

Principles of Peer Education with Sex Workers

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It should be noted that the views presented in this discussion paper are my own and not necessarily representative of SIN.

Using an empowerment model when working with sex workers is about acknowledging that sex work often occurs in conditions that oppress sex workers. We live in a sex negative society where the choices sex workers make in relation to our own bodies are complicated by the stigma attached to sex work. Moreover we are often working in illegal or underground situations, experiencing stress due to leading a double life and a lack of support, affirmation and a sense of legitimacy. Sex workers are best served by services that actively work to change discriminatory attitudes towards sex work, and to positively influence the environment in which sex work takes place - as well as the development of sex workers' self esteem, pride and personal skills to manage the impact of oppression.

An acknowledgement of a proud tradition

Formalised peer education models that are the basis for our work in sex worker organisations/projects should be seen as the extension of the informal tradition of peer education that occurs in sex industry workplaces. Just as many sex workers have had the opportunity to learn new work skills by a more experienced co worker in a brothel, these days a new sex worker should have the opportunity of walking in to a sex worker organisation and have an experienced sex worker to train him/ her in a range of relevant skill areas. The importance of this service from sex worker organisations is increased in instances where sex workers may be working privately, or in quite isolated ways. This acknowledgement of the history of informal peer education among sex workers serves to celebrate a history of supportive community between sex workers, promoting a focus on sex workers' co-operation, skillsharing and positive networking, rather than competition within sex industry workplaces.

Practical Sex Work Skills Training

Skills sharing, the development and enhancement of sex workers practical knowledge and confidence are some of the most empowering ways that sex worker organisations can work with sex workers. These encourage professionalism and pride in sex workers, and supports a greater assertiveness with clients, a culture of safer commercial sex practices, and a positive attitude towards sex work. Work skills training is the key reason why a peer education approach to working with sex workers is vital, as some of the most esoteric sex worker skills are not known by non-sex workers. While the support and counselling services available at sex worker organisations are important, I believe there may be a tendency to view those services as reinforcing a negative message (support services suggest that sex workers are more needing of support and counselling, thus pathologising sex workers as lacking coping skills; referrals to sex worker friendly services suggest that other services will necessarily discriminate against sex workers), whereas skills development and OHS are necessarily sex worker specific and about practicality, empowerment and confidence.

Role modelling and Challenging Sex Workerphobia

Peer education should be about role modelling. Sex workers find it difficult to avoid internalising the stigma associated with sex work, leading to feeling negative about their work and experiencing poor self esteem. It should be the role of a sex worker organisation to promote pride among sex workers, to challenge negative stereotypes about sex work, both in the general community, but also among sex workers. Peer education is not simply about reflecting a sex workers' views back at them, particularly not negative views - this is neither empowering nor helpful. Peer educators in sex worker organisations should be sex workers who feel good about their own sex work, and be able to provide a role model to other sex workers of sex worker pride

- I believe that this positivity will alert sex workers to the prospect that they too could feel a sense of pride and enjoyment of their sex work. I think it is possible to gently challenge views that are based on internalised oppression, without preaching or invalidating the experience of individual sex workers, by asking critical questions that encourage sex workers to examine where negativity is coming from, and see issues of poor working conditions, a lack of rights, a general sense of sex negativity that pervades society and sex workerphobia as the culprits, rather than sex work itself.

I would like to emphasise the importance of sex workers' confidence in their approach to sex work. The stereotype perpetuated by popular culture is the sex worker as passive, victimised, as someone whose job entails lying on her back (sex workers are almost always viewed as female) and being violated by the 'creepy' client. It is important for new sex workers to develop a sense of assertiveness and confidence about their work as soon as possible, and for the myth of the passive sex worker to be challenged, and those are key functions of any new worker training initiative run through sex worker organisations/ projects, either in the form of workshops or one-to-one work with new sex workers. Assertiveness and confidence displayed by Australian sex workers, in my opinion are some of the key reasons for the high standard of sexual health among sex workers, and high levels of safer commercial sex.

To a lesser extent, I believe it is important for sex worker organisations, in any campaigns, publications and messages that we deliver to sex workers and in the general community, to avoid the trap of problematising the clients of sex workers, to acknowledge that clients are statistically average people, whose behaviour in accessing other consenting participants for commercial sexual services is ethically neutral. While the behaviours of some clients has caused harm to sex workers, it is useful to recognise that most clients are well-behaved and merely contribute to the income of sex workers. Often, sex workers experiencing burn out and/or internalised sex workerphobia fall into the trap of constructing ALL clients in a negative way. This attitude impacts on sex workers' ability to enjoy their sex work, maintain a regular pool of clients and to be successful sexual service providers. Sex worker organisations have a role in challenging stereotypes about all parties in the commercial sex exchange.

Sex Worker Publications

Publications, such as pamphlets and Magazines produced by a sex worker organisation can be seen as a tool for promoting a philosophy of advancing sex worker rights and pride. Moreover, in a sex workerphobic world, where the mass media informs the negative attitudes towards sex work and the sex industry held by the general public with sensationalism and stereotyping, the role of publications produced by sex worker organisation as a tool for sex worker self expression, and for reflecting a positive image of sex workers cannot be underestimated. The validation for members of marginalised communities that comes from seeing their lives reflected and celebrated is powerful.

An over emphasis on STIs and violence reinforces for sex workers that they are particularly vulnerable, which is not helpful in reducing shame or stigma I think it is possible to address issues of condom use, sexual health and safety from violence in publications, as long as that isn't all you have to say. A focus on sexual health also ignores the evidence, that points overwhelmingly to the fact that sex workers in Australia are extremely responsible when it comes to condom use and have higher sexual health standards than the general community. If sex worker organisations/ projects make health and safety issues central to their work with sex workers to the exclusion of other messages may also unwittingly strengthen stereotypes about sex work, leading sex workers to believe themselves to be especially at risk, thus increasing fear and undermining sex workers' confidence and feelings of being in control. Sexual health messages that celebrate sex workers' sexual health and promote pride, along with a range of other positive messages - including sex positivity is I believe, the best way of producing an empowering publication for sex workers.

Support services

The emphasis of support provision, for me has been in avoiding problematising sex work. Instead the focus has been on acknowledging the pressures of stigmatisation of sex work and how leading a double life, or having loved ones who are not supportive, impact on sex workers, as well as the skills and strength shown by sex workers in negotiating these issues in their lives. It is precisely due to society's negative views about sex work, that generic support services often treat sex work as either the cause or symptom of dysfunction, rather than focusing on the effects of discrimination, and looking at the tools required to overcome structural and internalised oppression. Finding creative ways to affirm the role of sex work in the lives of sex workers and developing personal skills in sex workers is an inspiring and powerful focus for support and counselling services. This approach is also less likely to be a drain on the resources of sex worker organisations/ projects, as it encourages sex workers to feel powerful, encourage self esteem and take charge within their lives and work, rather than create a dependency on the service - a situation that is more likely to emerge from support provision that focuses in a negative way on sex work itself.

An empowerment model, that embraces and celebrates sex work and sex workers can flow through a sex worker organisation, enriching every single way that we provide services, advocate on behalf of sex workers and participate in community dialogue about sex work. Ensuring that these principles are enshrined in all aspects of our work is a goal that is achievable, worthwhile and vital.