

OPINION

# The Reality Of Living Through The Covid-19 Pandemic As A Sex Worker

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The first real flicker of nervousness I felt about the virus was back at the end of February. I had spoken to a new client to confirm the address of my apartment for a date that evening – but, on hearing it was in Chinatown, he paused. “Are you sure it’s safe?” he finally asked me.

*Read more: [Adesuwa Aighewi On Life In Nigeria During Lockdown: “For Many, Quarantine Is A Privilege & Not An Option”](#)*

I told him yes, of course, and I was so looking forward to meeting him, breezing over his casual racism in an attempt to hang on to his business. I couldn’t really afford to offend him: escorting work had been noticeably slower over the last fortnight, and at that point, I’d naively assumed it was the half-term daddy exodus to Alton Towers and second homes. With hindsight, I realise now that it was the beginning of the slow down. Some large international companies were already limiting travel to Europe, resulting in fewer visiting businessmen and less income.

In the wake of dwindling earnings, my stomach lurched when my client proceeded to cancel that evening's meeting 30 minutes later, citing health concerns. I checked my bank balance again, running a series of financial forecasts in my head. I tried to reassure myself, in the way that all freelancers must, that slow periods are inevitable and impermanent. "You've survived slow downs before," I told myself. "It's going to be fine."

Except it wasn't. Over the six years I'd been sex working, I'd transitioned from 11-hour shifts in a parlour to working as an independent escort. Marketing myself as "exclusive", my work mostly consisted of multi-hour "girlfriend experience" dates with wealthier clients who found me through my website or on social media. I'm white and middle class, so operate with considerable social privilege – but the impact of the virus was felt by everyone in the sex industry, albeit with varying degrees of severity.

As all non-essential contact was prohibited and the lockdown loomed, massage parlours, strip clubs, dungeons and brothels all closed. Our inboxes grew deathly silent. Our jobs are fundamentally incompatible with social distancing, and our services predicated on the human desire for unfamiliar yet intimate touch. Considering this was now potentially fatal and all but banned, our income vanished overnight.

The collapse of my own business was gutting, but I still felt overwhelmingly lucky compared to so many colleagues and friends. I had some savings to rely on and no dependents, meaning I could afford to stop working. But for others, Covid-19 has been catastrophic. For so many in our community, sex work is a survival tactic – something done by people facing precarity, stigma and marginalisation, including those affected by years of austerity measures. Without any reliable income, and

without sick pay or savings, some sex workers simply don't have a choice but to continue seeing clients in order to stay alive.

Yet this inconvenient truth has been ignored or forgotten throughout the crisis. Police are contacting our advertising boards and insisting that they limit posts from escorts, while organisations such as Streetlight are telling potential clients to stay at home during lockdown – while refusing to acknowledge that, without meaningful government support, some sex workers are forced to choose between surviving, and exposure to the virus.

As the situation has unfolded, we've seen the protections and safeguards provided to the rest of the labour force denied to sex workers. Under UK law, workplaces such as brothels are criminalised, meaning they operate under the radar and with no option for employees to be furloughed. Moreover, qualifying for self-employment support schemes is challenging in an industry built on cash payments from anonymous clients, and there's an understandable anxiety about sharing information around sex work with HMRC. Without these safety nets, and with universal credit payments too low to cover basic living expenses, sex workers have had to look after themselves – with the Sex Workers Advocacy and Resistance Movement (SWARM) setting up a hardship fund designed to make quick cash payments to those urgently in need.

*[Read more: Letter From Mumbai: Vogue India Editor-In-Chief Priya Tanna On Finding Hope During The Global Health Crisis](#)*

“As the scale of the crisis began to unfold, we knew we had to act rapidly,” an acquaintance who works for SWARM told me. “Since we opened the fund on 16 March, we've had over 900 applications. It's evident that sex workers are in dire situations, unable to pay rent or bills. Many are forced to continue work when they

would prefer to stay safe at home. We've heard of some sex workers being forced to choose between buying food and buying condoms."

While the pandemic has undoubtedly hit survival workers hardest, its impact has had repercussions across every area of the industry. As in-person sex work dried up, I, like so many others, have migrated to online services such as camming and selling explicit content. Others have rolled out "virtual GFE" packages in order to stay in touch with clients. On the face of it, this might seem like an ideal alternative, but these platforms present their own challenges – not least that, if you're in lockdown with your family or children, making adult content can be impossible.

What's more, despite the reductive belief that sex work is "easy money", there are distinct and specific skills relating to each type of work that falls under that umbrella term. The idea that those of us who make a living from stripping or escorting could seamlessly pivot to replacing our income through content platforms is akin to proposing that a masseuse "just switch" to becoming a therapist.

To make money through online sex work, you require camera equipment and lights, the technical expertise to film and edit your work, along with an in-depth understanding of digital privacy laws. The marketplace has been saturated for some time, but now, with so many more sex workers transitioning online, it has become harder than ever to make enough cash to cover your costs. And all that assumes that we manage to avoid being booted off resources such as OnlyFans, Instagram and Patreon following the passing of FOSTA-SESTA. This 2018 piece of US legislation is supposedly designed to fight sex trafficking, but in reality has only served to censor and erase sex workers from big tech platforms. As a result, swathes of the sites we once used to make money have either shut down or shut us out. Covid-19 has

proved a horrible reminder of how, while sex work remains criminalised, our income remains contingent on the whims of digital gatekeepers.

Like everyone else, I have little certainty about what will happen to the sex industry as we move through this unprecedented time. My years in the job have given me a fairly unshakeable belief in men's ongoing desire to buy sex, but it may be a considerable amount of time before clients return to our inboxes. In part, this may be because the crisis has eaten into their disposable income, producing a similar cooling effect to the one the sex industry experienced after the 2008 financial crash. But, unlike that previous collapse, this public health disaster, with its associated anxieties about bodies, cleanliness and transmission, has the capacity to amplify existing stigma around having sex for money.

*In Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights*, authors Juno Mac and Molly Smith unpick the ways that prostitutes have historically been depicted as “disease-spreader[s], associated with putrefaction and death... envisaged as a source of contamination”. Within this sort of narrative, sex workers are chauvinistically denounced as a vector of impurity, one that threatens the moral and physical health of the body politic and must therefore be controlled. The current heightened sense of risk around physical contact and infection may keep clients away far longer than previously, and sex workers may once again find their bodies policed and vilified in the name of public health.

*Read more: [What Hustlers Gets Right – And Wrong – About Life As A Sex Worker](#)*

However, amidst all this unpredictability, one thing remains clear: Covid-19 is exacerbating the issues that sex workers experience every day, with the impact felt disproportionately by the most vulnerable. This state of emergency will undoubtedly worsen the longer we remain in lockdown, and in the short term, our

community will do what it has always done: look after its own when no one else will. Beyond that, once the worst has passed, we will continue our fight for labour rights, and the decriminalisation of our work. If nothing else, coronavirus might at least prove once and for all how urgently we need these protections.

*Editor's note: the writer of this piece chose to donate her fee to SWARM's emergency fund to help sex workers severely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic; to make your own contribution, visit SWARM's website.*