

# Moon Light - A Project to Create Conditions for Safe Prostitution

*Being socially active and aware of many important issues of society today, I consider that it is necessary to find out and to learn about gender ideas and their links with the question of the equality of rights. As I am a young woman I understand the position of the women very well. Young women may not have the opportunity for advanced education, have limited job opportunities, and low salaries only because they are women. Unfortunately, this happens very often. Women are discriminated against because of their gender. I want to do something for the creation and development of equality of rights of all people. I think that women and men have to have equal rights which are independent from their gender. Also I'd like to help people to understand that the problem of discrimination is actual, is now (because many of them don't know and don't understand it, especially men). I would enjoy helping people here and don't see any problems, which might prevent me from doing so.*

I am happy that I have this possibility to tell you about our project, which runs between 1 November 1999 and 31 October 2003. In Latvia, as in other post-Socialist countries, prostitution has developed very rapidly during the period of economic transformations. Prostitution has spread along with the increase of rapes and the feminisation of poverty in Latvia, which has occurred against the background of a high level of unemployment. According to experts from the Latvian Center for Gender Studies, there were between 10,000 and 15,000 prostitutes in Latvia in the period between 1996 and 1998 and this number is growing extremely fast. Young women have dreams of a comfortable lifestyle – money for themselves and their families – nice clothes, and travel to foreign countries. Therefore many of them start their work in the sex business. As you know this job is very dangerous, because women are seriously at risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and HIV infection. Therefore there is an urgent need for the creation of an interdisciplinary intervention activity in the field of health promotion and social care among sex workers in Latvia. At the moment there is no structural policy regarding social and health care for sex workers, although the phenomenon of prostitution is rapidly growing. Above all, the phenomenon of transnational prostitution has been escalating during recent years and there is little experience and skills in HIV/STD prevention among sex workers, nor is there much knowledge of outreach/peer education in this country. These are the most important reasons why the project “Moon Light. Safe Prostitution in Latvia” was created and started by us.

Now a little bit about peer education, that I think, implies a didactic role. We invite a group of selected sex workers to attend specific training courses which teach them all of the skills necessary to function as competent educators within their own environment. After having accomplished this training course, they

are ready to raise awareness among their colleagues about STD including HIV/AIDS and they also are ready to organise and conduct lessons on safe sex practices and preventive measures, which are very necessary in the outreach work with the target group. The target group of this project includes female sex workers who are operating in Riga, Jurmala and Jelgava (the last two are small towns of Latvia). They work mainly on the streets, partly in night and sex clubs, hotels, bars and escort services.

## The Project's Long-term Objectives

Here are some of our objectives for the project:

- To create a strong commitment for the promotion of prostitution policies based on the principle of treating sex workers with dignity, respect and confidentiality and to promote their health, safety and civil rights;
- To develop common quality standards of HIV/STD intervention among sex workers which could be applied in other countries of the region.

## The Project's Short-term Objectives

In the short-term, our objectives are to:

- ↳ provide sex workers with information and sanitary prevention;
- ↳ promote the use of safe-sex techniques in prostitution;
- ↳ identify social and health service providers and make their services more widely-known, appropriate and accessible to sex workers;
- ↳ gather quantitative and qualitative data concerning the phenomenon of prostitution, its different forms, its transformation and its impact on the territory.

What do we do to realise these objectives? We use street intervention units formed by outreach workers (but this isn't part of our training). Outreach work activities include: mapping of the prostitution scene, gathering information and evaluation of

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sex-workers' needs, getting in contact and establishing relationships with the members of the target group, providing health and educational information and promoting behavioural changes as far as prophylactic measures are concerned (distribution of condoms and lubricants, information materials etc.) Production and distribution of condom and lubricant kits (small bags with basic products such as condoms, lubricants, sponges and information folders). Distribution of condoms among sex workers, accompanying sex workers to social and public health facilities and mediating between them and these services, recruitment and training of peer educators, supporting peer educators in their educational activities among colleagues regarding safe sex techniques.

How is it that sex workers prefer to work with us and to trust us with their problems? The main thing we do to get their trust is through organising discussions with them. We try to get into their situation and understand them. Our staff speak with women about how have they entered the sex trade and how have they been involved. Women often enter prostitution when they have lost control of everything in their lives. So we try to help them to find at least one thing or topic which they could control and, developing their capabilities to breakaway from their current situation.

### Peer Education

The next objective is to introduce the notion of peer education, to ensure its correct application, to conduct trainings for peer educators and to perform evaluation of the impact of peer education.

For organising the training we usually use the "Methodology of Training for Peer Educators", which was created by TAMPEP (see the end of this article for contact details).

There are some basic steps in this methodology that you can see below.

- The first step is the identification of future peer educators and application of criteria for selection of potential peer educators.

- Assessment of knowledge of future peer educators:  
Of course, prior to each course, an assessment of participants' knowledge is carried out concerning STD, AIDS, reproductive female organs, contraception, the use of condoms and professional attitude. This knowledge is tested by means of a specially developed questionnaire. The survey also includes questions about the individual wishes of the women concerning the contents of the course.

- The duration of the course:  
The sex workers are a very mobile group. That means that all activities concerning organisation and realisation of the training for peer educators should not take up too much time. We think the best duration of the course would be a period of two to three months.

- Formation of trainee classes:  
In general, in this step of the training we try to limit the number of trainees per class to ten or twelve persons.

- Continuous evaluation of the course and of the progress of

the trainees:

Every training session ends with the participants' filling out an evaluation form on the contents of the particular session, because this evaluation not only permits us to adapt the contents according to the wishes of the trainees, but also reveals how the members of the target group perceive the training and their own position in it.

