

Living and working in areas of street sex work

This study examines how residential areas characterised as being used by female street sex workers are shared by different sections of the community. In light of debates about managing ‘the street scene’, researchers from Staffordshire, Loughborough and Strathclyde Universities considered whether residential streets could serve as shared spaces where residents and sex workers could coexist. They found that:

- For many residents across the five areas studied, street sex work did not affect their overall quality of life. Concerns centred on the visibility of sex workers and associated nuisance. Street sex working also impinged negatively on some residents’ use of public space, and some associated it with drugs and crime.
- Community views and responses to street sex work varied, ranging from sympathy and engaging with the women to action to displace them from local streets.
- Attempts by police and local authorities to tackle problems relating to street sex work in some areas through enforcement action, such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders against sex workers, had caused difficulties. The women were sometimes prevented from accessing vital services, or were forced to operate in unsafe areas, thus displacing the issue and increasing their vulnerability. Regeneration initiatives which moved street sex workers out of their normal areas could also have similar consequences.
- Many residents and sex workers supported the concept of ‘tolerance zones’ or designated spaces for working. Sex workers’ greatest consideration was a safer working environment.
- Coexistence appeared greatest where integrated responses to community concerns had been developed with a range of partners, including sex worker support projects, and where alternatives to increased enforcement, such as court diversion schemes, existed.
- Overall, the scope for improving relations between residents and street sex workers was considerable, particularly through mediation and awareness-raising.
- The authors conclude that an integrated, multi-stakeholder response to street sex work is essential. Involving sex workers in local governance can help to ensure consideration of their needs when addressing community conflicts and managing the street scene.



Background

Street sex work is relatively new in some areas, but in others has long been part of the urban street scene. Some residents are less content than others with this state of affairs, and some regard street sex markets as a source of anti-social behaviour. Sex work also restricts residents' use of public spaces at particular times.

This study of sex work in five cities in England and Scotland aimed to:

- assess community responses to street sex work, identifying why and how some areas have sought to 'reclaim' the streets by excluding sex workers, while others exhibit greater tolerance;
- identify policies to reduce conflict in areas of sex work;
- explore whether residential streets can become shared spaces where residents and sex workers could coexist.

Case-study areas

The five areas studied, termed here Eastside, Westside, Riverside, Central and Southside, reflected a range of community responses, from intolerance to more effective coexistence. Each represented an established area of street sex working. The five sites were under varying pressure from changes such as regeneration and high population turnover. Residents had common concerns over crime, anti-social behaviour, environmental quality, poor housing and lack of facilities.

Street sex markets seemed to be changing. Residents in most of the areas reported a decline in the numbers of female street sex workers over the past five years. This may reflect changes in working patterns, with women working less visibly, for example through use of mobile phones, and sometimes being dispersed to other neighbourhoods. Overall, except for Riverside, residents' concerns about street sex work appeared to have lessened in recent years. Problems had increased in Riverside because of the closure of an informal tolerance zone, with little consultation with sex workers or their support projects. Street sex work had been dispersed across a wider residential area.

Issues of concern

For many residents across all five areas, sex work did not impinge greatly on their overall quality of life. Nonetheless, they identified specific concerns, centring on the visibility of sex workers and associated noise and debris, particularly discarded condoms. Nearly all the street sex workers interviewed used drugs. Drug use was therefore also a concern to some residents, who worried about the dangers of discarded needles and drug dealing in their area.

Street sex work and kerb crawling also impacted on some residents' feelings of personal safety, linked to perceptions of risk, crime and disorder and lack of social control. Residents' wider concerns over crime often outweighed those relating specifically to sex work. Physical violence was a concern for nearly all the sex workers interviewed. Many had experienced violence, particularly from clients, but also from residents or passers-by. Lower-level abuse from members of the public was common for most of the women.

One of residents' most widespread concerns was that street sex working, along with activities such as drug dealing, impinged negatively on their use of public space. Female residents were approached by kerb crawlers, and some felt unsafe walking home. Many sex workers also regarded certain public spaces such as parks as dangerous, indicating wider concerns over the perceived safety of some areas.

