

PUTTING EVIDENCE BEFORE IDEOLOGY: WHY LISTENING TO SEX WORKERS WOULD PREVENT FURTHER DESTITUTION AND HOMELESSNESS

Sex workers were one of the marginal groups most deeply affected by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures, many losing their accommodation or their income, or both. However, monolithic ideology prevented the inclusion of sex workers in governments' provisions of financial support for those who had lost work. Luca Stevenson outlines how this ideological approach only serves to marginalise sex workers further.



By **Luca Stevenson**, Coordinator, International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE)

THE HOMES OF SEX WORKERS

Agricultural workers, remote hotel staff, soldiers, au-pairs, sailors, astronauts and sex workers. It is hard to imagine a common denominator between these occupations, however, for many working in these sectors, housing is often provided by their employer. Barracks, boats, or even space stations are often both workplace and accommodation. In Europe, many sex workers, especially migrants, live and work in brothels and pay daily fees to their employer for the room they occupy.

HOW LOCKDOWN MEASURES IMPACTED SEX WORKERS

When COVID-19 broke out, many brothels had to close down and so many sex workers, a large number of them migrants, were forced on the streets, as they had to leave not only their place of work, but their means of accommodation. Some brothel owners agreed to let sex workers stay on the premises during lockdown but many were expelled overnight. Community organisations and media also reported that migrant sex workers were unable to cross borders and rejoin their families: no income, no housing, their safety and health further compromised by the lack of support from authorities.

Not all sex workers live at their work premises and this is only one example of how sex workers were impacted by the pandemic and the associated government measures, or rather the lack thereof.

A CHOICE BETWEEN LIVELIHOOD AND HEALTH

Like many socially marginalised groups, the vast majority of sex workers across Europe (and globally) have been extremely negatively affected by the pandemic. The number of clients had already dropped dramatically even before the lockdown measures were introduced. Once these measures were in place, sex workers faced difficult choices in a context of uncertainty: stop working and put themselves in a precarious situation or risk their own health, community and family members (as well as fines and policing) by continuing to sell sex. In particular, migrant sex workers who relied on their daily income to pay for hotel rooms or other temporary accommodation were suddenly at greater risk of homelessness.

ICRSE'S ATTEMPTS TO SECURE STATE SUPPORT FOR SEX WORKERS

ICRSE, a regional network for sex workers' rights, immediately raised the alarm on the impact COVID-19 would have on our communities. Due to the stigma attached to sex work, most European governments did not include sex workers in their economic and social measures leading to the greater precarity of sex workers who often rely on daily income to cover hotel or other accommodation fees. In countries where sex work is criminalised, including countries with the supposedly progressive Swedish Model, sex workers were not able to access any state support. In countries which recognise and regulate



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sex work, the situation was slightly better. If you were working legally and fulfilled countless administrative formalities - a task impossible for many sex workers who refuse to register or are unable - you might have been entitled to some governmental support. Furthermore, when ICRSE members and organisations led by and supporting sex workers directly approached Ministries or government agencies for support, they were rejected. The Ministry of Justice in Ireland for instance explained to our member, Sex Worker Alliance Ireland: *‘I want to make it clear that funding is not available for NGOs whose objectives and philosophy is opposed to these values and principles. If your organisation considers that you do share our understanding of prostitution as inherently exploitative of vulnerable people, then it is of course open to you to submit a formal application for funding.’* In France, the Ministry of Equality simply said that it would be “too complicated” to offer sex workers economic support.

In its various statements and policy demands, ICRSE made one simple and central recommendation: include sex workers in the wider development and implementation of policies, including those supposed to mitigate the public health and economic impact of COVID-19. In particular, ICRSE called for immediate economic and social support to sex workers which would have protected sex workers from putting

themselves at risk of COVID as well ensuring their ability to maintain relatively safe housing during those very uncertain times. The short-sightedness and the consequences of excluding sex workers have been pointed out by public health organisations for many years: the World Health Organisation itself not only opposes the criminalisation of sex work, including the criminalisation of clients, but recommends the meaningful involvement of sex workers as a fundamental part any public health programmes.

GOVERN WITH LOGIC, NOT IDEOLOGY

Times of crises such as the one we live through immediately reveal the dysfunctions and inequalities of our societies. The issue of sex work is a controversial one and opinions are highly divided on the best way to support people in prostitution, combat exploitation and protect sex workers’ rights. However, the COVID-19 crisis has shown us that by defining sex workers as victims, without agency and in need of rescue, governments and institutions only exacerbate the social exclusion of this group. We have seen further proof of how convenient it is to ignore us when sex workers call out for reforms and inclusion.



The COVID-19 crisis and the upcoming recession will not only gravely impact those currently in sex work, putting many at risks of further precarity and homelessness, it will also (as demonstrated during the 2008 financial crisis) lead to an increase in people, in particular women, migrants and LGBTIQ people, entering the sex industry to make ends meet, pay debts and rents or replace a lost job. Economic support, whether as income replacement, emergency funds or universal basic income as well as more greater availability of social housing (irrespective of one's involvement in sex work, migration status or drug use) should be a clear priority by all those who are concerned by the welfare of sex workers.

The correlation between precarious or unsafe housing and sex work¹² must continue to be explored and myths about homeless people and sex workers dispelled in order to develop nuanced and adequate policies that respect the dignity of those vulnerable groups.

The pandemic has shown, for those who still needed to be convinced, that policies based on evidence rather than ideologies work best to ensure the health, safety and well-being of all society members, including those most marginalised. The demands of sex workers, from an end to criminalisation, involvement in policy-making and direct support for community-led initiatives is backed by such evidence. It is high time that voices of sex workers are heard and listened to.



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1 Structural violence against sex workers <https://www.sexworkeurope.org/resources/community-guide-structural-violence-2015>

2 Rights violations against migrant sex workers <http://www.sexworkeurope.org/fr/icrse-intersection-briefing-papers/resource-surveilled-exploited-deported-rights-violations-against>

