et al. (2009) Acceptability and Use of the Female Condom and Diaphragm among Sex Workers in the Dominican Republic: Results from a Prospective Study. *AIDS Education and Prevention*. 21 (6). 538-51.
- Iman, J., Fullwood, C., Paz, N., W, D., & Hassan, S. (2009). *Girls Do What They Have to Do to Survive: Illuminating Methods Used by Girls in the Sex Trade and Street Economy to Fight Back and Heal: A Participatory Action Research Study of Resilience and Resistance*. Retrieved from <https://ywepchicago.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/girls-do-what-they-have-to-do-to-survive-a-study-of-resilience-and-resistance.pdf>.



# Sex Worker Support Group

- Date: Tuesday October 4<sup>th</sup> 6-7:30
- Lifeworks Psychotherapy Center 8707 Skokie Blvd, Skokie, IL 60077
- Open to anyone currently or previously in the sex trade—facilitated by Lifeworks therapists and a member of SWOP
- More info:  
[Rami@lifeworkspsychotherapy.com](mailto:Rami@lifeworkspsychotherapy.com)

# Resources

[www.swop-chicago.org](http://www.swop-chicago.org)

[www.prosnetwork.org](http://www.prosnetwork.org)

[www.calachicago.org](http://www.calachicago.org)

Contact- [info@swop-chicago.org](mailto:info@swop-chicago.org)

Organizational Models in US-

**St. James Infirmary**

[stjamesinfirmary.org/](http://stjamesinfirmary.org/)

**HIPS**

[www.hips.org](http://www.hips.org)