- Active participation of members of the target group in the course. (In my opinion this is the basis for the success of the course):

Their active participation is asked for in all phases of the training. The trainees are always encouraged to ask questions and share their experiences with other colleagues, because this will benefit the learning process and also enhance the credibility and acceptance of the information passed on. A colleague-prostitute shares her/his knowledge with the other participants under the guidance of an expert. At the same time this ensures that the future peer educator gains educational experience. At the conclusion of the course, the trainees/sex workers have the chance to produce (written) didactic materials if they so wish.

- Of course, we don't forget about guest speakers:  
During every training, some guest speakers, such as a physician from the local clinic, an employee of a contraception counselling centre, a trained peer educator or a social worker are invited to share their experience with the trainees.

- Economic compensation:  
The participants are given economic compensation for attending the training. This (small) amount of money rewards the time and energy put into the training, as well as partly covering any possible loss of earnings.

- Trial run-through:  
During the last gathering of the participants, each of them puts together a session which they lead. This is as an exercise for the future peer educators in passing on their knowledge to their peers. The contents are based on the material treated during the course.

- The diploma:  
At the end of the training all participants are awarded a certificate of completion of the course. This serves as a sign of recognition not only vis-à-vis the colleagues of the peer educators, but also vis-à-vis members of public service agencies of the various countries where the peer educators stay. Incidentally, one of my roles in the training is to prepare these diplomas.

- Monitoring the effects of the course:  
After the course, we maintain frequent contact with the peer educators in order to supervise and support their activities, which are the following:

- facilitating contact between peer educators and their peer group

- presenting peer educators to the members of official agencies and facilitating contact between them

- mediating between peer educators and public health services
- preparing peer educators for the role of mobile health messengers

- supplying peer educators with additional knowledge which was not included in the basic course



- providing peer educators with folders and other materials.

Collecting data, intervention methods used in the field and methods of evaluation concerning the results of the intervention are the next roles of mine in this project.

### Other Instruments Necessary for Achieving the Project's Objectives

There is not enough space for me to go into all the areas of our work and how it is organised. But I would like to highlight the following sectors.

We receive a great amount of technical support from TAMPEP: assistance in assessing the needs in a given prostitution area: mapping the prostitution scene, identifying target groups and determining their habits and culture; assistance in project design; training of street workers and cultural mediators according to the training modules prepared by TAMPEP. TAMPEP supports us with the necessary literature about organising training when we need it and often we use this information on the seminars and workshops where our street workers and cultural mediators are trained. In-service training is essential for all staff both in acquiring relevant knowledge and in improving team development. There are few courses or certificates that deal specifically with sex work, and our project has to use many different approaches, including attendance at general training on health and sexuality, management and team work, counselling, communication etc. In addition, visits to established projects are invaluable. Staff without pre-existing qualifications are encouraged to study for nationally-recognised qualifications. We receive technical support concerning the creation of networks and various forms of collaboration on a national and regional level between public health authorities, policy makers, police, proprietors of prostitution venues and others.

Our organisation structure is composed of a project group, an operating group and a support group. This was created in order to ensure the realisation of the above mentioned long-term objectives and in order to create a steady and stable basis and infrastructure for maintaining the activities and in order to guarantee the commitment of all parties and bodies to the philosophy of the project. It also has a prime task to seek the necessary support, cooperation, contacts etc. with the local governmental organisations.

We have a drop-in centre for sex workers, which is a major help in maintaining contacts between them and giving support. As they belong to a stigmatised profession, they often have few opportunities to meet and speak together without fear.

Disseminating the results of our work is important to us as is the opportunity to exchange experiences and cooperate with other projects in the geographical region (such as the other Baltic countries, Belarus, Russia, Ukraine).

### Our Results

Some of the main results are: information materials for prostitutes are ready; the outreach work in the three towns is working; the opening of the drop-in centre has been achieved; and the group of peer educators has been formed. An article "A Survey about Prostitution in Latvia" was published in the book Gender Equality in Latvia at the Threshold of the New Millennium (it is available in both Latvian and English

languages). We are organising meetings and workshops with sex workers once a week, not only in the drop-in centre or the STD centre, but also at the bars where the women gather together to "get warm" during their working time.

We organised a two-day International Training Seminar on the issues of Trafficking in Women and Prostitution. It was held in Jūrmala in June 2000. As a result, the basis was formed of the national network between NGOs and government institutions which are interested in common work in the field of prostitution and against trafficking in women; the main tasks were defined; an e-mail list was formed; and we were able to exchange reports about the situation in other Baltic states and raise awareness and understanding of the global character of trafficking. In addition, our work received new impulses for new kinds of activities.

The main result of our project is the creating of a refuge in our organisation. The aims of the refuge are to support, protect and treat the victims of trafficking and prostitutes.

What do you think? Why is the role of non-profit organisations important in such kinds of work? I think that sex work is - to a great extent - connected with the criminal world and an already harassed woman does not trust state structures, fearing punishment. So the structure of a non-profit, non-governmental organisation is very flexible, it is used to untraditional approaches, is located in the vicinity of the "customer": street work, work in sex firms, bars. The staff of the non-profit organisation have to receive proper training, have long-term experience, are very customer friendly, which allows building up mutual trust. Our NGO is an intermediate link between the customer and relatively stiff state structures which, on the one hand, makes it possible to protect the interests of a customer (medical, social and psychological) and, on the other hand, those of the state (alienation of minors from prostitution, cooperation with police structures, prevention of STDs and AIDS). And the introduction of trained peer educators helps us enormously in this work.

### Literature:

HUSTLING FOR HEALTH: Developing services for Sex Workers in Europe. " The European Network for HIV/STD Prevention in Prostitution (EUROPAP/TAMPEP), 1998.

### Would you like to meet us or receive more information? Please contact the following:

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