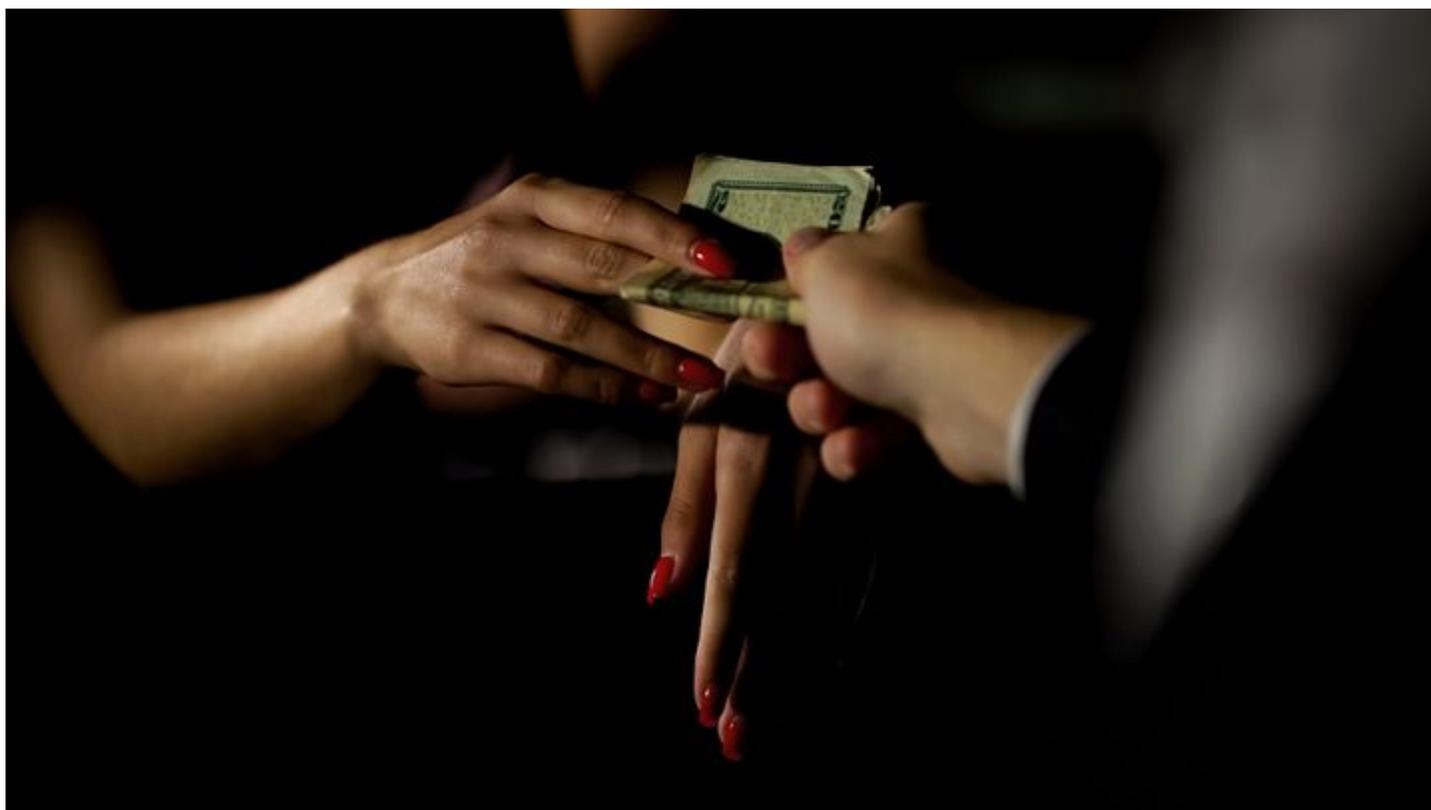


How COVID-19 Is Driving Sex Workers Like Me Into Crisis

The pandemic and the panic that surrounds it are a real and present danger for sex workers.



Molly Simmons
Guest Writer



MOTORTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

As soon as my alarm clock rings, I roll over to check the notifications on my phone. Two new emails. Amazing. I open the mail app, hoping for a new client inquiry. It's been too slow — the dead space of tax season has extended into March and I'm down to my last \$200, needing a client to come in fast. I open the first email.

Hi, my name is Jeff and I'm an experienced web developer looking to help you with –

Delete delete delete.

