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Survey of sex workers' access to Covid-19 support in the UK

Introduction

Context

This survey aims to examine the impact of Covid-19 on the everyday lives of sex workers in the UK. On 22 March 2020, the UK entered its first Covid-19 lockdown. Sex workers stopped working and had no income. Many women were immediately pushed into destitution, unable to pay their rent or feed themselves and their children.

The government created various income support schemes for workers, however most of these were not accessible to sex workers. The two avenues for government support for sex workers were a scheme for self-employed workers and the welfare benefit Universal Credit. This survey outlines sex workers' experiences with both avenues of support.

Summary

Between March and the end of September 2020, 222 women contacted the English Collective of Prostitutes for help. This is approximately a 30% rise on the previous six months. Some specific types of requests, such as for help with cases of stalking, rose by much more than that. The majorities of enquiries (62%) were from London. Twelve of the women were referred by other organisations.

There was a wide range of issues that women contacted us about, and many women were looking for support with a number of different problems.

Issues that women contacted us about

Emergency food vouchers	140
Help with benefits	63
Violence and stalking cases	42
Housing	12
Health	19
Questions about Covid regulations	27
Asking about starting work	17
Advice on safety and rights	31
Issues around child custody	6
Raids/arrest/criminal charges	16

Some specific examples of the issues women contacted us about include:

- a mother from Romania who couldn't get an appointment at the consulate to renew her passport and was therefore unable to apply for settled status and welfare benefits. She was forced to work throughout the pandemic and was left destitute

when she had no clients. When she contacted us, she didn't have enough money to buy milk for her baby.

- a migrant sex worker who was working to pay for medical care for her niece with a disability who was fighting an eviction notice because her landlord tried to forcibly evict her. She had negotiated a rent reduction during the first lockdown, but as soon as that was lifted her landlord insisted on the full rent despite the fact that her income was greatly reduced. The case comes to court this summer.
- a sex worker from Derby who was made destitute when the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) cut off her benefits, saying that they suspected she had been overpaid. They demanded to see her bank statements for the past year (which the bank said they had to send individually to her by post, month by month) even though she had already provided that information.
- a woman from Nottingham who was left with just £47 a week to live on after the DWP miscalculated her entitlement. She relied on local food banks to survive.

Profile of respondents

Immigration Status

40% of the women who contacted us were migrant women, and of these a proportion were undocumented. 56% were non-migrant, whilst 4% of the women's nationalities were unknown to us.

Immigration Status

Migrant	40%
Non-Migrant	56%
Unknown	4%

Migrant women were particularly impacted by the pandemic. Many reported that lots of their friends had returned home before the lockdown, and that their usual support systems had broken down. In addition, many migrant women had 'no recourse to public funds' due to their immigration status, meaning that they could not apply for Universal Credit. Migrant women also struggled to access healthcare and other forms of state support, as the government refused to say publicly if migrants would be subject to deportation if they sought help. Other specific difficulties that migrant women faced included language barriers and a lack of access to a bank account and/or home address.

Gender

8% of the women who contacted us were trans women who needed help with continued access to hormonal treatment and other healthcare.

Parent Status

65% of the women were mothers or primary carers for children or people with disabilities. This is slightly lower than would be expected and may be because women are frequently reluctant to speak about the fact that they have children for fear of stigma and being branded a bad mother.

Working Conditions

23% of the women had previously worked on the street or in precarious situations, such as in pubs and other semi outdoor locations. Others worked inside in various ways, such as in a flat with one other woman, in a managed brothel (premises where there is more than one

woman working usually on a rota, paying a shift fee to a manager or owner who is generally a non-sex worker), as an independent escort doing in/outcalls or as a travelling sex worker. 7% told us that they had only worked online prior to the outbreak of Covid-19.

Income Support Schemes and Welfare Benefits

Self-Employment Income Support Scheme

Only 13% of the women who contacted us applied for the self-employment scheme, and the majority faced problems when applying. Some women did not apply because they did not think that they would qualify. Others told us that they were worried about outing themselves as sex workers to the authorities, whilst some could not produce the necessary documentation in their chosen “cover” profession to qualify. All of the women that applied for self-employed status had been paying tax. A number of the women that applied and were refused have paid tax for many years.

