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# The REACH Project

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*Reaching women & girls vulnerable to or experiencing trafficking for sexual exploitation: Practitioner insights*

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## **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank all of the research participants across the island of Ireland for contributing their valuable time and insights to this study. Their input into the development of this vital awareness raising initiative to reach out to vulnerable women and girls in the sex trade is greatly appreciated.

## **Disclaimer**

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## Background to the REACH Project

The REACH Project is an initiative that aims to raise awareness of trafficking as a form of violence against women and girls and improve responses to this issue across the whole island of Ireland. The Project is funded by the European Commission and is being developed by a range of partners with expertise in this area, as part of a multi-agency Steering Group<sup>1</sup>. A key objective of REACH is to raise awareness of the rights and supports available to women and girls in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland who have been trafficked into prostitution or are vulnerable to being trafficked.

Ruhama is leading on the delivery of this awareness raising initiative. The intention is to ensure that all women and girls who find themselves in a difficult situation in the sex trade across the island of Ireland are aware of the support that is available to them and where they can seek help. The 'target group' for awareness raising is all vulnerable women and girls involved in prostitution on the island, given that amongst the many adversities this group may experience, this includes having been trafficked for sexual exploitation or a vulnerability to being trafficked in the future, whether within or across international borders.

This small piece of primary research was designed to help foster a sound evidence base for the development of an awareness raising campaign. It aimed to complement the research undertaken by Dr Monica O'Connor<sup>2</sup> with women with a variety of experiences of the sex trade, by exploring similar themes and ideas with the frontline practitioners who support these women, both north and south of the border. Whilst the study, and this resulting report, were designed to directly inform the content, tone and format of the awareness campaign, it is hoped that this report contains findings that may be useful in a broader sense to any audience with a remit to work with this vulnerable group.

## Methods

This study employed an online survey of relevant practitioners to collect some limited but illustrative quantitative data, alongside one-to-one qualitative interviews with representatives of key service providers in the field. Both the survey questions and the semi-structured interview topic guide explored the following:

- how vulnerable women in prostitution (the target group) come to access the service and how it is currently promoted
- views on the messages that encourage the target group to seek support
- the potential routes to disseminate these messages
- any safety or other considerations.

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<sup>1</sup> The REACH Project is led by the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit at the Department of Justice and Equality, in collaboration with Ruhama, the Health Service Executive, the Child and Family Agency and the Department of Justice, Northern Ireland. Other key project partners include An Garda Síochána, Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Cosc.

<sup>2</sup> O' Connor, M., September 2014. *REACH Project Consultation: Reaching women & girls vulnerable to or experiencing trafficking for sexual exploitation*. Dublin: The REACH Project.

Research participants were selected on the basis that they currently provide some form of specialist service or response to vulnerable/trafficked women in prostitution, whether in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. Participants represented both the voluntary and statutory sectors, and were drawn from specialist NGOs, health service providers and law enforcement. Whilst the research cannot claim to have involved an exhaustive list of all specialist services in this area, there is a high degree of confidence that the key services have been included, as their selection was based on the advice of the multi-disciplinary REACH Steering Group and the use of 'snowballing', through which interviewees suggested additional participants for interview/survey that they believed could contribute further information of value.

In conducting this study, the researcher adhered to the ethical guidelines set out by the Social Research Association throughout<sup>3</sup>. The survey was distributed via the online survey tool SurveyMonkey, and anonymous responses were invited over the course of approximately six weeks in the summer of 2014. Given the limited number of specialist services across the island of Ireland that currently respond to women who have been sexually exploited, the distribution of the survey was, in turn, quite limited. Survey recipients were encouraged to share the survey with colleagues with a similar remit. Twelve survey invites distributed to relevant organisations resulted in 16 responses in total.

Nine qualitative one-to-one interviews were undertaken with specialist support providers and police, either in person or over the telephone, between July and early October 2014. The interviews lasted about one hour on average, were relatively informal in nature, and were recorded in written note form, allowing the extrapolation of key themes. Questions were tailored slightly according to respondents' role and remit. In addition to the interviews, a focus group was held with all frontline specialist staff at Ruhama, involving seven participants. A full list of organisations who contributed to the research through interviews and/or supporting/follow-up discussions is available in Appendix A.

