

Covid-19: Irish Sex Workers Ask for Government Support



BY: **SHAMIM MALEKMIAN**

The World Health Organisation has recommended that sex workers should be included in the health measures being introduced to limit the spread of Covid-19. So why is the Irish government not following the recommendations of the WHO in this, when it is in so many other respects?

Sex workers of the world unite! Well, as it turns out they are doing just that. What's more, an array of European NGOs have also lent their support to a statement calling on Governments to devise an emergency plan to protect sex workers during the global Covid-19 crisis.

As it should be.

The International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE) – a network of over 100 European organisations supporting sex workers – has exhorted European Governments and institutions to implement a myriad of measures to assist what is an especially vulnerable cohort until the pandemic ebbs.

The measures proposed include emergency income replacement; suspension of fines, arrests and prosecution related to sex work and immigration status; access to health care; and regularisation of undocumented migrants.

"Sex workers, most of them working in the informal economy due to the criminalised and stigmatised nature of the work, have in many countries been completely excluded from social and economic aid," a statement from ICRSE read.

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In a [letter](#) sent to the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, ICRSE has warned that financial struggles and lack of Government support have prompted sex workers to disregard social curbs, and take to the streets – where the coronavirus hides in plain sight.

ICRSE has particularly emphasised the difficulties of vulnerable sex workers including, "undocumented migrants, single parents, LGBTQ members and sex workers of colour." These vulnerable workers are "amongst those most impacted by homelessness and lack of access to healthcare and social and economic support."

The World Health Organisation (WHO), meanwhile, has advised the inclusion of sex workers in the development and implementation of health measures alongside the decriminalisation of sex work for maximum impact.

We are taking the advice of the World Health Organisation on almost every aspect of the Covid-19 crisis. Why not this?

THE NORDIC MODEL

Kate McGrew, co-convenor of ICRSE and Director of Sex Workers Alliance Ireland (SWAI) has castigated the Irish Government for years of mistreatment of sex workers, adding that the Covid-19 crisis has revealed the true extent of the problem.

"In Ireland, the sex worker community has been facing an increased level of surveillance, exploitation and violence since the introduction of the abolitionist Swedish model, the criminalisation of clients in 2017," Ms McGrew said.

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"The crisis is now revealing the huge risks associated with any type of criminalisation of the sex industry: without State protection and labour rights, the most precarious sex workers face the hard choice between abiding the confinement rules by not working and selling sex to feed themselves and their families," she continued.

The 'Nordic model' – which was adopted in Ireland despite the opposition of sex workers themselves – criminalises the purchase of sexual services, yet allows "the selling of sex" with its main objective being supposedly described as protection of vulnerable individuals and curtailing human trafficking.

By doubling punishment for brothel-keeping, however, the Nordic model also makes it difficult for sex workers to work in pairs for safety.

Since the introduction of the new law, crimes against sex workers have [significantly increased in Ireland](#), according to data compiled by [Uglymugs.ie](#), an app through which sex workers can confidentially report abuse and crime.

SEX WORK COMES HOME

Last week, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection [announced](#) that it had funded 548,000 successful applicants for receiving the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

Nevertheless, people engaged in the casual economy like sex workers are grappling to avail of the Government's pandemic unemployment benefits.

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Many people, including Adeline Berry, a transgender sex worker in Dublin city, are seeking new work opportunities in sexually explicit live broadcasts, and with nearly half of the world under lockdown, the sector is seeing a large growth in customers.

CamSoda, a free live sex website, for example, has said that the number of viewers has doubled this year, compared to early 2019.

This, however, does not easily translate into more money, Ms Berry told *Hot Press*.

"Companies like PayPal would often close the account of sex workers, if they find out, making it difficult for us to receive funds," she said.

Ms Berry explained that sex workers on the streets can remain anonymous while earning extra cash, a luxury that cam-models can't afford, as sexually explicit live streams often oblige models to show their faces, causing them to be recognised and shamed.

In recent months, Ms Berry said, she was evicted from her apartment in Dublin. Indeed, she claims that Gardaí intimidated her landlord to force her on the streets.

"I'm still selling the porn that I had made before [the pandemic], and I also don't have much of space to make online videos, now that I'm evicted," she said.

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Ms Berry also fears that the Government, Gardaí and Dublin-based NGO Ruhama, an organisation formed, they claim, to 'aid' women affected by prostitution and commercial sexual exploitation – might try to clamp down on online sex work, arguing that it equates to human trafficking and abuse.

Ruhama, which means "renewed life" in Hebrew, is a State-funded agency run by two of the religious congregations – Good Shepherd Sisters and Sisters of Our Lady of Charity – which ran the notorious Magdalene Laundries where supposed "fallen women" and girls were put to work, as a form of punishment and penance.

Orders of Roman Catholic nuns operated the laundries for a profit, with the institutions being part of an interlocking system which included orphanages, industrial schools, "mother and baby homes" for single mothers and other church-run institutions in which the State once confined tens of thousands of what were in truth victims of a conspiracy between religious orders and the State.

Ms Berry rebuked the Government for involving a group with a stained past in the affairs of sex workers who are "only trying to survive."

"We [at SWAI] are trying to raise funds for each other," Ms Berry said. "It is also interesting that [thousands] of taxpayer money was spent on a campaign to stigmatise sex work even further, the We Don't Buy It campaign."

Funded by the European Commission and advocated by Ruhama, the campaign urges Irish men to take a stand against sex trafficking and "take a zero-tolerance approach to prostitution."

"It is easy to say you shouldn't be doing sex work, but to stick by that requires a certain level of privilege," she said, "if you're facing starvation or you can't feed your children what are you going to do?"

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"Organisations like Ruhama can't understand that sex work is often a result of poverty and inequality, and with all the money they get from the Government and the influence they have with Gardaí, they go fighting vulnerable groups," she continued. "That's what it comes down to."