

COVID-19 Is Laying Bare the Vulnerabilities of Sex Workers, So Often Canaries in the Coalmine



BY [JANIS LUNA](#)
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In the United States and around the world, COVID19 is laying bare the inequities with regard to race, class, illness and health care that take place under capitalism. Nowhere are these inequities more starkly clear than at the most vulnerable intersections of identity – Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC), folks with disabilities and chronic illnesses, the poor, underinsured and uninsured, and sex workers, many of whom have overlapping identities with all the aforementioned populations. With the stimulus package to provide relief considered by many to be [insufficient](#), and avenues to register for unemployment benefits [still out of reach](#) for those who need them even after a month of shelter-in-place & lockdown edicts in some cities, anxieties about our livelihoods are high. Sex workers – who often function, for lack of a better term, as canaries in the coalmine when it comes to economic and social change, for the few who pay attention – were some of the first to be alarmed about the development of the coronavirus. Nonetheless, aside from [in-community organizing efforts](#) to provide relief and resources, sex workers also remain an afterthought in terms of mainstream support and visibility.

And yet, the sex work community simultaneously provides one of the best examples of adaptation, resilience, and mutual aid that one could hope to find in the midst of crisis. This is unsurprising, given sex work stigma and the harms that sex workers have had to navigate in the face of it. As late capitalism seems to [crumble](#) around us, what can allies learn from sex workers in terms of resistance, resilience, and wisdom? Centering sex workers, and the hard won lessons that come with being a part of this community, are perhaps the most important steps we can take in an effort both to reduce harm, and to rebuild in the aftermath of COVID19.

“Vectors of Disease”: Sex Workers and Health

To understand the complexity of sex work, health care, and labor, you first have to consider the context of all three narratives. In [Sex Workers Unite](#), sex work scholar Melinda Chateuvert describes the longstanding history of stigma-based misperceptions about sex workers and health. As laborers whose work is considered “dirty work,” sex workers have historically been wrongly considered “vectors of disease,” a dehumanizing epithet used to justify violent and coercive measures taken against sex workers both by the state and by social service organizations that claimed to seek to support them. In [Sex Workers Unite](#), for example, Chateuvert described instances of sex workers being subjected to mandatory STI testing upon their arrest. Ironically, the clients who were arrested with them were not subjected to any such testing – something that even those of us with the briefest experience within the sex industry undoubtedly find utterly infuriating.

Sex workers, then and now, have a vested interest in stringent practices when it comes to physical health – our bodies, after all, are the vehicle we use to provide our services to our clients. (Lawmakers and law enforcement, by contrast, whether out of ignorance, or with more nefarious motives, seek to complicate this at every turn. Consider: Carrying condoms was, as recently as 2013, still grounds for being arrested under suspicion of prostitution, despite being one of the most effective, and accessible, means of ensuring safer sex.)

Accounts abound on sex worker social media of clients who try to cajole and coerce providers into offering services without standard methods of protection and safer sex techniques: Clients who whine about having to wear condoms; clients who sulk about being asked to shower before an encounter. These instances are perhaps experienced most commonly by full service workers (or workers for whom intercourse is one of the services they offer), but even as a stripper I've had to be wary of clients who seem to have little regard for their, or my, health. While it has been a somewhat rare occurrence in my experience at the club, I've had my share of clients who made no moves to provide condoms or even discuss safer sex methods before wheedling for extras or trying to take their pants off in VIP rooms. And as news about coronavirus began to spread in the last couple of shifts leading up to lockdown, one frequent topic of conversation in the dressing room was how to practice harm reduction while in the stuffy, enclosed environment at the club. While some clubs rolled out extra cleaning measures, started taking customers' temperatures before allowing them to enter the club, or began handing out hand sanitizer to customers upon entry into the club, most dancers I spoke to felt as though we were left to our own devices in terms of health and safety, with the club's bottom-line clearly considered more important than any safety precaution, and dancers (not eligible for sick pay or unemployment benefits) left in the lurch to choose between our ability to pay our bills, and making healthy, community-conscious choices with regard to social distancing.

Intimate Labor in the Age of Social Distancing

It's clear that most forms of sex work comprise intimate, physical labor. Stripping, (most) domme-ing, sugaring, and, of course, full service work – all of these forms of labor are full contact. To put it simply, you can't give a lap dance from six feet across the room. In early March, when coronavirus cases were just beginning to proliferate New York City and in the U.S. more broadly, one of the first conversations I had with my non-sex worker friends was around what harm reduction practices I could implement at work. The short version was – not many. I packed my work bag with extra hand sanitizer and baby wipes, and the house moms made sure to reiterate to us in the dressing room the importance of properly washing our hands. But when friends suggested to me that I try to just make stage money at work in order to mitigate my concerns about the virus, I had to explain that stage money simply wasn't what paid my bills.