Responses to the closed questions in the survey provided useful quantitative data, which is illustrative in nature due to the small number of responses. Qualitative data generated in response to open questions in the survey, alongside data from the interviews and focus group were analysed thematically to draw out key views and ideas. A summary of the findings is outlined below.

## **Key findings**

Fifteen of the sixteen survey respondents provide support services to women currently involved in prostitution in the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland, and most are supporting both women who are primarily involved in on-street locations *and* women who are primarily involved in off-street locations. Table 1 overleaf outlines some of the most pertinent survey findings.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://the-sra.org.uk/home/sra-ireland/>; <http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf>

**Table 1: Selected survey findings**

<b>How women find out about services currently</b>	
Through outreach work	73%*
From other agencies/services	73%
From word-of-mouth amongst others selling sex	60%
<b>The three most important things that practitioners believe have encouraged women to access support</b>	
1. The offer of practical support to address immediate needs	
2. The offer of free support	
3. The offer of confidential support	
<b>The three most important <i>messages</i> that practitioners believe encourage women to seek out support</b>	
Support is available that is non-judgemental	75%
Support is available that is free and confidential	69%
Support is available that meets a wide range of needs (practical & emotional)	50%
<b>The places practitioners believe would be most useful to reach women (<i>aside from statutory &amp; voluntary services</i>)</b>	
Public transport (buses, trains, trams etc.)	63%
Transport hubs (airports, bus stations, train stations)	63%
Own personal mobile phone	50%
Money wiring/transfer agencies	44%

\* Given the small sample size, percentages are for illustrative purposes only; multiple responses were possible.

The survey findings very much echo those identified via the interviews and focus group. In turn, there was a great deal of agreement between the findings amongst practitioners and those amongst the women interviewed for the purpose of O'Connor's research<sup>4</sup>. Qualitative findings from practitioners that relate to campaign messages and tone, and campaign routes, are set out below.

### ***Messages and tone***

In the interviews practitioners emphasised the importance of highlighting that specialist support services are free and confidential, although it was noted by some that this confidentiality can have its limits. It was suggested that services should also emphasise that they are non-judgemental about a woman's involvement in prostitution, whatever her circumstances, and also that women will be believed when they disclose violence/exploitation, even when their stories sound somewhat 'extraordinary'. It was noted that it would be helpful to be explicit in messaging that 'no papers are needed' (visas, passports etc.) to access specialist services, just as women themselves suggested, and NGO representatives were keen to emphasise to women that their services are non-governmental and independent of state authorities.

<sup>4</sup> O'Connor, 2014. *Op cit.*

Practitioners from a range of backgrounds emphasised that women need to know that services 'are not looking for anything in return' for the support they provide. In their experience, as well as payment and 'papers', women sometimes believe they are required to bring publicity and profile to a service (for example by telling their story to the media), that they will be forced to give evidence to police/be a witness in a criminal case, that they need to tell their whole life story before support is provided, or that they will need to live up to perceived expectations of being one of the service's 'success stories'.

Like women, practitioners suggested that campaign messages should be clearly and explicitly addressed to women involved in prostitution specifically, highlighting that the services on offer are tailored to them. Practitioners believe that the best way to encourage a woman to access a service is with the offer of very practical and tangible help to address immediate needs. Messages relating to a woman's future were not seen to resonate at this stage, as one practitioner noted: "identifying initial support needs is the best way in to a deeper conversation about what women really want for their lives."

Whilst practitioners were focused on demonstrating their professionalism through the offer of practical help, it needs to be borne in mind that whilst women did wish for their practical needs to be addressed, they valued feeling cared for, and being welcomed into a service and treated in a warm and human way, just as much, if not more than the practicalities.

A number of practitioners suggested that because of the stigma and shame so often experienced by women involved in prostitution, consideration should be given to making campaign messages 'one step removed' – e.g. suggesting to the target audience that they may know of someone, or have a 'friend' in need of support, rather than addressing them personally/directly. Regardless of the specific form messages should take, practitioners emphasised that any messages for women and girls communicated by the REACH Project should be consistent across all platforms and all REACH partners.