I open the second email.

hey :)

A huge sigh. This has been the theme for going on three months now, with no foreseeable end in sight. Every day the Dow drops more and for workers in New York, that's a pretty big fucking deal. Coupled with the growing concerns of contracting COVID-19, the client base for workers like myself is shrinking to almost nothing. I text my dancer friends only to hear the same — the clubs are empty.

I already know this email won't lead to anything but I respond to it anyway, unable to turn down even the slightest possible chance of work. Unless you're lucky enough to have some healthy and generous regulars, the types of clients coming in now are the kind you wished you didn't have to take.

For 8 years I've been in the industry as a full-service sex worker, and you get used to the ebbs and flows of the business. There are always times when work is scarce and you have to scrimp until the busy season returns. With the rise of COVID-19, however, we're being pushed into a state of scarcity that goes far beyond the usual slow season — and for disease epicenters like Seattle and New York, it could potentially rival the [post SESTA/FOSTA work losses.](#)

COVID-19 and its surrounding panic are a real and present danger for sex workers in New York. Workers and clients are both at risk for contraction, and knowing this has driven down the demand for our services an astronomical amount. The failure of our city to provide us access to social services, and our government's unwillingness to recognize sex work as a non-criminal venue of employment means that many workers are quickly being pushed into a state of financial desperation.

In an ideal world, both clients and workers could take time off and pre-emptively self-quarantine until the threat of contracting coronavirus is under control. We could all put our health first, and seek out health care if we need it.

The reality is that most sex workers have little to no savings to fall back on and little access to services that would at best only partially relieve the stress of not having work.

For sex workers who work outside, are Queer and Trans People of Color or are unhoused or undocumented, the threat of destitution looms even closer. For workers who are

disabled or immuno-compromised, choosing to see clients could mean they risk death ... but not seeing clients means risking all financial security.

Drops in demand brought on by COVID-19 don't just mean less work — it means less safe work. Often when workers have fewer clients and no savings to rely on, we get pushed into situations that compromise our boundaries. We are forced to book with clients who do not have our safety or our best interests in mind. Clients will try to haggle with us, push down the price of our services, and sometimes we can't refuse.

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Workers will feel pressure to screen less or not at all, to accept clients they know aren't safe and risk an assault or rape because they need to feed themselves or their children or keep the electricity on.

We are being pushed into desperate financial situations and to ignore symptoms because we don't have the financial means to afford health care. Some of us will be forced to return to abusive partners rather than risk homelessness.

The precarious situations of sex workers in the time of COVID-19 underscore the failings of our systems and our government's inability to care for its most marginalized citizens.

In times such as these, we rely hugely on mutual aid and grassroots organizing to act as a stopgap between us and financial ruin, but even these groups are rarely funded enough to be more than a Band-Aid for people who are affected.

I and the others of SWOP Brooklyn (Sex Worker's Outreach Project) recognized an immediate and increasing need for a crisis relief fund, so we [launched a GoFundMe](#) to supplement the donations we had raised at a previous fundraiser. In just 24 hours, we've

crowdsourced over \$20,000 in individual donations — an amazing amount, but still just a drop in the bucket given the people reaching out and asking for assistance with rent, bills, childcare, food and medication.

So, what of love in the time of COVID-19? What of sex?

Limiting direct contact with as many people as possible is the surest way to avoid contracting the coronavirus. It's a time to stay at home, take time off, self-isolate and pump up on vitamin C and supportive herbs. We all know this. Still, many of us will continue to gamble with our lungs and lives on the line as we try to pay our rent and make connections with our fellow human beings.

We often say that our work is a luxury service. Sex is a luxury service, but intimacy is not. The most impactful parts of our work — empathy, intimacy, connection — are also at risk as we begin to fear the touch of another human being. Intimacy is still a basic human need. People will still seek the services of professional sex workers, even now amid a viral outbreak when we all have that much more to lose.

Love in the time of COVID-19 means redefining how we can be intimate with and support one another. Whether this involves donating to crowdfunds, buying digital content or doing sexy quarantine play — there are ways to engage with and lift up sex workers in a time of crisis, while benefiting from our services. The only way for all of us to survive is if we continue to rely on one another and foster meaningful connections, regardless of whether it's in person or not.

I am grateful for the community that has stepped up so far, and I know that our solidarity efforts will only continue to grow as we weather this pandemic together.

How long will we be able to keep up such efforts? We've already been doing it for generations, in times of both abundance and scarcity, and I have no doubt we'll be doing it for years to come.

Molly Simmons is a full-service sex worker and sex-worker activist in Brooklyn. She is a chapter representative for SWOP Brooklyn, fighting for the decriminalization of sex work and providing mutual aid to sex workers in the New York area.