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Women and Equalities Committee inquiry - Unequal Impact: Coronavirus (Covid-19) and the impact on people with protected characteristics.

Written submission from the English Collective of Prostitutes, April 2020

The ECP is a self-help organisation of sex workers, working both on the street and in premises, with a national network throughout the UK. Since 1975, we have campaigned for the decriminalisation of prostitution, for sex workers' rights and safety, and for resources to enable people to get out of prostitution if they want to.

- ***How people have been affected by the illness or the response to it***

Financial effects

The coronavirus comes on top of a crisis of poverty, homelessness and debt, especially among women.

Like millions of other people, sex workers have been deprived of an income by the virus and now the lockdown. But because sex work is criminalised sex workers are also deprived of the support, payments and protections available to others.

The ECP's network includes thousands of sex workers across the UK. We have heard from hundreds of women since the crisis began. For many, their income has completely disappeared, and they are now absolutely destitute.

Women are in desperate circumstances – especially those with children. Those working on the street, migrant, trans, and women of colour, who already have the highest rates of poverty, arrest and violence, are particularly suffering. We are helping women apply for Universal Credit where possible, but the five-week wait for money and the low weekly amount, means this doesn't address women's needs. In addition, migrant women and those without immigration status aren't eligible. Women asylum seekers get only £37.75 a week, when they get anything.

Much sex work involves personal contact – exactly what people are being warned against if the virus is to be contained. Some women are turning to non-contact forms of sex work like camming where possible. But most women are being forced to choose between going hungry and risking homelessness or going back to work and risking their own and their loved ones' health.ⁱ

Even worse, some sex workers are then publicly named and shamed for supposedly breaking the lockdown rules, and targeted for abuse.ⁱⁱ By refusing support, the government is responsible for forcing sex workers to make dangerous choices and putting them at risk of attack.

Criminalisation of sex workers continues

In some cases, under the Coronavirus Act, women are still being taken to court for loitering and soliciting and there is even talk among police of prosecuting those working inside.

We were told by women in our network that a number of women had been taken to Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court for loitering and soliciting.

In Lancashire, police are patrolling areas where sex workers are known to operate and will either arrest, issue words of advice or a fixed penalty notices to sex workers and clients. ⁱⁱⁱ

This is an unacceptable response. The government's own [research](#) found that financial need and criminalisation create the "perfect cocktail of conditions" for undermining sex workers' safety.

Contact with health professionals and contact tracing measures are also hindered by criminalisation because sex workers can't say what we do or who we know for fear of arrest and discrimination.

A number of women in our network who are undocumented and have been forced to continue working are worried they won't be able to visit a hospital if they get ill as they aren't eligible for free health care, can't afford the fees and fear the possibility of deportation.

Sex workers who previous to this crisis, were facing police harassment and often racism, are reporting that they feel increasingly targeted for abuse.

We were glad to see some recognition by public health officials of the particular situation that sex workers are in for example in Blackburn with Darwen:

"However, I do realise that for many sex workers there are limited other sources of income and that the Government are unlikely to treat them as furloughed workers. I would urge the Government to think about this group and what alternative ways of providing financial support can be given."^{iv}

- ***If there have been specific impacts on people due to them having a protected characteristic***

Women: there are approximately 80,000 sex workers in the UK — at least 88% are women.^v

Mothers: Most sex workers are mothers, mainly single mothers, working to support families.

Vulnerable people like mothers and people with disabilities have been disproportionately targeted by austerity cuts, 86% of which have fallen on women.^{vi} Government policies of benefit sanctions and the introduction of universal credit^{vii} have deliberately caused destitution and pushed more women into prostitution.

This situation has been exacerbated by the virus. As one woman in our network described:

"The extra money was what kept me afloat. I couldn't afford luxuries but it meant that I had food in the fridge and the kids weren't just eating bread and jam. When they started speaking about a virus I didn't think about what it would mean. Then the customers stopped coming. As the bills come in I stack them up on a shelf and try to forget about them. I spend my whole day anxious. There is no let-up. I have the worry of the children, the worry of my mother who is old and on her own, the worry of my sister who has mental problems. I feel like I am living by a thread – I am exhausted and scared for our future."

Women are the poorer sex which explains why most sex workers are women. Women have less access to money and other resources including capital. Lack of pay equity, low wages, high childcare costs and lack of flexibility and consideration for women's caring work, means that many women, particularly mothers, are locked out of other non-sex work jobs.

