

Sex workers are falling through the cracks in coronavirus assistance programs around the world

By **Miriam Berger**

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Beth Reid's financial prospects are bleak. Her work is banned under Sydney's shutdown. Her limited savings are dwindling as bills accumulate. The 36-year-old is preparing to apply for Australian unemployment benefits, which have increased in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

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It's a familiar story. But Reid faces an added obstacle: While her line of work — as a dominatrix — is legal where she lives, it remains highly stigmatized. To receive benefits, she would have to register as a sex worker with the federal government, creating a record that could have implications for her future.

Still, she knows she's among the lucky ones: In all but a handful of countries, the sex industry is illegal. That means millions of sex workers, mostly women, are excluded from government programs meant to address widespread unemployment and economic hardship as the coronavirus continues to spread.

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Even in Australia, where sex work is legal in some states, Reid said she has seen an increase in “precarious housing situations, and also super precarious mental health” among colleagues left out of the system.

“There are loads of sex workers who don’t have access to either of the welfare measures,” she said, referring to the federal government’s two unemployment programs, “like migrant workers or those who don’t have a fixed address.”

Sex workers in Australia and around the world, she said, are in dire need of the same support that other people are set to receive for loss of income, health care and housing.

“Many sex workers come from communities that already face high levels of marginalization and social exclusion including people living in poverty, migrants and refugees, trans people and drug users,” the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE) said in a statement. “Sex workers who are the primary earners in their families, or who don’t have alternative means of support, are at risk of being forced into more precarious and dangerous situations to survive.”

Workers without recourse

Tens of millions of people work in the sex industry, according to some estimates — in brothels, strip clubs and massage parlors, or through escort agencies and on the Internet.

Only New Zealand and two states in Australia have completely decriminalized sex work, meaning there are no specific criminal penalties for engaging in it. Other Australian states, as well as a few countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, have legalized it, meaning the state regulates sex work and permits it only in certain state-sanctioned ways, with more parameters and policing.

The World Health Organization has advocated for the decriminalization of sex work. The question of decriminalization and legalization, however, is polarizing: Critics see laws that allow sex work as a cover for human trafficking and sexual exploitation, while advocates say it's a valid profession in need of protections, not policing. The countries that permit sex work follow a few different models, such as regulating brothels or allowing the selling of sex but not buying.

Even in the few places where sex work is allowed, applying for unemployment benefits is unlikely to be straightforward. Many sex workers lack the paperwork to document their employment status. In Germany, migrant workers from countries including Bulgaria, China, Nigeria and Romania make up about 80 percent of the sector, according to Luca Stevenson, coordinator of ICRSE. These groups have been particularly hard hit by the closing of brothels where many lived, and many have been stranded by border closures. Some are now homeless and without access to assistance.

In the Netherlands, recently unemployed independent workers are eligible for only about \$1,000 a month — those in sex work included, said Nadia van der Linde, coordinator of the Netherlands-based Red Umbrella Fund, which supports sex workers worldwide. Not all sex workers, though, will receive that money. Many people in Amsterdam's red-light district are migrants who are undocumented or from elsewhere in Europe. Even some Dutch sex workers chose not to register, as the process is complicated and the designation carries stigma, van der Linde said.

Demands for inclusion

Sex workers are used to being excluded from government services, said Reid, who has been in the industry for 17 years. To compensate, they have built tight support networks that are springing into action to set up emergency funds for assistance, in the forms of cash, food and health care.

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In some countries, the coronavirus crisis has created a new impetus to look out for sex workers. In Bangladesh, Thailand and Japan, countries where most sex work remains criminalized, although forms of it are regulated, governments have made efforts to include the sector in aid programs.

Bangladesh shut down legal brothels on March 20 along with most other businesses in the country, leaving destitute residents with no income. After workers appealed, the government agreed to provide cash, rice and a rent freeze to women and families living in 12 brothels, Reuters reported.

A few weeks later, when Japan announced a new subsidy program to help with child care during the outbreak, the country's labor minister expressly excluded the adult entertainment and sex industry. Two days later, on April 9, the government reversed course in the face of criticism. Determining eligibility for financial aid remains convoluted, CNN reported.

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In Thailand, adult entertainment venues employ an estimated 300,000 people and bring in around \$6.4 billion a year, according to Empower Foundation, a Thai sex workers advocacy group. The government ordered these venues closed on March 18. Days later, it announced an emergency relief, including \$150 monthly for the newly unemployed.

Most Thai workers who lost their jobs in entertainment venues qualified. Those who made money selling sex cannot apply, as that remains illegal, but workers such as dancers in bars were included. Even those without a contract could apply as a freelancer, said Liz Hilton, a member of Empower. Still, only about 60 percent of Empower's several thousand clients have applied, according to Hilton, who attributed the gap in part to the industry's high density of ineligible migrant workers.

In Mexico, the coronavirus-related closure of hotels meant many sex workers suddenly lost their homes and income. Left with nowhere to go but the street, they were offered by Mexico City's government temporary shelters and cards with 1,000 pesos, or around \$42, for emergency food and medicine.

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In Bolivia, France, South Africa and elsewhere, advocacy groups have been lobbying governments for similar measures, so far without much success.

“Very few governments are actually taking positive steps to ensure the inclusion of sex workers in emergency steps that they are taking,” said Ruth Morgan Thomas, global coordinator of the Edinburgh, Scotland-based Global Network of Sex Work Projects. “Nobody in this world can survive if they can’t find an alternative way of feeding themselves or their families.”