

## **Trafficking and prostitution: experiences of intervention on the street**

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### **Abstract**

This contribution is taken from the encounters of both a formation day at the university and the experiences of social work spanning many years with the Magliana 80 cooperative, in Rome.

The challenge, an interesting one, was to reflect on women's groups. Rereading the work experience, a few doubts arose: women psychologists and patients/users have access to services? Is it easy, or are we dealing with an achievement/renunciation? The female specific has the opportunity to be represented? From these questions arises a basic assumption. Women in many areas are excluded either by negative bias towards them, or for lack of time, incompatible to family life.

**Key words:** prostitution, trafficking, unit of the street, small groups, operator team

I quote, as an example of the different female access to services, the situation with drug rehabilitation services in which, notwithstanding the equal widespread use, only 30% of women manage to actually access services such as communities. Women are seen as bearers of disorder, of requests for affection, furthermore they are also blamed for being "female temptresses" stigmatized for daring to have a so-called social male disturbance such as drug addiction. The experiences of therapeutic communities in regards to women relate primarily to women as mothers with young children or pregnant women about to become mothers.

Other services however, demonstrate the difficulty that women have in accessing them even though they are often dedicated above all towards them. The meeting with the students dealt with these exact services.

What is the genesis of these services? In the 80's the phenomenon of the spread of AIDS forced the professionals to rethink their services and approaches. In Italy, the major spread of the virus occurred through the exchange of syringes. To counter this phenomenon the first street units were created with the objective to go towards the users and above all to the underworld of consumers who were not in contact with the local services. This first project, funded by the Osservatorio Epidemiologico (Epidemiological Observatory) in the Lazio Region, showed how to overturn the perspective of a seemingly functioning service to a greater contact with the users and a better effectiveness of the service offered.

Since the project had worked with drug addicts, it was decided to apply the same methodology with people prostituting themselves, assuming that they, through their numerous promiscuous sexual rapports, were the most at risk of infection. In 1994 the first experimental unit project for street prostitutes was started. After an initial mapping on the streets it was discovered that there were actually very few Italian women, the majority being mostly foreigners of different ethnicities and many transsexuals.

The mapping activity consists of a construction of a map of the territory covered by the intervention of the Street Unit, in which we highlight the useful websites to the operator of the street in order to act effectively on the area.

The mapping activity is devoted to research and contact with health and social services and the identification of the target population. It isn't useful to search out and contact all of the social services, but it's necessary to find and contact all those who can give answers to the user receiving the intervention of UDS. It may be useful to proceed gradually in the knowledge of the territory, first concentrating the exploration and reconnaissance to a limited area and then gradually extending it.

One walks the streets, one walks through parks, one follows the "tracks" of the underground along the car parks, the squares, the shopping centres, the walls, the social centres. It involves presenting oneself, to meet, to be known, to document, to take notes, to update the map, to build a up a picture, indicating the characteristics of the highlighted sites. These peculiarities of the mapping featured the initial phase of the operational implementation of the project of UDS. The results of the mapping have a direct impact on the organization of the actions of the UDS and on any contact made with the user during the execution of the project. The action of mapping, although predominantly in the initial stages of realization of the project of UDS, lasts for the entire period of its realization. In fact, by its nature the UDS actively seek the users in the territory, following the inescapable need to monitor the ever-changing points of aggregation of users and the operation of the services.

The goal was to inform people coming from different countries, different cultures, from different worlds how one can avoid infection from sexually transmitted diseases. First of all the street contact imposed a sense of introspection on the group of operators to review any prejudices and attitudes towards people met. Most of the women encountered on the street, were however, victims of a system of exploitation and enslavement. Thanks to a favourable meeting between local authorities, third sector organizations and thanks to a legal system that allowed the intervention, in collaboration with the council of Rome, the project Roxanne (taken from the lyrics of a song by Sting) took form, an integrated project consisting of:

- The units of the street:
- a unit of reception
- a network of services (a refuge house and part-independence) that allows women, victims of forced prostitution, to get out of this circuit using justice and a protection service, becoming themselves witnesses and therefore an integral part of a process against the racket
- projects of work and social placement

The first task consisted of a team of psychologists and cultural mediators aimed towards ethnic people, of different races and colours allowing the people contacted to overcome any differences. The function of the cultural mediator in the team is to reassure, to facilitate communication, unlike the psychologist who must provide counselling and help in guidance and motivation.

Amongst the various tasks of the team, the first was to "re-read" the situation and the dynamics that had happened in the contact made on the street, allowing a reworking of a better intervention strategy and not to fall prey to the classic error common with the help-profession towards people who are really sick. The team of street units for prostitution is formed by at least two people and never by two males together because the male figures are tied to that of the law enforcement and customers.

