

## **When's the Right Time to Work with the Police to Support Women in Prostitution?**

[Reading about the police raids in Chinatown and the arrest of 18 people, including several women](#), for trafficking related matters throws into relief some of the challenges we face as an organisation working to support women in, and exiting from, prostitution.

We are a charity that works on all forms of violence against women and girls. Our services include East London Rape Crisis, two refuges – one for women affected by sexual exploitation and one for women facing multiple disadvantage including problematic substance use and often poor mental health and involvement in prostitution. We also have a specialist service, London Exiting Advocacy, working with women involved in prostitution and with a particular focus on women wishing to exit prostitution.

We regularly receive requests to accompany police on visits to brothels – whether these are termed welfare visits or raids. In bidding for projects and tenders to deliver this work, we may be expected to include a commitment to joint operations with the police – we have to refuse. On the face of it the idea of having female specialist support workers available at such times might seem appealing, it could reduce the possibility of heavy handed tactics police officers sometimes used despite policies to the contrary, and we know that female Swedish social workers accompany the Stockholm Police Prostitution Unit on raids and have built up a solid relationship with the women which has been fruitful in many ways, but this is in a country which implements the Nordic Model, where pimps and buyers are criminalised and women are supported to exit. We have given this a great deal of thought and we have consulted women in prostitution with whom we work and we repeatedly come to the same conclusion. This is not the right approach for us, not as things stand. It is sometimes hard to help funders, commissioners, police and third parties to understand our objections.

Firstly, the most important thing about our relationship with the women we support is that they should know that they can trust us and that we are independent and are centred on their needs and their rights. Clearly, therefore, joint operations with police - however well-intentioned or important they may be - send a contradictory message to women – so we do not do it.

In addition, sometimes police operations may be required to arrest women, but we advocate both the decriminalisation of women involved in prostitution and the sealing of their criminal records. In other cases arresting women may be packaged as means of “keeping them safe”, a very mixed message for women indeed! In others, arresting women may be seen as a route to accessing information or facilitating arrests of traffickers, pimps, exploiters and buyers. Of course we want to see abusers and perpetrators held to account and men's attitudes and demand for prostitution challenged; but we cannot support an approach that arrests women in order to try to reach their abusers.

Another factor is that these raids or visits can be linked into immigration enforcement. This could see some women arrested, held in the notorious Yarlswood and/or deported. They may not offer access to support even though in some cases they may be women who meet the criteria for trafficking but would never have the opportunity for this to be explored and services available.

However, we do respect a role for the police. We wish to see all women able to equally access safety and justice for offences against them and to this end we help women to report crimes and advocate for their rights if this is what they want. We wish to ensure that police are properly trained to provide an appropriate response to women involved and to this end we do provide police training. We are prepared to be one of several services available to women after such operations so that women may be connected to support but we cannot do joint operations and cannot sanction operations that arrest and detain women who in our view need support and access to safety, justice and their rights.