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Our money is made in lap dances and private dances, and it's impossible to do either without coming into coughing range with customers. [Survive the Club](#), a popular stripper account on IG and a well-known stripper mentor, tried to roll out her own harm reduction practices in light of this. At the top of the list was simply not going into work – a difficult choice to make for many, if not most, sex workers, or most people more generally regardless of industry, to make. Who among us, after all, has money to spare to take off from work for an indefinite amount of time?

Other harm reduction tactics – ones that I myself tried to use before my club was shut down along with other restaurants, bars, and nightclubs in NYC – included wiping down the stage and poles religiously between sets, giving dances with your back to the customer, setting strict boundaries around customers trying to kiss and lick on you, and asking customers to make sure to wash their hands thoroughly as often as possible. (Other more gallows humorous responses included videos of strippers and customers alike showing up at the club wearing the now famous N95 masks, or entire HAZMAT suits for customers and HAZMAT suits with the butts cut out, for strippers.)

Even for workers who were not beholden to clubs staying open noticed the impact of COVID19 on their work and livelihood early on. Some sex workers willingly stopped seeing clients in order to observe social distancing practices on their own. “Can’t hold sessions during a pandemic,” one worker shared, for example. Others have navigated a decrease in clientele, especially as news of the virus started to impact travel. Sex workers who are [reliant on clients](#) visiting them while on work trips began to voice their concerns online. That the pandemic entered full sway in March was also not lost on many workers, and January and February are widely known as “slow season” in many places, as customers are hit with the bills from the holidays, or start to file and pay their taxes. Some sex workers are able to work with this in mind, saving up during the more lucrative months in order to have a cushion in the leaner months. But, like any other industry that can be observed to follow seasonal patterns, this, too, is a privilege not afforded to many.

Some sex workers have offered advice online to make the switch into Internet-based work. The Internet, after all, [was created with sex and sex work in mind](#), and has been invaluable in [creating more safety](#) and more diverse income streams for sex workers. One sex worker I spoke to – also a stripper – finds herself navigating the switch. “My work is cancelled,” she said. “Strip clubs are closed, so strippers are out of work since our job depends on social distancing.” Some of her work is promoted on sites like Only Fans and Is My Girl, she says, but she’s mostly been focusing on promoting her art on Patreon, as well as livestreaming herself playing music.

While diversifying your income sources in any freelance or creative industry is a good idea, making the leap into online work isn’t for everyone, for a variety of reasons. For some, online work is inaccessible, and some, or all, of the elements (access to a computer or phone, a private space, a way to advertise) are out of reach. For others, it comes with its own set of risks. I choose not to work online because my day job isn’t one where I feel I can take the risk of being overtly sexual – and overtly paid for sexual services – online. The risk is too great. Online work also requires a different skillset; even if I were able to safely do so, the fact remains that building an online following large enough to be one’s main source of income takes time. Even for workers who have an online presence, working in the midst of a pandemic can be complicated. Many sex workers are parents, for example, who now have to navigate conducting their work online with kids or partners home full time and in close quarters. Simply put, not everyone has the resources or the know how to brand themselves for online work, and sex work online is still formulated along the lines of white supremacist beauty standards – those at the top of sites like Only Fans would do well to take into consideration their privileges before recommending that anyone “just” make the switch over to online work.

Other avenues of sex work come with their own unique complications and challenges, of course. Full service workers, as veteran stripper, artist, and advocate Jacqueline Frances noted in an episode for [The Takeaway](#), are even more at risk, as in the U.S. at least, their work is still illegal. With non-essential businesses closed, has become more and more difficult to set up safe places to meet dates, and many have had to meet in more isolated – and therefore physically riskier – locations in order to work. Street-based workers face discrimination in the mainstream as well as within the sex work community itself, contending with things like rate shaming (shaming someone for charging lower rates than you for similar services) and lateral whorephobia (anti-sex work stigma as it operates within the sex work community). [Incarcerated sex workers](#), too, face a whole other level of risk, as prison is one of the [most dangerous places to be](#) in the middle of a pandemic.

What Labor Rights?

Further complicating the utility of the Internet in allowing sex workers to live and make money is [SESTA/FOSTA](#), a supposedly anti-sex trafficking bill that was passed in 2018 that in function, criminalizes the online presence of consensual sex workers (and sometimes even sex educators, therapists, and other sexuality professionals as well) and prevents them from advertising their products and services by including them under the loose umbrella of “aiding or abetting” prostitution. Anti-sex work stigma has existed prior to SESTA/FOSTA, of course – sex workers have always been notoriously unprotected both online and off – but sex workers are quick to point out and keep each other apprised of tips and tricks to keep their accounts as safe as possible, especially now that more sex workers than ever are almost wholly reliant on the Internet for the time being. “It isn’t safe to include certain links in your bio,” one worker advised, suggesting the use of link shorteners like Bitly instead. Others spoke up about getting banned from payment platforms like PayPal, Venmo, CashApp, and Zelle, even for things like selling pictures.