The first task of the formation of the team was to reflect on our own ghosts inside, about who is a prostitute and there emerged the group stereotypes, such as that of those who thought that prostitutes were like the women in the song of de Andrè "La chiamavano Bocca di Rosa" ( they called her Mouth of a Rose), or the prostitute in La traviata (opera di G. Verdi, the fallen woman or more lit. the woman who has gone astray, or La Dame aux Camélias), Mamma Roma (an Italian film with Anna Magnani, Irma la Douce, Pretty Woman and others. Today, the prevailing stereotype is that of the escort. In short many there were many models that somehow conditioned our approach. Stereotypes that don't show the suffering and the struggle of these people.

The first attempt at dialogue with the women was designed in a way to make sure that they didn't try to deny their disadvantaged conditions. It attempted to overturn the idea that this was the best job in the world and there emerged a substantial difference between "forced" prostitution and that of "free choice". In the nineties "forced" prostitution was synonymous with slavery, the women were brought into Italy using deception and with a "migratory" project different to that which the women had imagined, a "migration" project which was later realized with beatings, violence, oppression and the emotional burden of pain that was to be used to turn off the ability of the people on the street to react and say "leave it and run."

The massive intervention of repression in the early 90's and especially the opportunity to be able to have a residence permit if they made an official report against the racket, has meant that the relationship between the exploiter and the exploited has had to change. The prostitute on the street was no longer held in conditions of slavery and was no longer beaten up if they refused "protection" and exploitation. Over the years, the human traffickers have "softened" their pressure, changing instead their tactics to a type of "usury" in which the prostitute has to pay for the trip from their country of origin to Italy, plus the room, condoms, clothes, the termination of a pregnancy, medical visits etc. This multiplies the forced labour time for the pimp. Most of the women found it hard to admit that behind the scenes there was a pimp, but on the street without the protection of a pimp they couldn't be there. What has happened? This mechanism of "usury" makes the process of a way out for them more difficult because somehow it makes the prostitute an accomplice, aware of the choice made.

After gaining the trust of the women it was possible to start a dialogue with them beyond counselling on sexually transmitted diseases, discussing the possibility of obtaining a residence permit. Painful stories of deception surfaced. Even those who had chosen to come and work as a prostitute in Italy, consciously had no idea what it

really entailed. Prostitution, in the hypothesis of the migrants was seen as: I go to a club, become a lap dancer, do the "bunga bunga", every now and then I have sex with a respectable person and I make a loads of money. It was not seen as a heavy going assemble line of eight/ten hours on the street, without the possibility to refuse the customer because the customer cannot be refused.

Through the years the laws have changed. In Italy, thanks to the Merlin Law, the "case chiuse" (closed houses), where the state collected taxes on a controlled but still "forced" prostitution were closed. Prostitution is not a crime but to exploit or promote prostitution is. In Italy we have an advanced law, also copied in Europe: Law 286/98 that allows women victims of trafficking, but also worker victims of trafficking to ask, through Article 18, for Justice and a way out of the situation. Thanks to this article social protection interventions have been able to be made.

The other law in Italy is the Assistenza Sanitaria (healthcare), which is guaranteed to foreigners temporarily present in the country. Even illegal aliens without papers, if they are sick, have the right to health care.

These two laws offer practical assistance to these people, but the people need to be put in a position to know their rights. Often the people who are here illegally are afraid to ask for help or to approach the public services. We must, therefore, start by building a helpful relationship using even small gestures like offering a cup of hot tea in the cold days to the girls forced to stay outside with very few clothes. The work of a professional team becomes important since it uses the psychological skills of working with the individual but above all to work with the group to be able to build a relationship and enable change. A connection which generates trust can be created by offering concrete things such as a project to emerge from the state of exploitation. It's necessary to give accurate information, be on time, keep appointments so as to create a link to make sure that the girls look after their health and from this first step to proceed to a more complex project.

Street women are never alone, there is a leader, a person who has made a career in the hierarchy of street prostitution, and who works less and has more power to control the others, thus having a better life. Amongst the girls a hierarchy is created. The intervention involves understanding the internal dynamics to try to maintain relations that then can be developed when they come to the counter where there is more time to talk. The idea is to give them a space of autonomy and to leave the companion outside of the room, who, in some cases, it is also one of their clients who has decided to help because he is "repentant". Repentance of the customer happens when the prejudice that girls do it "because they like it" changes.

After the first attempts of connection on the streets, there is the problem of what to do with the project of a way out, in the sense of how to convince the girls that they will not be found by their pimps, or beaten to death, but that there is a concrete proposition. The costs in Italy to release someone from a ring of prostitution are so low that it does not create a big inconvenience for the organized crime. It's necessary to understand what their problems are, because at first it was assumed that the girls

had documents or passports and thus had an identity. Instead there are countries in which a passport is only issued to a certain level of the social class. For example, the Nigerian Consulate does not want to admit that there are many people who need one because they find it offensive, there doesn't even exist a concept of an identity card. One fights against the bureaucracy of other countries, which is not easy. In other countries where identity cards exist, they are kept in the hands of the pimps who use them as a weapon for blackmail.

