



'Sex workers are a drug dealer's dream. They've got access to cash, and quickly... One woman described it to me as being like a hamster on a wheel - work, score, work, score, work, score, collapse.'

With headlines dominated by the appalling events in Bradford, **David Gilliver** talks to the only independent sexual violence advisor in post at a UK sex worker project

SAFETY FIRST

'They're shite, killed by shite. Who gives a shite?' This apparently was the view of one police officer after the murder of a female sex worker in the 1990s. 'Drug-using sex workers are the forgotten victims of sexual violence,' says Shelly Stoops, independent sexual violence advisor (ISVA) for the Armistead Street Project in Liverpool. Inevitably, with the headlines dominated by the cases of Susan Rushworth, Suzanne Blamires and Shelley Armitage in Bradford, she's had a hectic week. 'I've had the media all over me,' she says. 'It's really sad that this is the only opportunity you get to talk about rational stuff.'

The Armistead Street project began in 2005 and is run by the Armistead Centre, a free and confidential sexual health promotion service for the gay community and female and male sex workers, delivered by Liverpool's PCT, NHS Liverpool Community Health. 'There was a project before us, but it closed because of lack of funding,' she says. 'Armistead babysat and did the outreach for a year, and formally got the contract in 2005. We got funding from the Home Office in 2006 for the ISVA role, and it's still the only sex work project in the UK to have that.' While the results have been 'amazing' – the conviction rate for rapes against sex workers in Liverpool now stands at 67 per cent, compared to six per cent for rapes nationally – every year the service has to put in a fresh bid for the money to sustain the ISVA post.

Ninety-eight per cent of her clients are dependent on class A drugs and/or alcohol, she says, a figure that 'would be echoed for street sex workers all around the UK'. Furthermore, the women are specifically targeted by local dealers. 'Sex workers are a drug dealer's dream. They've got access to cash, and quickly. They can go out and do a punter or two, go and score, then back again. One woman described it to me as being like a hamster on a wheel – work, score, work, score, work, score, collapse. She didn't have time for eating or bathing.'

The line quickly becomes blurred between developing a habit and going into sex work to pay for it, and using drugs to get through the work itself, she says. 'Women are using drugs to numb themselves because of what they're doing, and also working because they need drugs. My clients already had addictions when they came into it, but street sex work and drug use obviously correlate with all kinds of other problems – abuse, experience of being a looked-after child in the care system, poverty, lack of opportunity. That's not a gender thing either – we also have a project for male sex workers, which is quite a distinct market, with people doing business not necessarily for money but for a bed, drugs, a meal.'

The project works closely with local drug services as well as the police, sexual health and contraception clinics and local hostels to arrange emergency accommodation. The response from the women has been overwhelmingly positive, she says, with little or no suspicion even at the outset. 'We're seen as being here just for them, which to them shows that people do care. They really appreciate it, especially if there's been a murder – the fact that we'll be out there on the streets with them, reassuring them and making sure they're looked after.'

The majority of her clients are aged between 30 and 34, with the rest largely in the 25-29 range – 'that doesn't fit with the stereotype of the "teenage prostitute",' she says. One of the things that would most benefit them would be an expansion of treatment options, she stresses – she's been told of cases elsewhere in the country of police coercing women into entering treatment on threat of arrest. 'What kind of choice is that? We need more choices in treatment as it is – it's not just about methadone. People should have choices around prescribing, and treatment needs to be accessible at the point of contact – when people ask for it, it needs to be there.'

There was also a noticeable culture change when crack entered Liverpool's sex work scene, she says. 'The women weren't watching each other's backs any more. It damaged that sense of solidarity and sisterhood, which led to an increase in risk and danger.' A growing number of sex work projects now offer in-house prescribing, however, and 'there's evidence that that really makes a difference'.

There's no such thing as a typical day at the project, she says. 'It can involve being in the office, with clients, or training and then it can all go out of the window because we get a phone call that someone's been raped. That could come in the day, but most of the time it comes in the middle of the night and I'd then go out to the client.' Is she ever able to switch off from the work? 'You have to, but sometimes it's very hard to do that. You wouldn't be any good if you didn't have a very strong personal connection.'