Community responses to street sex work

Community responses across the five areas ranged from sympathy and engaging with the women, to action to displace them from local streets, particularly in Riverside and Westside. Some residents in all areas, particularly Eastside, perceived sex workers who lived in the area as part of the community and therefore their needs should be considered. Others saw them as 'outside community' and their views were not considered important.

In some sites, a minority of residents viewed enforcement as the most appropriate response, to remove sex workers and kerb crawlers from the area. The majority of residents and local service representatives, however, favoured a more holistic approach. They felt that enforcement should be balanced by support for sex workers, linked to harm reduction and opportunities to move away from street-based work or leave the sex industry.

Westside and Riverside had the most active opposition to street sex work. Residents' groups were involved in street patrols, though not all residents interviewed favoured such action. These patrols seemed partly to be a response to perceived inaction by the authorities. In these two areas, residents' opposition had also disrupted support projects, resulting in reduced services to sex workers, particularly outreach-based work.

In Southside, responses were more mixed, from active opposition to concern for the women. In Central, the level of complaints appeared to be relatively low, perhaps in part because of women being encouraged to work the city-centre beat, which had fewer residents. In Eastside, residents had been involved in negotiations with support projects and sometimes individual sex workers, leading to greater understanding among all parties. Agency staff

described the community as 'tolerant', though degrees of tolerance depended on the extent to which soliciting or other activities impinged on people's lives.

While co-existence appeared to be greatest in Eastside and Central, all five areas showed mixed responses and examples of co-existence and dialogue between sex workers and residents. Greater tolerance appeared to reflect: the extent to which sex workers lived as well as worked in the area and were perceived as community members; the degree of communication between residents and sex workers; and the relative visibility of sex workers and their clients. Many of the sex workers interviewed attempted to reduce nuisance to residents, for example by not leaving debris around.

Organisational responses

Local responses often centred on police or local authority attempts to reduce crime or move sex workers and kerb crawlers away from particular streets through environmental measures and enforcement activities, such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs). ASBOs are civil orders which aim to protect neighbourhoods from anti-social behaviour that causes distress and harassment. They might be used to prohibit sex workers from entering specific areas. Breaching an ASBO is a criminal offence. Criminal ASBOs (CRASBOs) are added on to a criminal conviction, and may include restrictions, for example on loitering.

Across the five areas, the use of ASBOs/CRASBOs and other civil measures to target sex workers and restrict their movements varied considerably. It ranged from initial blanket use in Westside, to part of periodic crackdowns in Southside, to a lesser extent in Eastside, and limited use in Central. In Westside and Riverside, lay involvement in patrolling and collecting evidence for ASBOs reinvigorated police enforcement, which became a central feature of the strategy on street sex work. In Central, ASBOs were used selectively against sex workers as a result of the multi-agency partnership, which stressed "a practical, non-judgemental view of adult prostitution".

Stakeholders were concerned by enforcement orders' lack of clarity, restrictiveness, applicability in the mere presence of street sex workers, and the potential for sex workers simply to be dispersed to other areas as a result. Sex workers noted that ASBOs had impacted on their movement, restricting and sometimes preventing their use of outreach support, drugs services and other support. They also faced media intrusion when ASBOs were issued, and consequent stigma, which could affect their daily lives. Project staff expressed concern that ASBO breaching was increasingly leading to criminalisation of sex workers. The lack of support and appropriate care packages for women served with an ASBO was also a concern.

Some areas were more supportive. Court diversion schemes in Central and Eastside gave sex workers the opportunity to engage with support projects and other services as an alternative to penalties. Projects addressed sexual health and safer working practices, provided onward referral to other services, and assisted women to move on from sex work. In these areas, agencies thought engagement was more appropriate than sanctions, as it helped women to address problems such as drug use and other support needs.

