



## **PreVist project: prevention of victimisation in sex work in the canton of Vaud (Switzerland). Reflections from the criminological praxis<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*PreVist* is a project created and implemented by the association Fleur de Pavé, a non-governmental organisation engaged in sex work risk minimisation in the canton of Vaud (Switzerland). Based on situational crime prevention strategies and existing research on the victimisation and stigmatisation of sex workers, this project aims to reduce the victimisation of sex workers. Three types of workshops were developed for the sex workers: “crime prevention and victims’ rights,” “what makes a good client” and “the need to be supportive and united”. We conducted workshops with indoor and outdoor sex workers and their clients. As an additional measure, pocket alarms were distributed. To motivate prosocial behaviour, we developed a guide for clients which was handed out in the street prostitution area in Lausanne and in the erotic massage salons in the canton of Vaud. Although the project was perceived as useful by the target population, at this stage, its limitations are: a) the lack of systematic and rigorous experimental evaluation of the efficacy of the project, b) the limited room for manoeuvre of an association, and c) the risk of encouraging undocumented migrants to report crimes. To overcome these limitations, we suggest collaboration between academia and NGOs for the design, implementation and evaluation of such programs. Nonetheless, we hope that this project inspires other organisations to carry out prevention projects in this field.

**Keywords:** *sex workers, crime risk, prevention project, situational crime prevention.*

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## 1. Introduction: sex work in the canton of Vaud (Switzerland)

This paper presents the prevention project *PreVist* taking place in the canton of Vaud, in Switzerland. The objective of *PreVist* is to reduce sex workers' victimisation and to increase their resilience. We describe the theoretical basis and the implementation of the project and discuss its advantages and limitations.

Switzerland is a federal state composed of cantons. In this country, sex work is a legal activity regulated by each canton. The federal penal code prohibits pimping, sexual exploitation and illegal practice of prostitution (art. 195, 199, RS 311.0 Code pénal suisse du 21 décembre 1937). The canton of Vaud established sex work regulations in 2004. According to this law, sex work can only be conducted as a freelance activity (Loi 943.05 sur l'exercice de la prostitution, 2004). Only Swiss and European nationals are eligible for freelance administrative status for sex work. Non-Europeans cannot obtain a work permit for prostitution. Nonetheless, in the canton of Vaud, non-documented sex workers exist, and their access to different types of services and rights is reduced (Ros, 2018).

Sex work is permitted in two places in the canton of Vaud: on the street and in the erotic massage salons (indoor prostitution). In Lausanne (the capital of the canton of Vaud), the law permits street prostitution in the neighbourhood of Sévelin, every day from 10 PM to 5 AM (Ville de Lausanne, 2016). Sex workers can tout for customers, but sexual services are not legal in public areas. Indoor prostitution is allowed in the "erotic massage salons", which are apartments, clubs, or cabarets in possession of administrative authorisation for erotic activity. Sex work conducted at places or times other than those specified in the law can be punished with a penal fine (art. 199, RS 311.0 Code pénal suisse du 21 décembre 1937).

Since 2018 several incidents have led to increased media coverage of prostitution in the canton of Vaud. Firstly, the municipality reduced the legal perimeter for touting for clients in the neighbourhood of Sévelin (Ville de Lausanne, 2018). The length of the



touting zone was decreased from 1700 meters to 700 meters, causing the relocation of prostitutes to the inner part of the neighbourhood. Secondly, the media reported an increase in fights between sex workers competing for working places and in sex workers' perception of insecurity (Toulami, 2018) as a consequence of the reduced perimeter. Additionally, the media reported the operation carried out by the Swiss police against Romanian and Nigerian criminal networks involved in human trafficking (ATS, 2019; Matteo, 2018; Terriennes, 2019).

Fleur de Pavé is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) engaged in the minimisation of risks related to sex work (sexually transmitted diseases, social exclusion, and victimisation), and the protection of sex workers' rights in the canton of Vaud. Among other measures, social workers of the NGO visit salons and work in the street to provide material for safe sex and information about socio-medical and administrative topics.

