

**Title**

***Health, Empowerment and Sex Work***

lessons learnt from health interventions in the Netherlands

**Issue**

Autonomy, a proper working environment and the protection of the person's (sexual) limits are very important components to improve the health and working conditions of sex workers. Although sex work is legal in The Netherlands, research in 2002<sup>1</sup> showed that sex workers have relatively poor health conditions. In 2006, a pilot project - *Health, Empowerment and Sex Work* - has been launched to tackle this problem.



**Description**

The main goal of the pilot was to develop interventions that contribute to the empowerment of sex workers, to enlarge their autonomy and to improve their health. The project reached 705 sex workers of whom 462 were frequently participating. From 2006 till 2008 five interventions have been developed and implemented in different Dutch municipalities.

- Dutch language classes for migrant sex workers, including negotiation skills.
- *Your Body, Your Life*: better understanding of the body, especially for drug using sex workers.
- *Women in Balance*: a course to increase empowerment and autonomy
- Outreach work for young girls with focus on empowerment and health.
- *Working Safely Behind the Window*: self-defence courses for window-based sex workers



**Lessons learned**

- That exchange and participatory interventions are a very useful tool for empowerment and self-determination.
- That the participants started to take better care of their health after the interventions.
- That providing information on labour rights and health issues increased sex workers self-esteem: they wanted to be identified as economic actors and not as victims.

<sup>1</sup> Vanwesenbeeck, I., Höing, M. & Vennix, P. (2002). *De sociale positie van prostituees in de gereguleerde bedrijven een jaar na de wetswijziging*, Utrecht: Ruthers Nisso Groep.

**Next steps**

- Interventions which stimulate sex workers participation have to be integrated in outreach activities and have been transferred successfully to other countries, for example Vietnam.
- Increase internet outreach intervention strategies in order to reach escorts and clients.
- Carry out regular interventions in the sex work context to train health professionals, social workers and peer educators
- Two interventions of this project have been certified by the Dutch CDC and are available in English. Please send an e-mail if interested.

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