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A town free of prostitution?

Published Date: 18 March 2008

By Liz Lee

In the five years since it was created, support group Sex Workers Around Northampton (SWAN) has helped scores of women leave the world of prostitution.

Now staff say their goal of eliminating the street sex trade is within their grasp.

Crime reporter Liz Lee spent an evening with the group.

"Ultimately our aim at SWAN is to make Northampton free from street prostitution, and I would not have signed up for that if I didn't think it was possible. We are already looking at a 70 per cent reduction in the number of women working the streets."

Having cut the number of women working in the town's red light district from about 220 in 2003 to a regular core group of just 20, Sam Benfield, a health improvement co-ordinator with SWAN, is positive something residents in Spring Boroughs could only have dreamt of five years ago is on the horizon.

SWAN's work has also contributed to a drop in the amount of money made from prostitution in the town. Street sex in Northampton was worth more than £16 million a year in 2003 and is now worth less than £500,000.

During one of the group's twice weekly outreach sessions in the red light district surrounding the Quorn Way industrial estate, a team of two spend several hours talking to the women on the streets, handing out condoms and rape alarms and warning them of recent violent attacks.

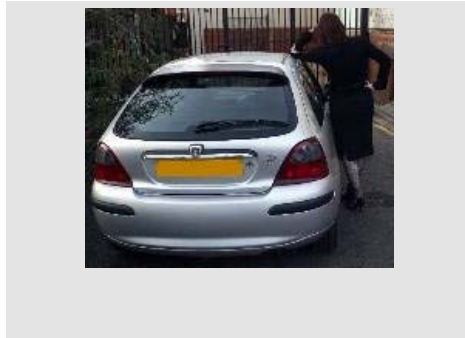
Discretion is at the heart of everything they do, and while I was there it was imperative the women were allowed to have a chat, coffee and sweets without putting their identity at risk.

The key to the group's success is gaining their trust, and most now confide in them on issues around housing, drug abuse, health issues and, crucially, life working on the streets.

Miss Benfield said: "We don't want to facilitate prostitution or make it easier for the women to work as sex workers, but it is about getting the balance right and making it safer for them."

There are some women who are friendlier and more open to us where others will be reluctant to talk, but it is not all about us approaching them, there has to be a willingness on their part."

In one typical outreach session, Miss Benfield and colleague Catherine Lessells spoke to seven different women, most of whom were regulars on the beat.



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Although there is a group of about 20 women who will be seen most nights of the week, 60 in total are thought to work the streets but many will not be seen for several months between visits.

Many complain of health issues and lack of appropriate housing but, more worryingly, some talk of violent attacks from punters.

Descriptions of these "Ugly Mugs" are written up by SWAN and passed around to each street worker to make them aware of any dangerous men.

Because of the group's dedication to helping women exit the sex trade, combined with a police crackdown on persistent kerb crawlers, the effect has not been to simply move the problem on but to drastically cut the number of women on the streets.

The size of the red light district, now centred in the small "priority action zone" where prostitutes can operate without fear of prosecution, is also greatly reduced.

Miss Benfield added: "SWAN and the police have worked very closely with residents, and the whole point of the priority action zone was to move the workers out of residential areas.

When we started, 999 people in Spring Boroughs responded to a survey and prostitution was the number one concern. Now, it's behind illegal parking and fly-tipping."

Sgt Paul Valentine, who leads Northamptonshire Police's Operation Uncanny crackdown on prostitution, said the force was on target to eliminate all street prostitution within two years.

The team focuses on getting women out of the sex trade and preventing any new starters, as well as dealing with pimps or boyfriends who force women to work and prosecuting kerb crawlers.

Any women who take up prostitution are given an intense package of care with police and SWAN workers and if they continue to work the streets, they will be given an ASBO.

Sgt Valentine said: "We are committed to eliminating street prostitution by 2010, and to my knowledge we are the only town in the country, along with Ipswich in the wake of the murders there, to stand up and say we can be completely free of the street sex trade."

Help and Advice

In SWAN's town centre headquarters, women can drop in to speak to health and housing advisors, or arrange to speak to police about attacks from punters.

As well as providing an advice centre, the prostitutes can just go in for an informal chat or a cup of coffee in a warm and friendly environment.






Mrs Lessells said: "As well as all the trouble these women have had in the past, they have stereotypes heaped on top of them. People have an image that women enjoy this life, which is a major misconception.


"It's not easy for us to separate ourselves from the way they actually make a living. Even if the women are happy to talk to us, their punters will always come first."

It is estimated that about 90 per cent of street workers are drug addicts, while 80 per cent are homeless. As well as outreach schemes and their headquarters, SWAN maintains The Nest, a two-bedroom house in Northampton where workers planning to leave prostitution can stay under strict conditions not to bring punters home.

The team, funded by several partners including Northamptonshire County Council, the PCT and drug support groups in the county, has eight employees focused on helping the women.

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It is undoubtedly a positive thing that genuine victims among prostitutes have their needs, such as drug addiction and homelessness, addressed, and are offered an opportunity to exit sexwork if they so wish.

Yet there is something very Warsaw Ghettoish about an ever-decreasing



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tolerance zone, which in terms of police action is more about active intolerance outside the zone than tolerance within it.

Studies across the world, including the UK, show a minimum of 70% of prostitutes in the indoor market, not the streets.

The consensus with the sex industry is that there will always be a street market, no matter what anyone does, firstly because street sex workers are generally cheaper, secondly because they are often more convenient, thirdly because some prostitutes prefer the streets to brothels (despite the fact that brothels are generally safer, with less chance of attack) because they value their independence and have more choice of clients on the streets than in brothels.

Streets are liable to become even more dangerous for street prostitutes if the Home Office perpetrates the Swedish regime in the UK, under which clients can be fined or imprisoned. Already able to seize cars in some areas of the UK, some symptoms of Sweden are already being seen here.

These include street prostitutes having to frequent darker, more dangerous back alleys and both clients and prostitutes fearing to carry condoms lest they are seized for use in evidence.

More details are available on the relevant 10 Downing Street petition site, here: <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/sexworkers/>

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