These girls have lived in situations of poverty, need, war, experiences of trauma in their countries of origin and come with the idea of being able to improve their living conditions. Although these women have become sex workers they have neither the competence nor the ability, to control the client to see whether he is healthy or not, nor do they possess a professionalism to simulate a relationship or to do it in a less harmful way. The oldest work of the world is not the one represented by the stereotype of "cheerful and fun sex", but it is a dangerous job that can hurt.

The girls are healthy when they come to Italy, it is not them who bring disease. They get sick here and not only with sexually transmitted infections such as candida and HIV, but also with stress-related illnesses, such as panic attacks, that are more difficult to cure. They become ill with lung disease, circulatory system diseases, gastrointestinal diseases all related to their lifestyle. What we offer them is very little. They are given resident permits and medical care but are missing a real possibility of serious placement in the workplace, an acceptable job and not only work in which they're exploited. Often the work that we are able to propose is that for example of carers to people who are very ill. One of the problems that has been found with the women is a need to dispel their false myths: there is a different health culture. Nigerian women think that penicillin cures everything and also that vaginal douches prevent disease, but we know that this excess can lead to other problems. Washing for them is a way of maintaining their dignity. For this reason efficient group work skills are essential to be able to convince the group to change their behaviour.

Some of these women, especially those from Eastern Europe, are highly educated, for example, university graduates in chemistry or engineering but their degree is unused even after the proposed exit from prostitution.

The myth of the 'good people of Italy' is dispelled, they report that the Italians are bad, dirty. In addition, all deny to having unprotected sex, but it does not add up given that 35% of the women surveyed had had an abortion within the last year. This happens in an attempt to make more money through unprotected sex in the hope of becoming a little more autonomous.

The Italians often use their hands. In the history of street prostitution at least once a year incidents of robberies, violence, theft, attempted rape (abuse after abuse), but in many cases they (the customers) repent enough to try to help the girls escape.

Our goal on the street is to improve, through micro-projects, the quality of life each time, ranging from teaching them to understand why not to put on two condoms, in so much as it's unnecessary, to how to use certain tools such as lubricants, to ask for help, to control the symptoms for early intervention of disease, to create a

relationship of trust so that requests can be made. These requests are formed differently depending on the stage of each woman and take place either at the beginning of their history of prostitution, when they are not yet accustomed to the lifestyle, or as usually happens when they have finished paying the debt and feel free to leave without running any risks. The girls told stories of having to help people in their own countries: children, parents.

Here in Italy they do not feel to be human but only items of exchange and this is a very painful sensation. When a girl decides to leave the street she has the possibility to use the protected modalities of the Council of Rome and to denounce the racket or collaborate by helping the understanding of the system of recruitment and arrival in Italy. These girls enter into a secure location and have access to safe houses. When they arrive in the safe houses all the pain and the trauma of the past comes to the surface and manifests, it's the only place where they feel heard, understood. Here we consider how to address the issues by working on the individual woman or by using the group of guests in the house, where the support is mutual and where the old group on their way out helps the new group.

The stay in the safe house is 6 months, useful time to learn Italian, to learn how to carry out a job, to not go home as a failure but as an equal, with a working life project that prevents disorders and discomforts.

The problem is that these small groups trained in the safe houses do not have the structure of a group therapy because they are extremely open as people enter/exit as they wish, so then six months becomes three if they can find a dignified job and learn first Italian.

A little known phenomenon among the victims is that there are prejudices and racism between each other. Some of these are related to ancient "rancour" between states and populations as for example in the case of the former Eastern European countries, others for cultural differences even on how to use the bathroom, or how the communal meals are prepared. Solidarity between victims must be built. This phenomenon obliges a work of mediation between the intercultural groups.

This is a project that uses to the maximum all the areas where the team can mediate between the dynamics to permit women to approach a more appropriate situation. Many women at the moment in which they have a new life plan, totally reject their past live; they feel the need to regain normality that often takes the form of a desire for motherhood, of a normal family.