Universal Credit

24% of the women who contacted us told us that they had applied for Universal Credit, but this may be an underestimation. The problems women encountered with Universal Credit included:

- having to wait for weeks before receiving their payments.
- the Universal Credit assessment of their rent not covering the true cost of housing as it was based on an unrealistic average for their area.
- not being able to prove their identity.
- being turned down for arbitrary reasons - for example, one woman was told that her claim was being closed because she had savings without giving her the time to provide the bank statements to prove that she didn't.
- difficulties navigating the online system.
- not having money for mobile data to be able to access the system, or not having Wi-Fi in their accommodation.

One positive aspect of Universal Credit during the pandemic was that there were no sanctions imposed on applicants. This meant that women didn't have to jump the usual hurdles to prove that they were available for work, and were able to avoid the traps put in their way by the authorities which normally result in many women being cut off from state benefits and left destitute.

Legal Context

Exchanging sex for money in the UK is not illegal, but in practice everything that a sex worker does to meet clients is illegal. This includes working on the street, working together with a friend from the same premises and advertising services.

Even though a proportion of sex workers are registered as self-employed, no one we know is registered as a self-employed sex worker. Most have found another occupation to use as a cover. This created many problems when applying for the limited government support available.

During Covid-19, street work became more dangerous and women were targeted for arrest despite it being clear to the police that they were only working because they were destitute and in extreme need of money. Managed brothels closed for at least six months from March 2020. Some reopened in the autumn and implemented stringent hygiene measures and other precautions to keep themselves as safe as possible. Income was much lower but in

most cases women were expected to continue to cover the full rent. This caused extreme hardship. We spoke to one mother who had no money for food for her baby. Food vouchers that we distributed were a lifeline for women over this period.

Coronavirus restrictions and “lockdown laws” have been imposed in a discriminatory way with many sex workers, particularly women of colour and migrant women, reporting that they felt unfairly targeted by police. Some were issued with “on the spot fines”, whilst others were harassed for working on the street or had their premises raided.

Recently published figures showed that over 400 people have been arrested for brothel-keeping in the last three years, and that prosecutions continued during the pandemic. Little consideration appears to have been given to the fact that women only returned to work if they had to, although this was acknowledged by one public health official who spoke about the need for women to get support. Women contacted us with worries and questions about how to work safely, what to do if the police stopped them or visited and whether their premises would count as a spa or a club among other issues.

Our Response

➡ We demanded immediate, easy to access emergency payments for sex workers in crisis and a moratorium on arrests. Thousands of people wrote to their members of parliament (MPs) with these demands, and we received a good amount of responses. Two MPs also asked questions in parliament based on our demands.

The government responded by pointing to the funding it had provided for health projects and other women’s organisations. However, even a brief analysis of this funding showed that it didn’t go to sex workers themselves but to the organisations, many of which had a moralistic view on prostitution meaning that women’s economic needs weren’t met. Some MPs also defended the lack of support for sex workers by saying that women could apply for Universal Credit, with no reference to the many problems with this benefit and that the amount women receive each week isn’t enough to live on.

➡ We demanded that sex workers be granted worker status, pointing to the situation in New Zealand where sex work was decriminalised in 2003 with verifiable success. During the pandemic, sex workers were able to easily and quickly access the government’s emergency wage subsidy and were eligible for job-seekers benefit.

➡ We joined a campaign for a Care Income. This was a pertinent demand because most sex workers are mothers who are working to support their families, and despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of people depend on their income for their survival, mothers receive no credit for their labour. It was also particularly important during the pandemic because the importance of care work, the majority of which is provided by women, was in everyone’s mind and we hoped that this would strengthen women’s demands for government support and resources.

➡ We helped get money from sex worker organisations’ hardship funds to some of the women most in need.

