

# Sex Workers Are Moving Online, Supporting Each Other During Coronavirus

By [Nastia Voynovskaya](#)  Mar 25



Sex Workers and their allies at an International Sex Workers Day demonstration in downtown Oakland in 2018.             

Retail, restaurant, hospitality and arts workers—and all kinds of professionals whose livelihoods are tied to in-person meetings—are currently suffering from coronavirus-related job cuts. The U.S. Private Sector Job Quality Index estimates that **37 million jobs** are vulnerable to layoffs due to social distancing measures to slow the spread of the pandemic.

While many white collar workers continue to labor from home, one group facing particularly acute challenges are sex workers, whose work is often illegal, in legal gray areas or not covered

by unemployment laws.

There are sex workers of all income levels and identities, but many come from marginalized communities and have trouble accessing other forms of employment, says Maxine Holloway, co-founder of the advocacy organization [Bay Area Workers Support](#) (BAWS). “There’s a large amount of our community that are people of color, that are trans women, that are disabled folks—folks that are not always able to access employment often turn to sex work to be able to survive and make ends meet,” Holloway explains.

A collective of sex workers, BAWS lobbies for the decriminalization of sex work and shares peer-to-peer resources. In light of the coronavirus pandemic, they re-launched a [microgrant](#) program that gives out payments of \$50–\$200 to sex workers in need. They also issued a [guide](#) for those coping with a loss of income during the COVID-19 outbreak, complete with health tips and strategies for remote work during social distancing.

Similar efforts are taking place across the country: the [Sex Worker Outreach Project](#), a national advocacy group, is organizing mutual aid fundraisers for sex workers in places like [Los Angeles](#), [Austin](#) and [New York](#), and sex workers in [Las Vegas](#) have been fundraising via crowdfunding platforms such as GoFundMe.

Sponsored

“We definitely do not have enough to keep up with demand of grant requests,” says Holloway, adding that the microgrant program relies on donations. “We’re definitely going to need an influx of financial support from our community.”



Sex Workers and their allies at an International Sex Workers Day demonstration in downtown Oakland in 2018. [Quinn](#) [D'A...](#) [G...](#) [a...](#) [v...](#) [t...](#) [i...](#) [r...](#) [i...](#) [G...](#) [W...](#) [D...](#) [A...](#) [y...](#) [i...](#) [w...](#) [A...](#) [Q...](#)

Without access to worker benefits, sex workers are often uninsured or underinsured, Holloway says, and may turn to clinics such as San Francisco's [St. James Infirmary](#) and the [Berkeley Free Clinic](#). But clinics serving vulnerable populations are already strapped for resources, and the Berkeley Free Clinic actually closed its doors until April 2 to mitigate the spread of coronavirus. (Meanwhile, Berkeley Free Clinic has a [GoFundMe](#) campaign to raise money for its volunteers to set up hand-washing stations at homeless encampments and supply additional tents to allow unsheltered people to self-isolate.)

## The Challenges of Taking Business Online

Taking their work online through photos, videos, phone sex and videoconferencing is one way sex workers have been protecting themselves during the pandemic. But changing how one does business is not as easy as starting an account on a website like OnlyFans, a subscription-based site that functions like a not-safe-for-work Twitter feed where users pay for additional X-rated content.

### An Artist and Sex Worker Taking Charge of Her Business

Arabelle Raphael, an artist and sex worker with multiple streams of income that include virtual and in-person work, published a **tutorial** on her Twitter feed with tips for sex workers building an OnlyFans brand. She says that there are barriers to entry: much like Instagram influencers, sex workers with existing online followings have an easier time monetizing their accounts than those starting from scratch. Plus, posting explicit photos and videos of oneself online has privacy consequences that people who aren't out as sex workers to friends and family may not be willing to take. And furthermore, online work may not be an option for those who are in child custody battles, or who don't have consistent home internet access.

“The hard thing is people who haven't had an online presence aren't gonna make money right away, it's a lot of work,” Raphael says. “It took me years to build something where it's like, someone can live off of this.”



Arabelle Raphael at home. [Arabelle Raphael on Twitter](#)

Vanessa Carlisle, a writer, educator and sex worker advocate in Los Angeles, says she's been seeing individuals and organizations step up mutual aid efforts. Her group, Hookers Army Los Angeles, typically teaches self-defense classes and has been moving meetings online to

facilitate resource-sharing. Carlisle herself has been offering free workshops for self-soothing somatic techniques for anxiety relief on [Instagram Live](#).

“Some sex workers are offering classes to help people get their NiteFlirt set up,” she says, referring to a popular phone sex website. “There’s people offering to help others set up their websites; there’s people helping each other set up for making content from home. I see a lot of skill share and mutual aid, and I’m seeing in my community a lot more texting and calling and reaching out.”

## **Mobilizing for Solidarity and Advocacy**

Sex workers have built networks for supporting one another, and can mobilize quickly, because the last few years have been volatile for the industry, says Reiko Rasch, an artist and sex worker advocate in the Bay Area. The federal SESTA/FOSTA law of 2018 shut down many of the websites where sex workers vetted clients and found dates without exposing themselves to the dangers of outdoor work. And because of California’s Dynamex lawsuit (and resulting new labor law, AB 5), many of the state’s strip clubs changed dancers’ status from independent contractors to employees, which resulted in pay cuts.

Yet AB 5 has an upside, which is that dancers are now eligible for unemployment benefits. Rasch says that on social media and in group texts, dancers have been helping each other navigate the bureaucracy. She says it’s part of a mutual aid effort that began weeks before the shelter-in-place ordinance. “I noticed the dancers, the sex workers themselves, took the first and strongest initiatives in responding to this,” says Rasch. “Back when this was still just in the news and [seemed like] this scary media thing, the sex workers started upping their risk management practices like taking more showers in the locker room, bringing Lysol wipes to work, attaching hand sanitizer to their money pails and sanitizing the stage more regularly.”

---

### **READ MORE**

**Classical Musicians Say Coronavirus Cancellations Are 'Financially Catastrophic'**

---

**Coronavirus Cancellations Threaten Livelihoods of Independent Artists**

---

## Bookstores Face Weeks of Closure Just as Readers Need Them Most

Sex workers' support networks have also been crucial spaces to feel seen and heard during this stressful time, and to encourage each other to practice self-care. "We've been organizing online support like Zooms, having a brunch where people can share in more of an environment of—not so much organizing what are we gonna do politically—but the mutual aid of, 'How are people doing. Are you safe? Are you taken care of?' And offering friend-to-friend kind of stuff," says Chatz, the lead singer of Oakland rock band [Copyslut](#) and a sex worker advocate.

The people interviewed for this story agree that it's important for allies to step up for sex workers in their communities right now, and that includes clients. The BAWS guide encourages fans of sex workers to pre-book sessions, donate to them directly or simply just check in with them, as the isolating experience of self-quarantining combined with financial stress can be daunting.

And Holloway says that—much like how the pandemic is causing many Americans to reevaluate the state of the country's healthcare system—it's an opportunity to think longterm about how the decriminalization of sex work could grant sex workers access to social safety nets.

SPONSORED

"I encourage people to think about this once the crisis has passed, that these issues of criminalization of people and the stigmatization of people have really intense effects on people's health, safety and livelihood," Holloway says. "Join us in fighting for sex worker justice that will help sex workers stay safer and healthier in the next wave of what is to come."