To show an example of one of the cases we can use that of Maria, a teenage Romanian girl, a rebel, who could not stand the rules laid down by her family, who disappeared, went to the disco and met up with a chain of prostitution connected to the circuit of clubs and easy money, and with a desire for consumerism and material goods, she came to Italy. Clearly in Italy she hadn't ended up in a golden harem, but ended up on the street and had agreed to get out of her situation with the escape project. She was placed with a grant-assisted job in an attempt to insert her in a project as an administrative secretary's helper having already had a diploma, but at a certain point, after being taken ill in the office, she confessed to being pregnant and asked to be accompanied for an interruption of the pregnancy, given that she had only

known her companion for a short while. Two months go by and is pregnant again, but this time she asks to leave early from the safe house and move with her boyfriend to the north, where she plans to work because she's tired and because she wants a normal family. This rash choice for the team is seen as very unwise, as she has only been in the relationship for less than three months, and to decide to have a baby and start planning the future gives an impression of trying to close a door (a form of negation), as if it were more important to her this new life rather than working on herself, on her relationship with her family of origin and to why she had left her own country. The team wasn't successful and in fact she left everything, and they lost track of her, while other girls who completed their journey have given news through various ways, even with postcards, which restores a sense to the activity because they tell of a journey of important changes.

On this need for normality expressed by the women it's necessary to have a large psychological support intervention by the team, both with the singular person as with the group: the girls criticize themselves for how they are dressed, made-up, for fear of being recognized and labelled as prostitutes when they are out. And this is one of the aspects of the educational process that is done.

Another failed and very dramatic situation was the case of Doris, a Nigerian girl who rebelled against the street. Girls from Nigeria and Africa in general have, in addition to a huge debt with the organization, also a cultural problem of a link with the exploiters obtained through black magical rites. During her stay at the safe house Doris's father had a heart attack and she left the refuge believing that they had put a curse on her family, and went on her knees to ask her mistress to take her back on the streets to free them from the curse. She therefore gave up on her plan of an alternative life due to fear.

There's a need to fight the beliefs of their countries with the work of mediation, a job that doesn't pay dividends if done at an individual level. The problem is that there is not always time and space to open, manage and carry through a group of this type.

Other reflections that can be made on this theme are the rapport with one's self and one's love life and with situations that may have resonance in one's work. In fact, many operators who work in this way, decide to have children only after finishing this project or in the moment in which they discover they are pregnant, they express the desire to not go back on the street as it's emotionally very involving. It is as if they don't want to be exposed to heavy trauma. This is because it is not uncommon to find pregnant prostitutes on the streets, given that there are certain categories of men who ask to go with visibly pregnant women.

All of these projects were started in the 90's and they are projects that are rewritten every year as are the requests for funding. Unfortunately, many good projects, which bring changes into people's lives, are not funded. Mental wellbeing is not among the spending priorities of a city that suffers cuts, is considered an extra and for this the politicians need to be convinced that our projects are necessary. This research work and data processing that transforms into a project, is neither valued nor recognized.

Finally, also for the initial approach on the street we must have a specific setting in which to work. Remember the setting is important in that we can be recognised as professionals and not as passersby.

When a psychologist has to leave the protected setting of the service he must have a very structured internal setting. Pages upon pages have been written on the importance of the setting and of the dignity to give a space and place where the demands of the people can be heard. Now the logic of the service overturns this training, the setting becomes a "place" of the mind, inside the operator of the street. They had to accept having to speak about serious problems even in front of a rubbish bin, to talk outside, if anything to maybe offer an appointment in a protected place to deal with certain things, but to work seizing the moment of contact.

I like to think that our way of working was inspired by the book "The Little Prince" by Saint Exupery. I think the encounter with the wild fox that, having suffered for his loneliness, asks the Little Prince to be tamed and explains to the Little Prince that to tame him he must go every day to the same place, then explains that it is better if it's everyday at the same time, like this creating a ritual, to give importance to the time, to give an importance to the wait. A contact that is not made haste, in which the timing of the other person is respected. A relationship that creates links.

We have also done it like this, going on the streets at the same time in the same place, preferably with the same people.

The few essential coordinates of the "setting" in the work on the street substantially reside inside the operator, who redefines them every time with the user and uses them for the analysis of what the user brings.

The team must maintain an internal structured setting respecting the basic rules of the code of ethics, which does not accept sexual favours, money, or other, bearing in mind that it is always a professional relationship, not a friendship and to use some important moments, especially on the street where the autovisione, the intervision and the supervision.

By autovisione is meant:

- reflection on what has been done,

why and how

- encoding work to assess whether the contact was satisfied, poor or conflicting
- If one was given an answer to the question, if something else was done (eg counselling or sending them to services)

By intervision is meant :

- The first opportunity to meet the colleague
- Used to tranquillize, to reason, to hypothesize and also to let off steam
- it's the first moment of a correction of an intervention

By supervision is meant :

- A neutral place where you can have a correct detachment from operations and thinking
- It is an moment of discussion and team growth

What have been the conclusions of this moment of confrontation with the future psychologists? In the reality of work one needs be able to combine theory and practice arriving even to a form of mediation that should not, however, become expressions of sloppiness or approximation. Especially in services where the setting is not defined, it must be internalized. In services in which the people do not know how to make a clear request for help it's necessary to work in small steps to allow them to reach the awareness and maturity of a request for help or even refusal of help offered.

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