## 2. State of the art

### 2.1. Sex work: a complex definition

Sex work exists in a broad variety of forms. Harcourt & Donovan (2005) analysed 681 articles on prostitution published in English from 1996–2004 and have identified at least 25 types of sex work, depending on the worksite, mode of soliciting clients, or sexual practices. They distinguish between direct and indirect sex work. Direct sex work is “a variety of sexual services widely recognised as “prostitution” because it is clear that the primary purpose of the interaction is to exchange sex for a fee” (Harcourt & Donovan, 2005, p. 201). Prostitution in the street, in a brothel, to escort, or to work on a window or doorway are examples of direct sex work. Indirect prostitution is defined as: “not always the sole or primary source of income for individuals, even in relatively poor settings. It can provide additional income for lowly or irregularly paid workers in other industries.”

(Harcourt & Donovan, 2005, p. 203). Bondage and discipline services, lap dancing, and massage parlour are illustrations of this type of prostitution.

Sex workers have different backgrounds and diverse motivations (Chudakov, Ilan, Belmaker, & Cwikel, 2002; Kontula, 2008; Mitjans Núñez & Molnar, 2016). In Israel, Chudakov, Ilan, Belmaker, & Cwikel (2002) analysed sex workers' motivations (n=55) through a questionnaire. They have corroborated the existence of diversity in motivations and profiles in prostitution. In Lausanne, Crittin (2010) studied street prostitution by observations and interviews with prostitutes (n=5) and professionals of fields related to prostitution, such as social work, police, and law (n=6). For the sex workers in the sample, prostitution was a “default choice”, necessary for surviving or for supporting their families. The author has pointed out that street sex work is often the only option for nondocumented migrants who do not have access to the regular jobs market.

Research shows that sex work is a stigmatized activity (Crittin, 2010; Eleuteri, di Santo, Fava, & Colombo, 2018; Fitzgerald-Husek et al., 2017; Földhazi, 2010; Mitjans Núñez & Molnar, 2016; Osborne, 2004; Scambler, 2007; Sprankle, Bloomquist, Butcher, Gleason, & Schaefer, 2018; Weitzer, 2018). In Italy, Eleuteri et al. (2018) conducted an online survey (n=999) addressing the general population's view of sex workers. Of the participants, 48,5% declared that sex workers should not have the right to adopt a child. Sprankle et al. (2018) found in an experimental study that the general population has less empathy with the victim of sexual assault if she is a sex worker. Hence, most of the time, sex workers prefer to hide their occupation from their relatives and friends because of fear of rejection and judgement (Földhazi, Chimienti, Bugnon, Favre, & Rosenstein, 2007; Mitjans Núñez & Molnar, 2016; Osborne, 2004; Pons i Anton, 2004).



## 2.2. *Victimisation in sex work and crime prevention projects*

Empirical investigations have analysed sex workers' victimization in different contexts and countries (Barberet, 2000; Bungay & Guta, 2018; Földhàzi et al., 2007; Mitjans Núñez & Molnar, 2016; O'Doherty, 2011; Plumridge & Abel, 2001; Ratinthorn, Meleis, & Sindhu, 2009; Ratinthorn et al., 2009; Sanders, 2001; Shannon et al., 2009). In Switzerland, Földhàzi et al. (2007) conducted qualitative research (n=36) on sex worker victimisation in Geneva, the neighbouring canton of Vaud. Sex workers in the sample reported on being victims of work-related crimes by their clients, colleagues, and passers-by (when working in the street). Examples are disrespect of sex workers' professional boundaries (unprotected intercourse, harassing or stalking), refusal of payment for the service, and thefts in places without social control. Working alone and the consumption of alcohol during work have been identified as victimisation risk factors by Földhàzi et al. (2007).