The assumption that the police had learned their lesson on attitudes to sex work with the Yorkshire Ripper case and the Ipswich murders of 2006 turned out to be overly optimistic. Does she detect any signs that attitudes are changing, albeit slowly? 'There are very definitely pockets of good practice, and there are a couple of cities that adopt a really pragmatic approach, although I can't really name them because *Daily Mail* readers would be up in arms. But overall it is hard.'

In 12 per cent of the 86 cases of rape recorded in the Liverpool north area last year, the victims were sex workers, while in 2007/08 the figure had been 22 per cent. A 2002 survey that questioned Liverpool sex workers about why they would not report attacks to the police elicited responses ranging from 'I don't want to be identified as a sex worker' to 'they might judge me' to 'they never do anything anyway'. Merseyside Police, however, have since taken the step of classing violence against sex workers as a hate crime, the only police force to do so. Is she hopeful that other forces might take the same approach? 'I am, and we've had several forces visit Merseyside and ask for guidance about how they can adopt a similar model. It's seen as a beacon, but so far no one has done it.'

Overall, legislation has worked to make women less safe, she stresses – sex workers in Bradford had previously been working in a residential area but the police moved them to an industrial zone where they were far more vulnerable. 'Somewhere where they're open to all kinds of abuse,' she says. 'No one's there to hear you scream. And if women work in a flat with someone else, they're open to brothel-keeping laws – women have been murdered working alone in flats.' Is it possible that the Bradford case might lead to an overhaul of the law? 'Yes, but what they're saying is they want tougher laws, which is not going to work – it's a knee-jerk reaction and it's misinformed.'

The government's prostitution strategy of 2006 had five strands – prevention, tackling demand, developing routes out, ensuring justice and tackling off-street prostitution. The original funding for the ISVA post came from the 'ensuring justice' strand, which focused on making sure that sex workers who are victims are treated with respect. The same year, however, saw the Ipswich murders. 'They spent about £20,000 on sex worker safety and about £20m on the Ipswich murder investigation. I know where the money would be better spent – on prevention.'

Best practice in police work prioritises safety over enforcement, she stresses, and the use of dedicated police liaison officers. 'There are lots of liaison officers in the country but what I find problematic is that often those officers will still be involved in enforcement – you have to have separation, you have to be pragmatic. If someone has a warrant for shoplifting or non-appearance or whatever and they get raped, then they're scared to come forward, so that has to be put aside. Those are the pragmatic decisions that have to be taken – prioritising the needs of that woman. I'm not saying you don't deal with that other stuff, but you can deal with it later.'

In Merseyside, it's now standard for police officers who deal with sexual offences to be trained in issues of sex work, and the key issue, she says, is that when women do report incidents they are believed. 'If you're a taxi driver and someone rips you off for a tenner you're not going to spend hours in a police station reporting it when you could be out earning hundreds instead. Women would not report these things if they weren't extremely serious.'

'When [the Bradford story broke] you just think "are we learning nothing?" Why, why, why is this happening again?' The case means there have now been 14 murders of sex workers since Ipswich. However, there is some sense that things are moving in a positive direction – funding was agreed in April for five more ISVAs in sex work projects, although they're not yet in post. From a legislative perspective what would she most like to see? 'Decriminalisation – let's take it out of the back streets, let's have a reasoned, adult debate about this. It totally mirrors the drugs debate – let's take it out of the criminal fraternity.'

'I'm very much a believer that people have the right to choose whether they want to sex work and, while some people will believe it isn't a choice, all the choices we have are in some way circumscribed,' she says. 'We have to think about allowing those choices to be made and having a debate around that. We can never guard against everything but what we can say is overwhelmingly it's safer for women to work together, indoors. And the media needs to stop saying "three prostitutes have been murdered" and start saying "three women have been murdered". These women were all somebody's daughter, friend, sister, mum, wife, partner, and they were all loved.'