In addition, women's work at home looking after children, friends and family - the invisible and unpaid caring work we do every day -- has increased because of the virus and during the lockdown. But there has been no relief package for women for this work from Governments.

Despite evaluations of how much women's unpaid work is worth^{viii}, it is rarely suggested that women actually get any of this money, and we continue to be impoverished without the resources we need. We are left with few choices and that is why many of us end up working in the sex industry to make ends meet and put a roof over ours and our children's heads. We support the [demand for a Care Income](#) so that we could leave prostitution if and when we want to.

If sex workers' contribution to the survival and welfare of people was more visible, our status would rise and our demands would be seen to be more valid.

Trans women are disproportionately represented in sex work because stigma and discrimination prevents women getting other jobs.

The health of migrant trans women who depend on sex work for survival and to pay for transition related healthcare, is being compromised because women have no money to pay for ongoing treatment.

Reviewing the measures

- ***What needs to change or improve, which could be acted on in three weeks' time;***

Financial support for sex workers

Women must be given the resources we need to survive without doing sex work.

We are demanding immediate, appropriate and easy-to-access financial support for sex workers in crisis. Including:

- Emergency payments for sex workers who are destitute.
- Worker status so that we can get sick pay, wage relief and the benefits that other workers can claim.
- Rent, mortgage, utility bill relief and emergency housing for homeless sex workers.
- Universal Credit must be increased to the level of the living wage

End the criminalisation of sex workers

We are demanding that at this moment of national crisis, health and human survival is prioritised over criminalisation, including:

- An immediate moratorium on raids, arrests and prosecutions of sex workers.
- Immediate implementation of the 2016 parliamentary Home Affairs Committee recommendation that sex workers on the street and premises be decriminalised.

These measures would ensure that women can come forward without fear of prosecution to access health and other resources.

There are precedents for our proposals. New Zealand decriminalised sex work in 2003 and the *Guardian* recently reported^{ix} that its "policy framework has helped sex workers . . . find financial security and safety during this time of crisis".

The New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective (NZPC) have reported to us that sex workers are receiving wage subsidy grants and being put on benefits quickly by government agencies, without the need to disclose they are a sex worker.

In addition, the police, charged with ensuring people are abiding by lockdown rules are contacting the NZPC if they come across sex workers who are still working, as opposed to arresting them. This is the difference a decriminalised environment makes.

In Ipswich during a series of tragic murders, when the imperative was for women to be able to get off the street, the government provided emergency payments.

Countries like Japan and Thailand have made emergency payments to sex workers, why not here?

Other measures

We also support demands for: an increase in Child Benefit, the release of people in immigration detention and of non-violent prisoners, access to health care regardless of immigration status and the many other measures that are needed to prioritise health, safety and welfare.

- ***What needs to change or improve, which could be acted on in 6 months' time.***

The measures **granting worker and self-employed status** so that sex workers can claim sick pay, wage relief and other benefits, and the **implementation of the 2016 Home Affairs Committee recommendation to decriminalise sex workers** on the street and working together in premises, should be implemented as soon as possible and certainly within the next six months.

But we reiterate that immediate measures must include **emergency payments** for sex workers who are destitute, **a moratorium on arrests and prosecutions**, an increase in **Universal Credit** to the level of the living wage, as women are already at crisis point.

Any of these measures that are enacted, should not be repealed at a later date.

Our full statement and demands are [here](#)

ⁱ <https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/lockdown-offers-sanitiser-north-east-17978007>

<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/sex-workers-swanseas-high-street-17990035>

<https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/how-coronavirus-affecting-street-sex-3990370>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.hulldailymail.co.uk/news/hull-east-yorkshire-news/motor-home-prostitute-sex-hull-4029366>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/18393231.coronavirus-fears-sex-workers-clients-sees-police-take-action/>

^{iv} <https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/18393231.coronavirus-fears-sex-workers-clients-sees-police-take-action/>

^v Brooks-Gordon, B., Mai, N., Perry, G., Sanders, T. (2015). Calculating the Number of Sex Workers and Contribution to Non-Observed Economy in the UK for the Office for National Statistics.

^{vi} <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/benefit-freeze-single-mothers-austerity-a8846246.html>

^{vii} <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/may/22/universal-credit-hardship-linked-to-prostitution>

^{viii} Globally women and girls do more than three-quarters of all unpaid care work – a total of 12.5 billion hours a day with the market valuing this work at \$10.8 trillion a year.

^{ix} <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/28/dont-have-to-fight-for-pennies-new-zealand-safety-net-helps-sex-workers-in-lockdown>