Similar results were found by Crittin (2010) in the canton of Vaud. Sex workers reported being victims of stealing or robbery, physical aggression, sexual violence or harassment, crimes whose authors are either clients or passers-by. Crittin (2010) has corroborated the disrespect of sex workers' boundaries, which is in agreement with the earlier study by Földhàzi et al. (2007). Some clients demanded sexual services that have not been previously negotiated. Groups of strangers hassled the street prostitutes with insults or throwing stones, water, or bottles full of urine at them, among others. Risks factors found by Crittin (2010) are: 1) the secrecy of nondocumented migrants, who need to hide from the authorities, and 2) the drug addiction of some sex workers. Crittin (2010) has argued that nondocumented persons are easy targets for motivated offenders because they are less likely to report the crime to the police.

Ros (2018), through participant observation during five months at Fleur de Pavé, has also argued that very few numbers of non-documented migrants consider reporting a

crime because of the risk they encounter of being identified and expelled to their country of origin. Although they might be recognised as victims by the authorities because of the Federal Law on assistance of victims of infractions (RS 312.5 Loi fédérale du 23 mars 2007 sur l'aide aux victimes d'infractions), at the same time, they might be prosecuted because of an infraction of the Swiss Law on foreigners (RS 142.20 Loi fédérale du 16 décembre 2005 sur les étrangers).

### *2.3. Prevention projects in sex worker victimisation worldwide*

Prevention projects in sex worker victimisation have been implemented by organisations worldwide (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2012). However, only a limited number of interventions have been evaluated rigorously.

In Mongolia, Carlson et al. (2012), through a randomised clinical trial (n=166), examined the efficacy of an HIV/STI risk reduction intervention at decreasing paying and intimate partner violence against Mongolian female sex workers. They recruited and randomized to either: 1) four sessions of a relationship-based HIV/STI risk reduction intervention (n=49), 2) four sessions of a relationship-based HIV/STI risk reduction intervention plus two additional motivational interviewing sessions (n=58), or 3) four-session control condition focused on wellness promotion (n =59). They found a statistically significant reduction in sex workers' risk of suffering violence in all the conditions. This suggests a positive impact on the reduction of victimisation of female sex workers even in low impact interventions as wellness promotion.

In Brazil, the organisation *Fio da Alma* opened a drop-in centre where sex workers participated in workshops about crime prevention following a community approach. Participants were encouraged to discuss and share experiences with other colleagues. This intervention showed an improvement in sex workers' abilities to deal with challenging clients (World Health Organization, United Nations Population Fund, Joint United





Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, Global Network of Sex Work Projects, & The World Bank, 2013).

Beattie et al. (2015) evaluated the *Avahan programme* (n=5792) in Karnataka (India). This intervention aimed to reduce violence towards female sex workers. The evaluation suggests that large-scale comprehensive HIV prevention programming which incorporates empowering techniques and violence prevention elements are useful to reduce violence and arrests among female sex workers.

### **3. *PreVist*: a project for improving sex workers' security and resilience**

#### *3.1. PreVist: theoretical background and goals*

In January 2018, Fleur de Pavé started the *Previst* project, which is financially supported by the Federal Police (ordonnance RS 311.039.4 du 18 novembre 2015). Sex workers and their (potential) clients are the target population of this project.

Theoretically, this project is based on the routine activity approach (Cohen & Felson, 1979). According to this approach, “most criminal acts require convergence in space and time of likely offenders, suitable targets and the absence of capable guardians against crime” (Cohen & Felson, 1979, p. 588). “The lack of any one of these elements is sufficient to prevent the successful completion of a direct-contact predatory crime” (Cohen & Felson, 1979, p. 589). Considering this framework, the sex worker is considered a suitable target because of the risk factors aforementioned: working at night, alone, consuming alcohol, or being a clandestine migrant (Crittin, 2010; Földhàzi et al., 2007). The clients or passers-by are considered likely offenders. Colleagues and other clients or passers-by are considered capable guardians.

The general framework is completed with situational prevention strategies updated by Clarke & Homel (1997). These authors complete the situational prevention strategies proposed by Clarke & Mayhew (1980) and Clarke (1997). *Grosso modo*,

these scholars classify four types of opportunity-reducing techniques for offenders: a) increasing the efforts, b) increasing the risks, c) reducing the rewards of offending, d) removing excuses.

