

Chapter 3 Needs Assessment

As community workers, we often feel that we know what is best for the health of a community. This is especially true when we work with groups of people who are similar to us in some ways, for example people from our town or state, or people from our racial or ethnic group. Sometimes we have more education than the people with whom we work, and that makes us feel we must know what the community wants or needs. However, even though we may have an inside view, we must be careful never to assume that we know what commercial sex workers need or want in their lives or from our projects. Indeed, all commercial sex workers are not alike, and we must be careful not to group them all together simply because they make their living in the same way.

Beginning a Needs Assessment

We have talked about entering into the CSW's community. However, there is no way that you can plan effective interventions without finding out about the CSWs. This means not just what they think about AIDS, but what they think about other issues, and how they see their world. Probably the easiest and most effective way to find out about their lives is to spend time with them where they live and work. Not only will you find out about their lives, but you will begin to develop a relationship of trust and mutual respect. You will be talking to the CSWs about their jobs, sex, and other sensitive issues, and so it is important that you feel comfortable enough with each other to discuss these issues openly and honestly.

It is important to add that CSWs have very set work routines. During peak periods of the day, they will only attend to clients. They often work through the night and so sleep late. Their time is valuable and you must take this into consideration when you plan your visits and other project events. The gatekeepers should be able to help you schedule your visits during times when the women are available.

CSWs are unlikely to tell you the truth about themselves at first, and will often say just what they think you want to hear. For this reason you must be willing to be patient and spend time with them—as they get to know you they will open up and be more honest about what they really think, feel and want.

As you spend time with the CSWs and find out more about their lives, you may find out that AIDS and STDs are not what they see as the most important problems in their lives. They may feel that

harassment by the police, low wages, high room rent, dirty hotels and bars, disputes with clients (or anything else!) are bigger problems. As you can imagine, it will be difficult to implement an AIDS prevention programme when the CSWs feel that something else is a more urgent need. We found that the women we were working with were concerned with hygiene and the welfare of their children.

When we began our work with them, they did not see AIDS as a particular threat to them, at least not in relation to some other problems they were experiencing. You may be faced with a similar situation. You will need to be able to adapt to their needs and help them solve the problems they feel are more urgent. Once we helped the CSWs address their issues, they were more willing to hear about what we thought was important—AIDS. Your flexibility and willingness to work on problems that are of concern to them will make the CSWs feel you are truly listening to them, and have respect for how they feel. They deserve this respect; they may know that their lives are threatened by HIV, but that does not mean that the other problems in their lives are any less important. After you have developed a relationship with them, they will be more willing to expand their efforts to include issues that are important to you (AIDS). Only with their involvement and interest will what you do be a success.

Be sure to talk to all members of the community at this phase. Do not leave anyone out. Our experience has shown that CSWs will feel insulted if they think they are being left out or ignored, even if this is not your intention. They can rebel and disrupt what you are doing, or possibly tell negative stories about what you and your staff are trying to do. You will run into enough difficulties along the way without this added trouble—make certain to include everyone.

Finding Out the Details

Once you have found out about the CSWs and their lives, it will be important to find out what they know about HIV/AIDS and other STDs. In addition, you will need to have accurate information about their sexual and health care practices. Remember that these women, like all of us, already have a system of getting both health-related advice and health care. Some of it will be based in traditional medicine, and some will be based in modern medicine. You must be sure to identify where and to whom they are going for health care.

To get this information, you may need to use more formal methods of collecting information, like focus groups, individual interviews and possibly Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) surveys. If you are not familiar with using these methods of data collection, you should ask for technical assistance from someone in your area with this expertise, or refer to the resources listed in the back of this manual. You will want to ask specific questions about what the CSWs know about the virus, particularly its transmission and ways to prevent its transmission. They may have misconceptions about how HIV is transmitted. They may know how HIV is transmitted but not how to prevent its transmission. They may have false beliefs about using condoms. They may not know how to begin asking their clients to use condoms. Only when you have an accurate picture of their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours surrounding HIV/AIDS can you decide exactly what type of programme and messages will be best suited to their needs. This is called "targeting" the intervention to meet the needs of the group you are working with (your "target group"). Once you have completed this step, you will have the information you need to develop a programme that directly responds to the needs of your target group.



Spend time with CSWs where they live and work. Not only will you find out about their lives, but you will begin to develop a relationship of trust and mutual respect.