

An activist shows sex workers how to apply hand sanitizer during an awareness campaign to promote safe measures against the spread of the new Coronavirus, COVID-19. (Joaquin Sarmiento/AFP via Getty Images)

## Sex workers are stressed, anxious and depressed amid COVID-19 pandemic

As the novel coronavirus causes significant income loss, many sex workers have no safety net

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**NICOLE KARLIS**

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As non-essential businesses close to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus, American workers are experiencing **layoffs**, pay cuts, and a whole lot of **financial uncertainty**. While on-the-books workers are being encouraged to file for unemployment and/or possibly being aided by Congress's **Families First Coronavirus Response Act**, American sex workers are unlikely to benefit from either of these measures.

"Sex workers cannot file for unemployment and are denied access to several aspects of the formal economy such as paid sick leave and healthcare," Emily Coombes, a researcher and organizer based in Las Vegas, told Salon in an email. "Overall, the public needs to know that not only are sex workers being hit hard by the spread of this virus and response to a growing global pandemic, but also how sex workers are missing from a lot of general conversations about supporting workers through self-isolation."

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The Las Vegas Strip has shut down, putting service workers in a precarious situation — particularly sex workers. Sex work is notoriously precarious labor, meaning many sex workers were already struggling to make ends meet prior to the pandemic, especially those already marginalized in society.

"Black, brown, trans and queer workers, sex workers who are housing unstable, sex workers who are chronically ill or living with disabilities are all particularly at risk for negative impacts," Coombes said.

"There are essentially no secure safety nets for sex workers when there is a massive shutdown or quarantine like the one we're in now; what sex working communities often end up relying on to get by is mutual aid and emergency funds."

Coombes is helping organize a [mutual aid fund for sex workers in Las Vegas via GoFundMe](#). A quick search of "sex workers" and "COVID-19" on GoFundMe reveals many others have turned to the online fundraising platform. Yet creating and marketing a fundraiser is [not a universal skillset](#); not all sex workers have the technical equipment, or social media aptitude, to pivot so fast.

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In Brooklyn, New York, sex workers are organizing as part of the Sex Workers Outreach Project-USA (SWOP), to eventually take part in a rent strike. They are also raising money on GoFundMe for a **mutual aid fund**. Molly Simmons, a chapter representative of SWOP, told Salon that the timing of this global pandemic makes it particularly difficult for sex workers because January and February are typically slower months.

"It's the new year, where people start thinking about their taxes, things like that, so we already had people that were sort of running on financial fumes," Simmons said. "Not only has this pandemic really destroyed a lot of the industry, and a lot of the work for us, especially in certain places, it's just that the timing came particularly at like a really rough time; a lot of people were suddenly thrust into like a really uncertain financial future, which is really scary."

"People have really no institutional support, which is why we're forced to rely on mutual aid most of the time," Simmons added.

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For Tea, a co-chapter representative of the SWOP who preferred not to use her surname, four dates were cancelled at the beginning of March when news about COVID-19 emerged.

"For me, the thing is, I don't normally work super often, so to have four dates cancelled in one or two weeks, that's most of my income," Tea said. "As someone who is a full service sex worker, I don't actually see that many clients and I'm used to huge dips in income. . . . the feast and famine that

comes with this, that is similar with other freelance jobs, but if we don't prepare — if I don't have some type of savings then I don't pay rent . . . . I think many sex workers, if they can, have something saved away, but that is rare."

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Not only is social distancing affecting sex work, but layoffs experienced by their clients have affected the flow of work.

"We're a non-essential service, in the sense of like we're not a restaurant, or a grocery store," Tea said. "So, as soon as someone is feeling the pinch they're going to stop and start canceling."

Maxine Holloway, a sex worker who is based in the Bay Area, told Salon she noticed a slowdown in the beginning of March. She is also having symptoms of COVID-19 — a dry cough and shortness of breath—which is worrisome to her.

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"I'm not working at all, and I'm stressed about the income I've missed and the income I will continue to miss," Holloway told Salon. "There is a lot of stress and anxiety and depression about what is going to happen next; sex work is my primary form of income and I'm a new mom."

Bella Robinson, a sex worker in Rhode Island and Executive Director of Coyote RI, told Salon in an interview that she is still being contacted by men looking for work, but she is self-isolating. She stopped taking clients on March 9.

"I'm taking the opportunity to text back and say 'Have you watched the news?'" Robinson said, adding that she is concerned. "This is going to affect the poorest of poor sex workers and we saw this with **SESTA-FOSTA**."

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Robinson pointed to a **document on harm reduction**, written by Malana Krongelb, which includes helpful resources for sex workers.

SESTA-FOSTA, an acronym for a two-bill package called "Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and Allow States" and "Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act" passed in Congress in 2018, had the side effect of marginalizing many sex workers and making their work more dangerous and difficult. As a result of the twin bills, Craigslist was forced to shutter its personal ads section. Websites used to vet potential clients, which were crucial resources that many sex workers relied on to ensure their safety, **were shut down, too.**

Regardless, many of the sex workers Salon spoke with are hopeful about organizing in the midst of a crisis. "The community has really come together," Robinson said.

## **NICOLE KARLIS**

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