The goals of this project and the measures we implemented for reaching these objectives are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Goals of PreVist Project.*

| <b>Goals of <i>PreVist</i> Project</b>                   | <b>Measures of <i>PreVist</i> Project</b>  |
|--|--|
| To decrease sex workers' risk of being suitable targets. | Improving sex workers' crime prevention and management strategies.<br>Improving their knowledge of sex workers' rights in case of victimisation.                         |
| To decrease clients' risk of becoming offenders.         | Motivating the clients to behave in a prosocial manner.  |
| To increase guardians' capability to prevent crimes.     | Encouraging sex workers' ingroup support.<br>Motivating clients to report criminal activity to the police, including prostitution of minors or persons under constraint. |

### *3.2. Activities with sex workers*

#### *3.2.1. General description*

Three types of workshops for sex workers were conducted within the perimeter of legal prostitution in the street and in erotic massage salons in the canton of Vaud. The workshops were guided by the coordinator of the project and a trained social worker. They took place at night in the street and during the day at the erotic massage salons. Depending on the number of sex workers interested or available at the place, workshops were done individually or in a group.

At the beginning of each workshop, the team introduced the project to the sex workers with a flyer (Figure 1). Since empowerment was one of the objectives of the



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project, we chose a strong female character to avoid over-victimisation or over-stigmatisation of the sex workers. Hence, the flyer is called “Do we prevent crime?” and its logo is *Wonder woman*, a DC Comics book character. This is used to introduce the topic and guide the discussion. Since there are many foreign sex workers in the canton of Vaud, the flyers were translated into four languages: Romanian, English, French and Spanish.

In addition to the workshops, pocket alarms were distributed to the sex workers. Specifically, pocket alarms shaped like lipstick were distributed at erotic massage salons, and keyring alarms were offered in the perimeter of legal prostitution. The primary objective was to provide a tool that is useful in dangerous situations: The alarms are discrete to carry and can alert colleagues and the neighbourhood in case of an offence. This increases the offender’s risk of being spotted and deters them from carrying on with an offence.

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Figure 1. Flyer “Do we prevent crime?” in English.

**FLEUR DE PAVÉ**

**Do we prevent crime?**

**STOP** Know your limits and yourself. Be clear with what you do and do not.

Avoid giving to the clients any information about you, the place you live etc.

If you have a smartphone – activate the GPS and send your position to a friend.

Do not have much money with you. Keep an eye on your stuff!

Try to look confident – the attitude matters!

Try to have a good relationship with your colleagues and to not isolate yourself.

**You have rights!**

You have 3 months for a formal complaint  
You do not need to give any evidence to the police—that is their job!  
In case of violent aggression, hurry to the hospital and contact the police  
If you are victim of a crime, you can contact a LAVI center in order to get any kind of help

**You are not alone! Count on us!**

Fleur de Pavé Avenue de Sevelin, 32B 6e étage 1004 Lausanne Tel. 021 661 31 21

Police 117 Centre LAVI Rue du Grand-Pont 2 bis 1003 Lausanne Tel. 021 631 03 00

### 3.2.2. Crime prevention and victims' rights

The first workshop is based on crime prevention and victims' rights, specified in the Federal law for assistance to victims of infractions (RS 312.5 Loi fédérale du 23 mars 2007 sur l'aide aux victimes d'infractions). During the workshops, practical strategies for risk minimisation are advised. Key points are the followings:

- To know that, according to the law, sex workers are freelance workers that can decide their services, prices, and working days.
- To know the Federal Law for assistance to victims of infractions.
- To have clear boundaries and limits and to express them to the clients.
- To avoid violent clients or clients who are under the influence of drugs.
- To be aware of the risks when going with the client in the car.

- To take notes of the registration number of the client's car.
- To be aware of the risks arising from noise isolation by using headphones during work.
- To avoid consuming alcohol or psychoactive substances while working.
- To have a good relationship with the colleagues and to not be isolated.
- To have a good relationship with the residents in the vicinity.
- To activate the GPS on the phone and share the location with someone.
- To report suspicious activities to the police.
- To be aware of the advantages of making a formal complaint to the police.
- To know the deadline for reporting a crime to the police.