The study also garnered some recommendations on the tone of the campaign, including suggestions on the need for a caring, compassionate, warm, friendly, inviting and 'human' tone. A few practitioners suggested, however, that the tone should not be 'too fluffy' in light of circumstances where women may be in immediate and serious danger from their controllers, in which case the tone should be 'realistic' and 'urgent' to strongly encourage women to seek help as soon as possible. One participant argued in favour of 'soft and subtle' messages that would not be deemed 'too shocking' if seen by the wider community. However, the same participant also noted that the more 'hard-hitting' the language and tone of a message, the more likely it is to work, and thus suggested that the campaign should find a balance between these two extremes.

### **Routes**

Just as the women who participated in O' Connor's research emphasised the critical importance of police, legal practitioners and sexual health services in being the first to

respond and to link them into other forms of specialist support<sup>5</sup>, this was echoed by practitioners in this study too. Indeed, it is notable that while women had accessed support through these routes rather than in response to specific advertisements promoting support services, similarly practitioners themselves noted that very few women access their services as a result of promotion via printed materials, online or via social media. Instead, as highlighted in both the interviews and the survey findings, practitioners primarily rely on outreach work, recommendations/referrals from other agencies and word-of-mouth amongst others involved in prostitution to encourage women into their services.

As a result of feelings of fear, stigma and shame related to their involvement in prostitution, practitioners noted that women want to receive and consume messages about the support available to them in a highly discreet way. They do not want to be seen to pick up leaflets/cards or other printed materials that relate to prostitution or trafficking in a public setting. This led a number of practitioners to recommend the use of posters in carefully chosen locations, and noted that despite posters being somewhat 'old-fashioned' in the digital age, they remain quite effective. Their preference was for posters featuring contact details in large print that could be looked at in a public setting and noted down discreetly on paper or in a phone without anyone noticing. A very similar suggestion was made by the women themselves. Both women and practitioners described a number of key locations where a poster such as this could feature, including:

- Public services, and health and immigration services in particular (including general hospitals, maternity hospitals, GP surgeries, health centres, immigration offices and direct provision hostels)
- Women's toilets in the above public services – a number of women and practitioners suggested that the most safe and discreet place for a woman to get information about support is to locate it on the back of the door inside the cubicles of women's toilets in the above key public services, where a woman is not being directly observed by a pimp/controller
- Pharmacies.

This study explored a range of other possible routes via which campaign messages could potentially be disseminated, aside from the usual statutory and voluntary services that it is already known women are likely to access. Practitioners who participated in the qualitative interviews also identified the following locations as potential sites for campaign messages:

- Money wiring/transfer agencies (noted by almost all interview participants)
- Public transport/transport hubs
- English language classes (particularly in light of moves to better regulate English language schools in Ireland)
- Women's own personal mobiles phones and computers/laptops/tablets
- Free newspapers
- 'Ethnic food' shops
- Internet cafés.

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<sup>5</sup> O' Connor, 2014. *Op cit.*

The majority of practitioners emphasised that reaching women via their mobile phones and online was not without its problems and risks. They noted that whilst some women in prostitution do use this kind of technology, others do not have access to it at all, and amongst those who do, this may not be free access – i.e. their use may be monitored by pimps/controllers and phones may even be used to track women's movements and activities. One participant with expertise in this area noted that whilst women are provided with mobile phones by controllers to give the illusion of independence to both the authorities and buyers (at the same time as they are advertised online as 'independent escorts'), often women will have little or no phone credit and so cannot use the phone for anything other than accepting calls.

