

# Reaching out

**The ORCHID Project provides important services to female indoor sex workers** *by Soni Thindal*

**I**n the media, you often hear about the conditions of street-based sex workers in Vancouver. Statistics suggest that outdoor sex work in Canada makes up 20 percent of all sex work activity. So where does the other 80 percent of sex work occur? Vancouver has a very active indoor sex trade that happens in a variety of indoor establishments, such as massage parlours, escort agencies, and micro-brothels.

After conducting preliminary research and focus groups with women working in the indoor and outdoor sex trade, it became clear that women working in indoor sex venues, in particular Asian and immigrant women, were often isolated and largely ignored by existing services. Something needed to happen to allow women to access services in their own environment.

The Outreach and Research in Community Health Initiatives and Development (ORCHID) Project was born out of partnership between the Asian Society for the Intervention of AIDS (ASIA) and researchers for the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) to address the needs of indoor sex workers. The project has two parts, service delivery and research. The service delivery is operated by ASIA and the research arm is operated through the BCCDC.

ASIA's work with peers is an intrinsic part of the ORCHID Project. In Vancouver, there is a large Asian and immigrant population and this is reflected by women working in indoor sex establishments. Therefore, language capacity was a crucial component in the creation of the outreach project.

The outreach program provides culture and language-specific HIV and sexually transmitted infection (STI) education, safer sex supplies, referrals, and support services. The outreach teams regularly visit over 31 indoor sex venues within the Lower Mainland, including Vancouver, Burnaby, New Westminster, and Richmond. To gain access to these venues and build a relationship with the owners, managers, and staff is

something that takes time and patience. Although ORCHID functions as an outreach program, women can choose to meet with the outreach team outside of their place of work or visit the ASIA office.

The outreach teams are comprised of peers—women with experience in sex work—and volunteers, with at least one person on the team being able to speak an Asian language. The teams are provided with initial and ongoing training as well as monthly team meetings where they can debrief about outreach together as a group. There are also several team-building activities throughout the year to foster greater relationships between the volunteers, peers, and project coordinator.

Notably, many peers consider ORCHID to be their first “straight job.” The project provides a stepping stone for them to gain new skills and confidence that can be transferred to new opportunities such as education or other employment. So far, two peers have pursued new opportunities while maintaining a commitment to outreach.

Over the last three years, the project has grown and provided valuable opportunities for peers and volunteers as well as much needed support for indoor sex workers. As an expansion of the existing services ORCHID provides, ASIA has received a grant from the Law Foundation of BC to work in partnership with PIVOT Legal Society to produce legal rights workshops and information cards for indoor sex workers. After receiving initial input from sex workers, the workshops and cards are now in development.

It's an exciting time for the project to be expanding in ways that are directed by the needs of women working in the sex trade indoors. ☺

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