### 3.2.3. *What makes a good client?*

*The second workshop* is called “What makes a good client?”. The main goal is to encourage sex workers to reflect on their boundaries and criteria when choosing a client. The first question asked by the team is: “What makes a good client for you?”. Guided debates about how to identify good and bad clients are conducted, motivating sex workers to share their experiences and strategies dealing with problematic situations. Secondly, we reflect on the most effective ways of dealing with challenging hypothetical scenarios related to clients. Amongst others, the situations were the following:

- A client who is under the influence of alcohol or drugs;
- A client who pushes too hard during the negotiation of the service;
- A client who behaves violently during sexual intercourse;
- A client who insists on sexual practices which are unpleasant for the sex worker;
- A client who locks the sex worker inside of the car/room;
- A client who demands the money back after the sexual service.

### 3.2.4. *Need to be united and supportive*

The third workshop is called “Need to be united and supportive. We aimed to increase the social cohesion between sex workers and to encourage mutual support among colleagues. Discussions were held on the advantages of being supportive with colleagues as well as on good ways to react if a colleague has been a victim of a crime. Pieces of advice were proposed, for instance:

- To note the registration number of the clients’ car if a colleague goes with a client;
- In case of being an eyewitness of a violent crime:
  - Search for a safe space and contact the police as soon as possible;
  - Pay attention to as many details as possible about the offender and the environment;
- If a colleague is a victim of sexual exploitation or human trafficking, recommend she gets confidential help from an NGO in the canton of Vaud that offers support in these situations.

### 3.3. *Activities with the clients*

The approach followed for the clients of sex work is the development of a flyer called “How to become a super client” (Figure 2). This flyer is a guide about how to behave when receiving a tarified sexual service<sup>3</sup>. The insights produced in the second workshop with the sex workers “What makes a good client” were used for developing this flyer. To avoid stigmatising the clients, the logo of this flyer is *Superman* next to *Wonder Woman*, a DC Comics superhero who is well-known for his courage and ethical irreproachability.

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<sup>3</sup> Translated from French into English, Romanian, Spanish and Portuguese.

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Messages to improve the clients' view of the advantages of behaving pro-socially are given. The messages also aim to reduce their neutralisation techniques (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Although it does not represent most of the prostitution known to the association, human trafficking and prostitution involving minors exist (Matteo, 2018; Ros, 2018). During the year 2017, the Swiss authorities detected 37 victims of human trafficking through forced prostitution in the Canton of Vaud (Association Astrée, 2018). To increase the clients' role in the detection of these cases, we encourage clients to report to the police any sex worker they encounter who seems to be exploited or under 18 years old.

The team from Fleur de Pavé handed out the flyer in the street to passers-by, to sex workers and to managers of erotic massage salons to distribute it to the clients of their establishments.

Figure 2. "How to become a super client" flyer in English.

## How to become a super client

Guideline elaborated by sex workers for their clients

Association Fleur de Pavé  
Av. de Sévelin, 32B  
1004 Lausanne

- Sex workers offer services but they don't rent their body!**
  - Choose a professional who offers the services you would like to get. Not everybody offer the same.
- The condom – the guardian angel of pleasant intercourses.**
  - If you don't want to end up at the emergencies line and to ruin your savings and health you should prevent it!
- Intercourse with or without happy end? Let's be reasonable!**
  - It is not sex worker's responsibility if you end up with and orgasm or not.
  - Often your mood or substance consumption might affect your sexual performance.
- Good communication – the basis of human understanding**
  - Whatever you wish, don't forget to ask in advance to the professional if it is okay for him/her.
- First of all – respect!**
  - Violence (physical or psychological) is punished by the law and intolerable if you want to be a good client.
  - Respect the person and his/her privacy.
- Don't forget to be a good citizen**
  - If the sex worker shows signs of being a victim of a crime, being obliged or being under 18 years old, it's your duty to call the police! Telephone: 117
- Give the money always in advance! The price is not negotiable.**
  - Sex workers do this job to earn a living and they decide their own prices. Or – is it accepted to negotiate at the grocery stores?
- Hygiene matters – don't forget to take care of it.**
  - If a shower is offered to you, use it! Water is relaxing and might prepare you for a much pleasant intercourse.

