

From working girl to job seeker

A white paper on the reform of prostitution laws is due next month. It could learn a lot from Streetreach, an employment project helping to break the vicious circle of drugs and punters. Saba Salman reports

17 March 2004
The Guardian

The only thing Sam remembers about her first punter is that he was worth four £10 bags of heroin. "This guy drove up, wound down his window and asked me if I was up for business. I told him I'd do it for £40. I got in, we drove round the corner, had sex and he gave me my money. I remember getting out of the car feeling disgusted but to be honest what I felt most was relieved. It was so easy to get the money to score."

Sam(not her real name) spiralled into drugs and prostitution through a heroin-addicted boyfriend. Impressed by the fact he was four years older, she would give him the wages from her job as a care assistant. "At first I didn't touch the stuff but when I told him I was sick of him sponging off me, he suggested I try it to see why he liked it so much. Like an idiot, I did."

Hooked on heroin, Sam moved in with her boyfriend. But she struggled to hold down her job and lost touch with her family. She would shoplift to buy drugs but shopkeepers began to recognise her, so her boyfriend suggested she try the red-light district. By the time they split up three months later, Sam had a £400-a-week habit.

For seven years until last summer, from the age of 17 until 24, Sam was one of the 200 or so prostitutes who work Doncaster's red-light district. She was a familiar face to outreach workers with the charity Streetreach - a unique project to help women off the streets and into work.

With a white paper to reform prostitution laws due next month - it is expected to focus on new ways to help women out of the sex trade and break the vicious circle of drug addiction and prostitution - Whitehall is sure to be studying the scheme carefully. In fact, the project's work was recognised as a model of good practice in 2002 when project manager Trudy Hannington was invited to a Downing Street reception on social exclusion.

After two years' support from Streetreach, Sam finally kicked her habit last summer, started a job as a sales assistant in a clothes store in the autumn and moved back home. Her colleagues and new boyfriend don't know about her previous life. The only thing that betrays her past is the slight caginess with which she greets new people.

Streetreach was set up by Hannington in 1991. She was working with the Doncaster drugs team run by the local health authority when she won a £90,000 health authority grant for HIV awareness work. "The initial idea was to deal with sexual health," says Hannington's colleague, senior drugs worker Jill Collier. "Then heroin took over. From going out a couple of times a week [to make money] to buy clothes or schoolbooks for their kids, the women were out there 24 hours a day to fund their habits."

Realising the scheme had to offer more than safe sex advice, Hannington won health authority funding for a base on the edge of the red-light district and extra services, such as outreach work. Now, the £150,000 annual budget is funded by the primary care trust, local authority and charitable grants.

The team comprises three full-time and two part-time project workers, a community psychiatric nurse, a GP who visits once a week and two administrative staff. A groundbreaking partnership, launched three years ago, with Reed, the recruitment company, means an employment adviser is also available for advice.

In the year to March 2003, 168 women visited the project. Of those, 44 were new to prostitution and almost all were self-referrals. Outreach workers, who go out twice a week

distributing condoms, personal safety leaflets and alarms, saw 170 women, 94 of them new to prostitution. Over the past three years, more than 50 women have been helped back into work - ranging from beauty therapy to care work and the travel industry - thanks to the Reed partnership.

Collier describes the scheme as "a one-stop shop for women involved in prostitution". Daytime opening hours mean the women can make phone calls during office hours to dental surgeries or accommodation agencies. They can also use showers and washing machines, and learn to cook or find out about employment and training.

Getting back into mainstream work increases the women's chances of staying off drugs. It took Sam two years and five attempts before she kicked her habit. She had weekly employment sessions with Maria Bevan, a childcare coordinator with Reed who works from the project and specialises in getting hard to reach groups, such as lone parents, back to work.

As well as providing suitable interview clothes, Bevan offers advice on CVs, interview skills and even how to conduct workplace banter. The fact that Sam was seen as employable boosted her confidence. She got back in touch with her family and, after seeing a vacancy advertised in a shop window, applied for a sales position, was interviewed and got the job.

"It's not about saying 'We've got a job for you in a supermarket or factory'," Bevan says. "We work out where they want to be and how to get them there. It might involve voluntary placements or training, or both."

Bevan admits that the stigma of prostitution means prospective employers are not always told about a candidate's background when Reed encourages them to apply for a job. "They know that they've come from hard-to-reach backgrounds. We just treat the women like any jobseeker who might find it hard to get work."

Hannington adds: "The hardest thing is ridding yourself of the label, not just of being a drug user but of being a prostitute. Tell someone you're a user, and they tell you how well you've done to beat the addiction, but it's not the same for prostitution."

As for Sam, she relishes the prosaic nature of her new life. "All I ever wanted when I was on smack was a normal life. It sounds boring, but I just wanted a job, a proper boyfriend. Not having to wake up and think 'Where's my next fix coming from?'" Her hope is to save up and retrain to work with disadvantaged youngsters.

"Sam was like a cardboard cutout when we first met - she had no spark," recalls Collier. "Now, it's like there's a light behind her eyes that's finally been switched on."