For those women who do have smart phones and online access that is not tightly controlled, practitioners recommended the following:

- A single telephone number for women to contact to access support – one idea put forward was the use of billboards in pertinent locations using a catchy word or phrase in different languages that would translate into the phone number to call for help (i.e. where the letters correspond with the digits to dial)
- Using QR barcodes on printed materials which could be swiped discreetly
- Developing a website that would act as a single 'central repository' for all REACH information and messages, ensuring online safety mechanisms are put in place (exit site, cover tracks/delete history etc.)
- Minimising the 'number of clicks to support' – considering what websites women are using (such as Facebook and escort advertising websites) and what search terms they might be googling (such as 'sexual health checks', 'free condoms', 'ugly mugs' etc.) and how to ensure that through this online activity women are finding and being quickly linked into appropriate messages and forms of support.

### ***Key considerations and challenges***

In addition to their ideas on campaign messages and the routes to deliver them, study participants also highlighted a number of considerations and challenges that need to be borne in mind in the development of an awareness raising campaign targeted at vulnerable women and girls in prostitution, as follows:

- *Risks and fears*

Practitioners were acutely aware of the dangers of support services attempting to communicate with women and engage them with services when they are being controlled by someone who does not want them to access help. Women who attempt to seek help or even gather information about sources of help in these circumstances, risk both physical and psychological harm at the hands of pimps and traffickers, as well as potential harm to their family members/loved ones here and in their country of origin. This may be compounded by women's own fear of the authorities and fear of possible deportation, and further exacerbated in cases where voodoo, juju or other rituals have been used to exercise extreme control over women and girls. All of these significant barriers to accessing support need to be taken into account in encouraging women to take the first steps towards finding

help, and practitioners emphasised that the opportunity to receive key campaign messages and information as discreetly and safely as possible is key in this regard.

- *A lack of awareness of services*

In this study, one practitioner with considerable expertise in working with vulnerable women in prostitution noted that: “It is really important to bear in mind that the women live in small, isolated bubbles with no social support except for other women in prostitution”. It is often as a result of this isolation, further compounded by controllers, that some women have little or no awareness of the specialist support services that are available to them, and so have no idea where to turn even when they do decide to seek help. Practitioners agreed that one key task of the REACH Project should be to ‘get the word out’ to vulnerable women and girls about the services on offer. As well as enhancing the online presence of these services, as described above, practitioners emphasised the importance of the positive, proactive face-to-face contact with women that is undertaken by the key agencies that women in this situation tend to encounter first – the police, legal practitioners and sexual health services. Police ‘welfare checks’ and sexual health drop-ins were identified as being particularly vital in this context, not only in responding to women’s needs, but also in building the trust of women in services, putting a ‘human face’ on the support available, and acting as an important ‘bridge’ for women into other forms of specialist support.

- *How women understand ‘trafficking’*

A number of practitioners noted that a potential challenge in devising this awareness raising campaign is that the terminology of ‘trafficking’ is not always known or properly understood, even by women who themselves have been trafficked. For women who have been trafficked this is seldom perceived by them as a specific occurrence, but rather a set of often complex experiences that may fit official definitions of trafficking but are not understood by women as such, especially if they feel they have ever made any kind of choice regarding their own circumstances during their trafficking ‘journey’. Sometimes women who have been trafficked will say they have seen or know other trafficked women, but will not classify themselves as such. What this means for awareness raising is that the use of trafficking terminology will have to be considered very carefully, as will the use of images traditionally associated with anti-trafficking campaigns targeted at the general public. These are prone to employing imagery that women themselves do not associate with their own experiences, such as images of slavery, chains, ropes, someone being restrained, obvious physical wounds/bruising etc. It was suggested by a number of practitioners that this type of imagery does not tend to resonate with the target audience, whose real experiences of control tend to be much more psychological in nature.

- *How to reach the most vulnerable*

Some practitioners also described the challenge of encouraging help seeking amongst women and girls ‘who do not know a better life’ – who have grown up with adversity and even exploitation and do not have any expectations or even belief that their lives could improve. Young women in state care, and those who have grown up in ‘crime

families'/criminal gangs with close-knit ties, were particularly mentioned in this regard. It was noted that these young women are surrounded by peers in a similar situation to them and so it is very difficult for them to begin questioning the status quo; even more so for those in relationships with 'boyfriends' or husbands who are essentially pimps. It was suggested that encouraging women to be aware that an alternative, better life is possible, particularly when this may involve breaking one's community bonds, is very challenging and will require clever messaging, if indeed it is even possible to achieve this change of mind-set via such a campaign.