FLEUR DE PAVÉ





## 4. Success of the project within the target population

In general, sex workers were satisfied with the workshops. Firstly, as we explained to them that the Federal Police funded the project, they were pleased to hear that the Swiss police care about them. That might have increased their trust in the police. Secondly, they thought that the alarms were useful. The social cohesion between them might have increased because of the alarms. Since the gadgets were distributed, they agreed that if an alarm sounds, help should be offered because a colleague is in danger.

The content of the workshops seemed to be helpful for the sex workers. Firstly, the majority expressed gratitude for the pieces of information, some unknown to them. For example, several persons thought that the deadline for complaining to the police was only a few days, so they were astonished to find out that it is possible for three months. Secondly, there were sex workers who showed interest in the “Guide for being a good client” and said that they would show it to their clients before the services. Some of them hanged the guide on their door or wall at the workplace so that clients can read it. As well, since both flyers were translated into their mother tongue, the information was more accessible to them.

So far, the success of the activities with the clients is less apparent than with the sex workers. Although some persons were very interested in the campaign, others seemed to be uncomfortable when receiving the flyer. Since sex workers and managers of the salons distributed flyers to their clients as well, the impact of this campaign is unclear for us because of the snowball methodology that we followed.

## 5. Discussion

According to scientific literature and the insights produced at the workshops, these types of projects appear necessary in the sex industry in Switzerland. Although sex work is a legal activity in this country, sex workers are likely targets for different types of crimes. A considerable proportion come from abroad and only live temporarily in Switzerland (Biberstein & Killias, 2015; Ros, 2018). Thus, these persons may lack knowledge of the country's laws and their rights. Additionally, being a client of prostitution provides many opportunities to commit a crime. However, it is vital to respect ethics and not to stigmatise the prostitutes or their clients.

Nonetheless, these types of projects have limitations. Firstly, because of the ethical principles of social interventions and social work (Fédération Internationale des Travailleurs Sociaux, 2004), the prevention strategies need to be implemented with every person. In consequence, an experimental model cannot be implemented, nor a systematic evaluation of its benefits or side effects. The only evaluation that could be done is of sex workers' satisfaction with the project, which has been contested by researches as not being an accurate indicator of the efficacy of the program (Killias, Aebi, & Kuhn, 2012; Mathey et al., 1997; McCord, 1978, 1990). Many other programs and interventions have faced this limitation in the same field (Deering et al., 2014). Secondly, taking into consideration that undocumented migrants carry out sex work as well, it is complicated to encourage them to report a crime to the authorities because they could be expelled from the country (Ros, 2018; RS 142.20 Loi fédérale du 16 décembre 2005 sur les étrangers).

For further research, it seems relevant to analyse this topic at different levels. At the micro-level, it seems pertinent to analyse the situational context where sex work takes place and propose situational prevention strategies. One example would be the installation of locker rooms on the street, to decrease the risk of being a victim of theft or robbery. At the meso-level, it also seems necessary to study the implementation of sensitisation campaigns with the general population to decrease neutralisation techniques (Sykes &

Matza, 1957). If people think that prostitutes sell their bodies, it seems, *a priori*, more probable that prostitutes could be victims of rape. At the macro-level, an evaluation should be conducted regarding the prostitution law and its effects.

In conclusion, this project was very positively perceived by the sex workers, who showed enthusiasm towards these interventions and evaluated the information received as being useful for them. However, this is a field in need of more rigorous studies and prevention projects, as postulated by other scholars (Deering et al., 2014). Therefore, the involvement of public authorities and the collaboration of academia are needed. Regardless, we hope that this project will inspire other organisations to develop rigorous studies about sex workers' victimisations and crime prevention projects among this population.

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