The EARN-IT Act, according to [Hacking Hustling](#), like SESTA/FOSTA before it, has also has the stated goal of targeting online child sex abuse while more broadly infringing on our online freedoms. “If you care about free speech and free expression online particularly for marginalized groups like queer and trans sex workers of color, safe ways for you and your allies to connect, or political opponents of the current administration, you should care about this proposed act,” Hacking Hustling wrote in one of their educational texts about the bill. “This act would create a massive new threat to anyone who could be a target of the DOJ, by letting their new cherry-picked committee certify whether websites are living up to new federal speech rules, ostensibly to protect children. But those rules could easily be used to limit speech about abortion, LGBTQAI peoples, harm reduction methods, criticism of law enforcement, and so on.”

“We are in a moment where, now more than ever, sex workers need access to the Internet to survive,” Dr. Jayne A. Swift, a sex work scholar and former dancer at the [Lusty Lady](#), told me. “Simultaneously, our free use of the Internet is impeded by FOSTA and the possibility of further punitive federal legislation (EARN-IT act),” she continued, citing a piece of legislation which would essentially [end private communication as we know it](#). “During moments of crisis, we should expect anti-sex work elites to push their agendas further. I hope we keep finding ways to nurture and defend our right to physical spaces and infrastructure for our work and communities, in our respective localities. And we also need to remember to bring the power of our in-person relationships into our online spaces.”

Social media sites like Instagram have always played fast and loose when it comes to how they roll out their guidelines with regard to obscenity and adult content. BIPOC creators, for example, who utilize nudity in their work and art, or creators who depict bodies that fall outside the narrow confines of what is considered conventionally attractive – fat bodies, trans bodies, etc. – are more likely to find themselves banned or shadowbanned. Tumblr – for so long a safe haven for queer, trans, and kinky folks, educators and community members alike – has [booted adult content](#) from the site, and even [Twitter](#), often considered the last bastion of at least nominally sex work inclusive space online, has been known to ban (some!) folks for violating Terms of Service with regard to sexual content (while letting overt violent sexist and racist rhetoric fly.)

But although most of our lives, even more than usual, are being lived online in the time COVID-19, sex workers’ rights are not only under attack virtually. Jacqueline Frances, also known as Jacq the Stripper, pointed out the lack of protections for sex workers in real life, as well as online. Strippers, she stated, are misclassified as independent contractors, when in reality we function more like employees, especially in clubs where we’re obligated to abide by a set schedule and start times or risk being fired. As independent contractors, however, in general we can’t claim unemployment benefits – something we share with other gig and freelance workers. Many of the women I work with have voiced this, too, in the days after our club was shutdown as part of New York City’s P.A.U.S.E. initiative – and I’ve continued to witness my friends promoting each other’s OnlyFans accounts more often in the past couple of weeks than ever before.

Promotion within the community can only go so far, however, which is why it was so egregious when [news broke](#) that sex workers would likely be ineligible for COVID relief. At the beginning of this month, the Small Business Administration (SBA) website posted a disaster loan application available for small businesses (businesses employing less than 500 employees), sole proprietors, and independent contractors in response to COVID19. However, it included one telling stipulation: “anyone whose professional activities involve ‘prurient’ products or content are ineligible for COVID-19-related loans for small businesses and the self-employed.” The logic behind such a stipulation seemed to be that any businesses engaged in activity considered illegal under federal law would not be eligible for the loan, though the wording of the application matters greatly. Under this wording, both individual workers and small business owners working in the legal aspects of the sex industry – camming, porn, and strip clubs – are barred from applying for a disaster loan. Also important to note that while full service sex work is illegal in the vast majority of the United States under individual state laws, it is not, actually illegal

with regard to federal law. “Whorephobia” – or hatred and discrimination of sex workers – “is literally written into this covid relief,” Frances [Tweeted](#) in response to SBA’s disaster relief application restrictions. “In a global pandemic, policy makers are actively making the world a worse place for sex workers and their families.”