➡ We distributed over 600 food vouchers during the lockdown, and worked continuously to try and get food parcels, food vouchers and other essential items to women in our network, particularly women who aren’t entitled to any state support.

➡ We helped women to apply for benefits and confront the stigma and hostility from the authorities.

- ➡ We helped a number of migrant trans women gain access to hormone therapy and other urgent medical care that had been interrupted as a result of the pandemic and loss of income.
- ➡ We collated sex worker friendly emergency resources like food banks and one-off grants to refer women to, and provided financial support in the form of phone credit/data to ensure that women were able to access government information, make the necessary calls and fill out forms online to apply and access benefits.
- ➡ Our work and demands helped ensure that attention was focused on the lack of government support and helped stave off any tendency from the media or politicians to witch-hunt sex workers for working during a pandemic.

Statement from Gloria

“When the coronavirus hit, I had a feeling it was going to last longer than what people said. I knew that sex work, because it involves so much personal contact, was going to be very difficult to continue with. I immediately gave up the flat where I worked with a friend to try to reduce my outgoings. I spent ages budgeting to see how long I could make my savings last. I started shopping around for the cheapest food. My ex did nothing to help. I think he was glad to see me in a difficult situation. The children have been fantastic. They’ve never asked me for anything. I’ve struggled with home-schooling. I have one tablet and was supposed to get another from the school, but it never arrived so my little one uses my phone for some of her school work and to get online. I thought to myself that I could manage to the beginning of May. I crossed my fingers and everything I possess hoping that by then I would be able to go back to work at least with the old regulars, doing out calls. But that was not to be.

I tried signing up to OnlyFans but felt that I was too old and there were too many other girls on there and I couldn’t find any space or time at home to put in the hours needed to make money in that way. In the last two weeks I’ve run out of money altogether. There are couple of really lovely people in my road who offered help. They referred me to an informal food co-op and I’ve had three or four food parcels from them. The ECP got me a food voucher as well. I’ve looked at all my relatives to see if anyone is in a position to lend me money. My auntie gave me £50 which is very sweet of her but doesn’t last long when you’ve got two kids to feed. I’ve looked at every other kind of work. I’ve applied for supermarket jobs but how can I do that and pay childcare? The numbers just don’t add up. I’ve started having night sweats and not being able to sleep. If I could I would definitely go back to work because there’s no way I can bear to see my children go hungry. We are eating the most basic of food. White rice. Bread. Beans. We can’t afford fruit or fresh vegetables. We can’t have any treats at all. I’m frightened for a future.

People have no idea how hard it is for mums. We can’t just go out and get another job. The other jobs are too low paid and too inflexible. They don’t pay any attention to the responsibility we have for our children. People wonder why so many mums do sex work and that’s the reason. The benefits are too low and the other jobs don’t pay enough. All those people that are outraged about some women going back to sex work at the time of this crisis. I say to them, tell us how else are we going to survive?”

Conclusion

This survey has highlighted the drastic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on sex workers' lives within the UK. Sex workers, many of whom are mothers, have been left without an income and pushed into homelessness and destitution. Due to the criminalisation of sex work, sex workers have faced multiple barriers in accessing state support, with only small numbers applying for self-employed status or Universal Credit. Migrant sex workers subject to 'no recourse to public funds' had no access to state benefits at all.

By May, we started hearing from women who were so desperate for money that they had to return to work. The lack of emergency support and other resources and the layers of criminalisation, stigma and illegality associated with sex work meant that sex workers, some of the most in need in society, were immediately pushed into destitution. This meant that women were forced to choose between risking their health by working and seeing their children and other family members going without.

Confirmation of the poverty crisis came from former homelessness tsar Louise Casey, who raised the alarm about the unprecedented levels of destitution within the UK, stating that people will have "to go out and prostitute themselves, so that they could put food on the table." A Cardiff-based charity saw a 69% rise in women coming to them for support during the coronavirus crisis, many of whom had continued to work through economic necessity.

It is therefore without doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the inequality of government support systems within the UK, and revealed the state structures that further marginalise and push sex workers into crisis situations.