Challenges for managing public spaces

In terms of managing the street scene, practical initiatives such as clean-up activities were felt to make a substantial difference for residents. Local authorities' efforts to 'reclaim' public space, by gating off areas, CCTV, demolishing disused buildings and landscaping, had also provided some reassurance to residents. Often, however, such measures had merely displaced sex workers into other areas. If ill-considered, the effect of these measures was to reduce people's access to certain spaces and diminish the quality of the local environment. Redesign of public spaces involving different community members, including sex workers, may have wider potential to improve all residents' quality of life.

For many residents and sex workers and some agency representatives, a managed zone away from residential areas appealed, particularly for reducing nuisance to communities and potentially improving conditions for sex workers. Many representatives stressed that regulations and regular clean-up activities would be needed, as well as mechanisms to ensure sex workers' safety. Only one area had experienced a managed tolerance zone, albeit an informal one, but attempts to regenerate the area had effectively closed it. The women dispersed to other more heavily populated areas, increasing their visibility to residents. There was evidence too that women were now working in isolation, increasing their vulnerability.

Improving community relations

To improve community relations, a key finding across all five areas was the importance of consultation and involving all stakeholders in decisions regarding responses to street sex work.

Most residents and agency representatives acknowledged that awareness-raising and mediation could improve relationships between residents and sex workers. Police and wardens carried out informal mediation in most of the areas, but local support projects played a particularly important role. In addition to mediation between residents, service providers and sex workers, project staff attended community meetings to build awareness of their work and sex workers' concerns. They also responded to community concerns by taking part in

'clean-up' events and consultation on issues such as outreach and court diversion services. Such work had led to more constructive dialogue with residents in several areas, particularly Eastside, and raised awareness of sex workers' circumstances. The short-term funding of some projects, however, undermined their longer-term sustainability.

The need for multi-agency working to pursue longer-term strategies was widely recognised, though the degree of strategic co-operation varied across the five sites. Where it worked well, it offered increased capacity, opportunity and resources to pursue joint interests, for example harm reduction strategies and court diversion schemes. It also enabled support projects to influence wider policies and statutory agencies' service delivery.

Conclusions

Scope for improving relations between local residents and street sex workers was considerable, particularly through mediation and awareness-raising. Coexistence appeared greatest where integrated responses to community concerns had been developed through a range of partners, including sex work projects, and where multi-agency working favoured alternatives to increased enforcement, such as court diversion schemes.

Consultation is needed with all interested groups in areas where street sex work takes place, to explore options for addressing concerns. This should occur within a framework of inclusive citizenship and safer space for both residents and sex workers. Any strategy concerning street sex work must consider the potential for encouraging space to be shared by different groups, as well as other options such as safety zones, which might include 'managed areas' where sex workers can operate.

At national level, a shift in focus towards increased support and services rather than penalties for street sex workers would be required to facilitate this model, alongside clearer guidance on using enforcement measures such as ASBOs/CRASBOs. These were intended to address specific issues of anti-social behaviour, yet they appear to be used to tackle the presence of street sex workers in some areas, leading to increased vulnerability for women who are already excluded from vital services and, increasingly, from public spaces. National policy also needs to accommodate exploration within each locality of a range of options for managing the issue, to enable local negotiation and consideration of shared interests to influence the way forward.

About the project

The research was undertaken by Jane Pitcher, Rosie Campbell, Phil Hubbard, Maggie O'Neill and Jane Scoular from the Universities of Staffordshire, Loughborough and Strathclyde between July 2004 and September 2005. The study took place in five cities in England and Scotland and included:

- interviews with project staff and volunteers working with street sex workers, and observation of project activities;
- observation at meetings, including local prostitution forums and community meetings;
- interviews and discussions with staff in public services;
- focus groups with local agency staff and residents;
- interviews with women sex workers;
- interviews with residents, community and business representatives.

For further information

The full report, **Living and working in areas of street sex work: From conflict to coexistence** by Jane Pitcher, Rosie Campbell, Phil Hubbard, Maggie O'Neill and Jane Scoular, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press.

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