



## 'Don't have to fight for pennies': New Zealand safety net helps sex workers in lockdown

Sex workers have spent decades working with the government. This has proved life-saving during the Covid-19 crisis

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**T**he week before New Zealand went into full lockdown on 26 March, Lana\*, 28, had taken a break from work at the high-end Wellington brothel where, since September, she had made around NZ\$2,200 a month seeing two or three clients a week.

On 23 March, her university announced courses would move online. The following day she decided to stay with her parents in Auckland, and applied for New Zealand's emergency wage subsidy for all workers whose earnings have fallen by at least 30% due to coronavirus.

Just two days later the money - a lump sum of NZ\$4,200 covering 12 weeks of lost part-time earnings - was in her account. Full-time workers, who average more than 20 hours a week, get a lump sum of \$7,029.

“The form only took about three minutes to fill out and I didn’t need to disclose that I am a sex worker,” Lana said. “I only needed to disclose that I am self-employed.”



Brothels in New Zealand have emptied since New Zealand's lockdown began in late March. Photograph: Mary Brennan

In New Zealand, sex work is seen as any other form of work under the country’s decriminalisation model, which was developed with input from sex workers themselves and became law in 2003. As the coronavirus impacts country after country, exposing deep-seated inequalities and further marginalising vulnerable workers, New Zealand’s policy framework has helped sex workers, in contrast, find financial security and safety during this time of crisis.

“Because [sex work] is not criminal, in my experience, I think that just creates an environment where you are respected,” says Lana, who studies politics and languages. “You’ve got so much behind your back.”

She’s using the time to focus on her studies, and volunteer with a community justice organisation, writing on social and human rights issues.

### **‘They have to live, they have to pay the rent’**

There’s perhaps no country in the world in which the government and the sex worker community, which in New Zealand numbers around 3,500 people, have as robust and productive a relationship.

“The fact that the sex industry in New Zealand has been decriminalised has a lot of advantages, and it proves itself now with this virus issue, in the sense that all sex workers in New Zealand get their access to benefits,” says Joep Rottier, a criminology researcher at Utrecht University, whose dissertation looked at the New Zealand model.

In addition to the emergency wage subsidy, which is available to all New Zealand workers just by providing a national ID number and basic personal information, sex workers are also immediately eligible for job-seekers benefits, a weekly payout that for other workers typically requires a waiting period (the exemption, part of the 2003 legislation that decriminalised prostitution, was intended to ensure sex workers could leave the industry at any time and would not be forced into sex work for financial reasons).

Dame Catherine Healy, a campaigner, former sex worker, and founding member of the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (NZPC), says she has seen applications for both the emergency wage subsidy and job-seekers benefits processed within days, thanks to assistance from government outreach workers who, until the coronavirus crisis struck, regularly made in-person visits to a sex worker community centre in Auckland.

“We had a cluster of nine dealt with promptly on Wednesday and sorted by Friday,” Healy says. “We had to get IDs and in one case there was no bank account to pay the subsidy to and this has been sorted too, with the officials’ help.”

Rottier says that thanks to the New Zealand sex work community’s robust relationship with law enforcement, police officers have taken over outreach activities from NZPC, finding sex workers who are working in the street and directing them to groups like NZPC which can help them get financial assistance.

By contrast, in neighbouring Australia, a statement from an alliance of sex workers groups condemned police for fining sex workers who continued to work in New South Wales. “This does nothing to promote the public health measures that are currently in place, and instead serves to punish those who have already been left behind by federal income relief measures,” they wrote.

Reports from the US suggest that sex workers, while able to earn some money from non-contact work such as peep shows and webcam streaming, are turning to GoFundMe campaigns because their off-the-books work makes them ineligible for government unemployment benefits.

In the Netherlands, Rottier is concerned some sex workers find it difficult to observe social distancing measures designed to prevent the spread of the virus. “They have to live, they have to pay the rent, they have to eat, so they are forced to continue working,” he says.



Funhouse is an escort service based in Wellington. Photograph: Mary Brennan

The same may also be true in New Zealand. Mary Brennan, who has run Funhouse, a high-end Wellington brothel, for 15 years, said there may also be sex workers in New Zealand who are still working to survive, “just like any other humans in this massive international tragedy we find ourselves in”.

While street work has gone down dramatically since the 2003 decriminalisation (and thanks to sex workers being able to advertise online and contact clients through their phones), there is still a small population of street workers, as well as migrant sex workers who move from town to town.

Healy noted that the benefit amounts are not enough to live on in a country where there is a housing crisis, and the cost of living is amongst the most expensive in the world. She recently helped a sex worker locate a place to get tested for coronavirus, and afterwards the woman told her she didn't have any toilet paper or food, so NZPC helped her.

Healy says some were already receiving their assistance before the crisis hit and that it had not been enough at less than NZ\$250 a week, which is why they also moved into sex work.

## **Freed up to help**

Thanks to the government benefits, several of the highly paid women who worked out of Funhouse are using the hiatus to volunteer and do charity work. One offered sexy photos on Twitter to anyone who donates a night at a women's refuge for someone in need.

“We have women on social media not having to fight for pennies who are using their skills and their bodies to raise money for those more vulnerable,” says Brennan, who goes by “Madam Mary”.

Healy says it is unlikely sex workers will be able to return to normal work until New Zealand reaches level one restrictions - on Tuesday it moved from level 4 to level 3.

Alice\*, 23, was earning around \$1,200 a week at Funhouse in January and February, before she returned to Auckland, where she works through another agency on Fridays and Saturdays, while studying science during the week. She applied for the part-time subsidy on 30 March, and received it on 6 April. Although she hasn't worked since mid-March, she feels financially secure, and is spending her free time studying, watching movies, and taking an online psychology course.

Although she used to have very minimal contact with clients outside the brothel, she has allowed some to contact her via Twitter.

“I'm kind of happy to spend a bit more time messaging people and keeping in touch,” she says. She also created a photo set to sell to clients, whose physical and intellectual companionship she misses.

“I think it's kind of something I took for granted; it just becomes such a normal part of our lives to spend so much time around people in an intimate setting, and now it's a little bit of a shock to the system to not have that kind of closeness with people,” she says. “I was spending a lot of time with people that I don't see in my day-to-day life. I used to have a lot of interesting discussions, get a lot of different opinions on things. Now I'm kind of closed off to this small group of people I live with.”

\*Names have been changed

*This article is a partnership between The Guardian and The Fuller Project.*

*An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that sex work was fully decriminalised in 2003.*

## **America is at a crossroads ...**

... and the coming months will define the country for a generation. These are perilous times. Over the last three years, much of what the Guardian holds dear has been threatened - democracy, civility, truth.

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