



COVID-19 AND SEX WORK

The rapid spread of SARS-CoV-2 and the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and deepened existing inequalities experienced by sex workers. Other Fact Sheets in this series (see e.g. Violence, the Law, and Women's Rights) have highlighted commonplace challenges that sex workers face regularly. Under COVID-19, these challenges have become extreme and have driven many already-precarious sex workers into crisis, destitution and/or death.

How are sex workers affected by COVID-19?

1 Exacerbating existing inequalities and injustice: Many sex workers face a complicated web of discrimination because, in addition to being sex workers, they belong to other marginalised groups. For example, sex workers are often women, and they may also be migrants, trans people, gay or bisexual men, people living with disabilities or HIV, or people who use drugs.

2 Targets of Law Enforcement: Sex workers, especially migrant sex workers, are often profiled and targeted by law enforcement under the pretence of public safety. The increased risk of arrest during Lock-downs or with repressive law enforcement practice place sex workers at particular risk of imprisonment, where conditions of detention could increase the risk of infection.

3 Severe loss of income: Closure of workspaces, lock-downs, self-isolation, travel restrictions and curfews mean that many sex workers have lost most, if not all of their income. Many sex workers are unable to access basic necessities, such as food, shelter or clean water. Many also support multiple adult and/or child dependents which compounds financial instability and increases pressure on sex workers to take risks to secure income.

4 Exclusion from government relief and protection measures: In the few contexts where social aid is available to sex workers, requirements can include documentation that many sex workers are unable to provide such as proof of salary or of residence. And many government relief and protection measures explicitly exclude sex workers even when they can provide such proof.

5 Barriers to health care: The current health crisis increases the lack of access to basic healthcare already experienced by vulnerable and underserved communities. In instances where sex workers become ill from COVID-19, or from other related ailments, discrimination and prejudice in health care facilities serve as barriers to screening and testing and to receiving proper care and support.

6 Barriers to labour rights: Most countries in the world criminalize some aspect of sex work, so sex workers are unable to hold employers accountable for infringing on their rights for example, unfair dismissal.

7 Increased risk of COVID-19 transmission: Most jobs in the sex industry —like sex work, stripping, escorting, and massage work— require close in-person gatherings and physical intimacy where the virus can be transmitted.

8 Increased vulnerability: Given the above circumstances, some clients are using this time of increased insecurity to bargain down prices and/or to demand riskier services, such as sex without a condom or kissing and other or face-to-face activities.

“ Sex workers are being targeted with violence, blackmail, and arrest by police. Women doing sex work and their families were already starving because local government officials have denied them food aid. HIV positive sex workers and their children are already struggling to get HIV treatment refills, PrEP, STI treatment and contraception because of poor government planning. Now they are being brutalised and traumatised, and forced to choose between starving, isolated with no income or working while risking their own health and safety. Enough is enough. ”

Macklean Kyomya, Alliance of Women Advocating for Change, Uganda.



“ Sex workers are already aware of the importance of social distancing and other necessary measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission but we cannot be placed in a position where we have to choose between being fined and criminalised or having our families and ourselves be homeless and hungry. ”

Cameron Cox, Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP), Australia.

How can allies support sex workers during COVID-19 and beyond?

Sex workers have a history of self-organizing and providing mutual aid and support. While the direct and indirect impact of COVID-19 is currently the biggest threat to sex worker livelihoods and lives globally, it has also highlighted the resourcefulness and resilience of sex worker communities everywhere. At the same time, the existing systems of criminalization and exclusion combined with this current global crisis, have created difficult, if not untenable, conditions for most sex workers. It is important for allies to respond now.

Here is how

Advocate for the involvement, consultation and collaboration with sex worker-led organizations on all aspects of COVID-19 emergency responses.



“ It would be advantageous to the control of COVID-19 if the government was willing to work in partnership with sex worker organizations, rather than to implement criminalization and penalties. ”

*Jules Kim,
Scarlet Alliance,
Australia.*

“ Sex worker-led organizations from all regions are reporting a lack of access to national social protection schemes and exclusion from emergency social protection measures being put in place for other workers, particularly where sex work is criminalized. Whenever and wherever possible, sex workers are responsibly self-isolating in response to governments’ calls. However, when they are excluded from COVID-19 social protection responses, sex workers are faced with putting their safety, their health and their lives at increased risk just to survive. ”

Global Network of Sex Work Projects/UNAIDS joint statement.



Support the call for immediate, appropriate, inclusive and accessible social protection schemes for sex workers, including migrant sex workers, that include financial support schemes and access to housing.



Call for an immediate end to the use of criminal laws to enforce COVID-19-related restrictions, including forced COVID-19 testing and related prosecutions and raids on sex workers’ homes and sex work premises. In addition to halting arrests and prosecutions for sex work-related activity, advocate for removal of punitive measures and criminalisation in favor of reaching and serving those most in need.

“ Women sex workers have suffered a great impact due to the health emergency. We take to the streets with great fear and we are afraid of being violated. We do not have money for food, rent, medicine; health services are closed. There is no access to condoms—colleagues have died due to COVID-19. ”

*Colectivo Flor De Azalea,
Ecuador*



“ The other big thing I have seen is there is such an outpouring of support from the sex work community. I don’t think people realize that there’s an incredible sex worker community, not just individuals. A lot of mutual aid funds popped up, and those have been really powerful, and people are trying to figure out how to keep doing outreach and offer each other support. Sex workers have always supported sex workers when no one else will—which is pretty often. ”

Anonymous sex worker, USA .



Support sex worker-led fundraising campaigns by making financial and resource donations; if this is not possible, channel resources to sex worker-led organising via funders and networks that are already supporting these efforts. **See references below.**



References:

- List of initiatives to support sex workers in the COVID-19 crisis: <https://www.redumbrellafund.org/covid-initiatives/>
- Global Network of Sex Work Projects Sex worker emergency funds and mutual aid <https://www.nswp.org/page/sex-worker-community-responses>
- Global Network of Sex Work Projects UNAIDS statement “Sex Workers Must Not Be Left Behind in the Response to COVID-19” Available: <https://www.nswp.org/news/sex-workers-must-not-be-left-behind-the-response-covid-19?fbclid=IwAR38eYt7s0r-W95j3Qr8ewnG5eXHzUQheQWK0sf5t88JgLUyib-DpSCWAKQ>
- Platt et al “Sex workers must not be forgotten in the COVID-19 response” *Lancet* 15 May 2020
- Global Network of Sex Work Projects General COVID and Sex Work info <https://www.nswp.org/page/covid-19>
- Susannah Breslin “A Sex Worker Reveals How The COVID-19 Pandemic Has Changed Sex Work” *Forbes* 14 March 2020