All hope is not lost, though for a community as stigmatized as the sex worker community, it’s often hard to find, illusive, and obstructed. In a recent article for [Tits and Sass](#), contributing writer Bubbles noted that sex workers “[can and should request pandemic relief.](#)” Bubbles reminds readers that the CARES Act expanded unemployment benefits to include independent contractors and the self-employed, two categories under which many sex workers find themselves. Bubbles also offers guidelines for how sex workers might classify themselves when seeking unemployment benefits for pandemic relief funds (independent contractors; sole proprietors; or, for a small handful of clubs around the country, as employees). The difficulty, she notes, is how individual dancers will have to prove that they’ve been working and that they’re missing out on income with clubs closed. To illustrate why this is difficult, consider an anecdote from my own club, where some dancers (presumably those who work “full-time,” or at least 4 shifts a week) are classified by the owner as “on the books” and may receive a W-2 form; other employees who work less do not. “They’ll likely be wanting some kind of proof that you lost work due to the virus, which means you will need some way to prove you were working at a club that was closed due to the pandemic,” Bubbles writes. But exactly how to prove that is unclear: “We don’t know what they’ll be asking for, but it’s possible that things like club contracts or a schedule with your dancer name on it would suffice.”

Sex workers rights’ advocate [Kate D’Adamo](#), who put together a resource list for sex workers in light of COVID-19, also speaks to the uncertainty and confusion with regard to pandemic relief and small business loans as they concern sex workers and the sex industry. “The definition of that term [“prurient sexual performance”] is based on the application of what’s called the Miller obscenity test,” she writes, pointing out that sex toy shops and sex educators and therapists are probably fine, and even strip clubs may be in the clear when it comes to small business loans. “Where it gets trying is anything involving the Internet, because of competing court decisions that the Supreme Court hasn’t weighed in on.” As ever, the non-sex working politicians behind SESTA/FOSTA and the nascent EARN-IT Act continue to be involved in drafting and creating laws that deeply harm sex workers, without even the barest understanding or consideration of just how those laws will taken effect in circumstances as extraordinary as a pandemic.

Mutual Aid in Action

The challenges sex workers face with regard to pandemic and quarantine is undeniable. But so is the time honored strength and resilience of this community in the face of hardship and unrelenting stigma. Multiple Go Fund Me fundraisers are [accepting donations](#) to help relieve sex workers in a financial bind as restrictions on work persist. (Go donate to some today!) [Mutual care collectives](#) are also a staple of the community, harkening back to the [Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries](#), self-organized by queer sex working ancestors Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson and often funded by their own sexual labor. Sex workers are amplifying each other’s stories and links, offering to shack up together to create content for the long haul, delivering food topless for [Boober Eats](#), passing along requests for paid Zoom strip sessions to each other, creating free and pay-what-you-can support groups for each other, and paying each other’s therapy bills. As ever when it comes to sex workers, we’ve got each other.

And...we shouldn’t have to be each other’s last, or only, support network.

Sex work is real work, and sex workers are profoundly important members of society, with incredible skills and strengths with regard to adaptation and collective care. And we are more than what we can offer – we deserve access social safety nets. As Brooklyn-based sex worker Molly Simmons [wrote](#) for Huff Post, “Drops in demand brought on by COVID-19 don’t just mean less work — it means less safe work,” and no one should have to make the choice between their financial and physical health, and their safety.

I’ve experienced a lot in my time in the sex industry. I would be lying if I said this break from the club didn’t come with at least a little bit of a sense of reprieve. I was relieved when it was announced that bars and nightclubs in NYC would be shutting down to flatten the curve of the virus; the choice was made for me to not go in to work, and while I’m deeply anxious about my finances, at least it was finally out of my hands. And yet –I also miss the club. Not the men, and not the management, but my coworkers, yes. As Dr. Swift so beautifully described to me, “Many of us know the visceral, sensual pleasures of working with each other; from this in-person and body-to-body contact we have been able to nurture the kind of dense, intimate ties that sustained our fights with management, predators, police, hostile publics and politicians.”

I'm worried about my coworkers; ones for whom dancing was their only job, and has been their only job for years. My coworkers who are also single parents, or undocumented immigrants, or for whom sex work is the only work they've done, leaving them with a resume they can't write because *other people* think sex work is "easy money" and sex workers are vapid and unskilled, two things which couldn't be farther from the truth.

And yet — I've also learned more about strength and resilience from my involvement in the sex industry than anywhere else in my life. Because of this, I am less afraid now pandemic that I might have been otherwise. Dr. Swift describes this as "the outlaw attitude" that allies and supporters would do well to recognize. It is one that "means that sex workers have knowledge and insights that non-sex worker organizer/activists can learn from, as we all imagine new ways to survive and transform this violent political and economic system." The future, in the context of COVID19, is uncertain, for sex workers and non-sex workers alike. But sex workers, and specifically poor, BIPOC, street-based and chronically ill sex workers, have faced down apocalypse for generations. It's time we center their voices, compensate their expertise, and let their wisdom lead the way.

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Janis Luna

[Janis Luna](#) is a stripper, writer, and sex-worker-affirming therapist who lives at the intersection of art and activism.

Janis has written 5 articles for us.