- *Training and specialist responses*

Research participants argued that whilst there is great benefit in raising women's awareness of sources of support and encouraging them to seek help, it is vital that all relevant professionals know how to respond appropriately and effectively when a vulnerable woman or girl does manage to come forward for assistance. Participants from both the statutory and voluntary sectors in the Republic of Ireland highlighted the lack of specialist training on prostitution and trafficking currently provided to both police and healthcare staff. It was acknowledged that while some excellent specialism does exist in these services, it is limited to a very small number of personnel, who report being under-resourced and regularly dealing with caseloads far above their capacity.

With regard to the Gardaí in particular, it was noted that the training the majority receive is not sufficiently detailed to effectively equip Gardaí to undertake the often complex process of victim identification. It was recommended that as well as upskilling more members of An Garda Síochána in this area, additional resources also need to be channelled into a dedicated trafficking and prostitution unit within the police where existing specialism in these areas could be further developed and extended in partnership with other police and non-police experts in the field.

- *Meeting the demand for support*

A number of practitioners noted that it would be poor and unethical practice to encourage vulnerable women to come forward for help when they face so many risks and barriers to doing so, only to find that services are heavily over-burdened or not sufficiently resourced to respond as promised. Thus, whilst participants welcomed the intention to raise awareness amongst the target group about the sources of support on offer, it was seen as imperative that all services would then be able to meet any additional demand for support that this awareness raising initiative might generate.

## Key recommendations

1. An awareness raising campaign targeting vulnerable women and girls in prostitution and encouraging them to seek help should contain the following key messages/information:
  - a. services are available that are specifically for women involved in prostitution
  - b. they are free and confidential and no visa/'papers' are required to access them
  - c. these services are caring and non-judgemental – i.e. they will care for and believe women, and will not judge or stigmatise them for their involvement in prostitution
2. Regardless of form and content, messages communicated by the REACH Project should be consistent across all platforms and all REACH partners
3. The campaign's tone should be caring and warm, but also potentially highlight the seriousness of women's situations
4. Police, legal practitioners and sexual health service providers are of critical importance in identifying and responding to vulnerable women in prostitution, including those who have been trafficked, and are therefore key professionals to engage in communicating campaign messages and information
5. Messages need to be communicated in such a way that they can be consumed discreetly, for example via a strategically placed poster in public services, and immigration and health services in particular. The interior of cubicles in the women's toilets in public services was identified as a particularly safe and discreet location for messages to be placed
6. Other specific routes recommended include pharmacies, money wiring/transfer agencies, public transport/transport hubs, English language classes and women's own personal mobile phones/computers
7. Attempting to reach women by mobile phone or online carries a number of risks and drawbacks and needs to be handled very carefully. For those with mobile phone or online access, there are a number of mechanisms that could be used to effectively communicate messages via this route, including minimising the 'number of clicks to support' by ensuring that campaign messages are accessible and easily found online
8. Other considerations that need to be borne in mind in campaign planning include: the potential dangers to women of seeking help and how these might be mitigated somewhat; the low awareness of the existence of key support services amongst the target group; a lack of understanding of the term 'trafficking' amongst the target group, who may not recognise or identify their own experiences as such; the challenges of reaching some of the most vulnerable women and girls in society and encouraging them to believe that an alternative life is possible; and the need to ensure that agencies have the trained personnel, the resources and the capacity to respond effectively and appropriately to any vulnerable woman or girl in prostitution who comes forward to seek help as a result of this awareness raising campaign.

## **Appendix A**

### **Agencies who participated in interviews/focus group/supporting discussions**

- Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid
- Chrysalis Community Drug Project, Dublin
- Doras Luimní, Limerick
- Garda National Immigration Bureau
- Garda Operation Quest team, Dublin
- GOSHH, Limerick (formerly Red Ribbon)
- Immigrant Council of Ireland, Dublin
- Police Service of Northern Ireland
- Ruhama, Dublin
- Women's Health Service, Health Service Executive, Dublin.