Virtual Engagement for Harm Reduction with Sex Workers: Adapting Outreach Strategies, France

Case studies of two health and rights promotion initiatives targeting sex workers (SW) in Rouen and Montpellier, France.

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CONTEXT

Since the implementation of the 2016 law criminalizing clients and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, street-based sex work has markedly declined in France. Many sex workers have shifted to online platforms to connect with clients.

Identified Issues

- Increased isolation among sex workers
- Reduced access to health services and legal rights
- Heightened vulnerability to HIV transmission and experiences of violence

Target Population : SW

Sex workers (SW): Individuals engaged in transactional sexual activities — including exchange of sexual services for money, housing, food, psychoactive substances, administrative support, or protection — who connect with clients primarily via online platforms.

Epidemiological Context and Health Issues

There is limited epidemiological data available on the specific health issues faced by this population.

Health Issues

- Violence (physical, sexual, psychological, institutional)
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and gynecological conditions
- Contraception and reproductive health
- Mental health and psychosocial support
- Addictions

Access to Healthcare

- Restricted health-related rights
- Few identified or trusted healthcare providers
- Sex work activity often undeclared, limiting access to social and medical rights
- Sexual health rarely addressed during medical consultations
- Among Healthcare Providers
  - Need to move beyond the notion of "choice" regarding sex work
  - Need to avoid reducing individuals solely to their status as sex workers

Methodological Approach

Adaptation of Harm Reduction Strategies

- Virtual outreach: engaging with sex workers through escorting websites
- Creation and facilitation of peer-led discussion spaces, addressing topics such as rights, violence, holistic health, sexual and reproductive health, mental health, and prevention
- Distribution of tailored "Escort Kits" based on individually assessed needs
- Use of social media to disseminate targeted information related to health and rights

Composition and distribution of “Escort Kits” based on identified needs:

Results 2024

76 virtual outreach sessions conducted

1,788 individuals reached
251 responses received (14% response rate)

Distributed Material : 64 escort kits sent, including 22 containing one or more HIV self-tests

45 motivational interviews conducted and 25 referrals to identified structures for care or peer support

Referrals made to Jasmine, Médecins du Monde’s violence prevention and information system
Add information at the presentation at HR25:
Tuesday, April 29th at 2:30 PM ROOM number 3/N

ESCORT KIT

SENDING OF A KIT CONTAINING HARM REDUCTION MATERIAL TAILORED TO INDIVIDUALS' NEEDS

Conclusions and Perspectives

Virtual outreach achievements

- Virtual outreach helps reach isolated individuals
- Recognition and integration into the community

Areas for improvement

- Increase engagement rates
- Expand the initiative to non-French-speaking sex workers