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Sex workers at a coronavirus crossroads

The pandemic has been tough for many sex workers, and the end of lockdown brings new challenges.

By Eline Schaart & Nektaria Stamouli

Politico (16.06.2020) - <https://politi.co/3g0aaMi> - Sex workers are faced with a dilemma: open for business and risk getting coronavirus, or face having no income.

The pandemic has laid bare the legal limbo in which most sex workers operate in Europe, with many unable to access state support. During the lockdown, that meant either no money or breaking the rules and carrying on working — adding an extra layer of risk to what for many is already a dangerous job.

Now countries are beginning to open up. Belgium was one of the first to allow brothels to restart work, on June 8, even though saunas and massage parlors must remain closed until July 1. Customers' temperatures are checked upon arrival and both partners have to wear a face mask.

In Belgium — where there's no legal framework to protect sex workers, but most local authorities tolerate it — only those registered as self-employed have been able to get compensation. That means many people were forced to return to work, according to UTSOPI, which represents sex workers in Belgium, because "they don't have a choice" due to their financial situation.

Hot Marijke, a sex worker in Flanders, has been getting state support but says she will lose it now that brothels are back open. "They are basically forcing me back to work," she said over the phone. "It's madness, you cannot touch your friends but you can climb into bed with a wild stranger."

"The pandemic has been very dramatic for all sex workers — due to their lack of legal status in many countries they are being completely excluded from emergency measures," said Luca Stevenson, coordinator at the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE), which includes more than 100 organizations.

In Greece, brothels reopened on Monday, with authorities issuing a long list of hygiene rules, which brothel owners and sex workers fear will be a deterrent to customers.

They include an obligation to keep all clients' contact details in a sealed envelope for four weeks for tracking and tracing purposes; that services should not exceed 15 minutes per

customer; and only one customer at a time. Sex workers have also been told to "ensure distance," which will likely prove rather difficult, and avoid "face-to-face contact."

Greek law does not allow sex workers to register as self-employed and therefore take advantage of state support. That means, according to Red Umbrella Athens, an initiative supporting sex workers, that more than 600 brothels operate illegally in Greece — with the authorities turning a blind eye — and hundreds of sex workers are out looking for customers on the streets. According to officials at the Greek Ministry of Civil Protection and the Municipalities, they are beginning to register the hundreds of illegal brothels, with the aim of making them legal.

Red lights are off in Amsterdam

In the Netherlands, there are calls for the government to open up the industry as soon as possible. "We are fully prepared and could open tomorrow," said Yvette Luhrs, a spokesperson at the Prostitution Information Center who also works in pornography.

Yet under current plans from the government, the windows in De Wallen, Amsterdam's main red light district, will remain empty until September 1.

"Our hygiene rules were already extremely tight and now, taking into account the coronavirus protocols, [are] even more strict," Luhrs said. The guidelines "go much further than those in Belgium."

Although prostitution in the Netherlands is legal, many sex workers are in limbo. Like many governments at the start of the crisis, the Dutch set up an emergency income fund for those left without work. But in practice, many sex workers do not qualify for the subsidies because of the way they were registered with the tax authorities before the crisis began.

Luhrs said that without the necessary financial compensation, many sex workers and their families have found themselves in dire situations. "We've been working for weeks on a protocol and we've sent letters to the government demanding to be treated like other contact professions, such as tattoo artists and hairdressers, but so far The Hague has stayed quiet."

In a survey of more than 100 sex workers in the Netherlands conducted by Sekswerk Expertise, a research group in Amsterdam, more than half of respondents said they had applied for coronavirus support. Of those, only 13 percent said they had received help. Of those who did not apply, around 1 in 3 said they already knew they would not qualify, and 1 in 6 said they were worried about identifying themselves as sex workers to the government, in case that information was leaked.

A new emergency fund has been set up by volunteers, which offers aid of about €40 to the most desperate applicants.

Researchers from across Europe — including in Belgium, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and France — found that many sex workers continued to work during lockdown to make ends meet, putting them at risk from abusive clients as well as coronavirus.

"Some [sex workers] rely on seeing one or two regular customers ... which covers their fixed costs," said Luhrs. "But we also hear from people who have to look for new clients, which is more dangerous because people with bad intentions know that sex workers cannot go to the police if something happens, because then you end up with a criminal record."

Pierrette Pape, who heads Isala, an association that provides support for sex workers, said there's been a lack of "deep reflection" on the fact that many sex workers "are foreigners, victims of trafficking, exploitation or precariousness," adding that between 80 and 90 percent of sex workers are part of a trafficking network.

"Nothing will really change if another lockdown is put in place [due to a second wave of coronavirus], and these people will still face [the same] big social and financial problems," Pape said. "Let us give them a residence permit, a work permit and financial assistance to survive, and then they will see what they decide to do — but we need a long-term vision."

Sex workers struggle to survive Covid-19 pandemic

Criminalization makes a bad situation worse.

By Skye Wheeler

HRW (04.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3dJeVsu> - Covid-19 presents a new problem for sex workers. In-person sex work is intimate by its very nature, and workers are at heightened risk of contracting the virus if they keep working. But without work, as strip clubs close and clients dwindle, sex workers struggle to survive.

In many countries in Europe, sex work is criminalized directly or indirectly through legal systems such as the "Scandinavian model," which makes buying sex illegal. Sex workers, who are forced to work in the informal economy, find themselves excluded from emergency assistance available to other workers.

A [new report](#) by the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSWE) notes that sex workers in the continent live in the "economic margins" and often have less savings and government support to fall back on. They are also rarely benefitting from pandemic response and recovery plans."

Sex workers are often from groups that are already marginalized economically and socially, such as undocumented migrants, people of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, some of whom have been pushed out of their families due to homophobia. Sex work may, for them, be one option among bad ones. The ICRSWE report also predicts that hard economic times may mean more people will turn to sex work.

The report asks European governments to issue urgent moratoriums on raids, arrests, and prosecutions for sex work, provide financial support to sex workers, and ensure sex worker-led organizations are included in distribution of emergency assistance.

In the longer term, as the ICRSWE argues, governments should carry out meaningful consultations with sex workers to establish a framework that "respects their human rights and improves their safety and working conditions."

States that criminalize sex work should work towards decriminalization. Human Rights Watch has documented the harmful impact of laws criminalizing sex work in countries including South Africa, Tanzania, and the United States. We call for decriminalization of sex work everywhere because, as this new report says, decriminalization helps protect sex workers from violence and is an important step towards ending harmful stigmatization.

Violence against women rife in eastern Europe, says OSCE study

The OSCE spoke face-to-face with over 15,000 women to gather data on the prevalence of sexual, physical and psychological violence in southeastern and eastern Europe. The results showed a "grim picture."

By Cristina Burack

DW.com (06.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2FcSch1> - The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) published Wednesday the "grim" results of a large-scale survey on violence against women in eight different countries in eastern and southeastern Europe.

The representative report surveyed around 15,000 women aged 18-74 in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, Moldova, Ukraine and Kosovo, asking them about their experiences of violence and abuse since the age of 15.

Key findings on violence

- Some 70 percent of women said they had experienced some form of violence since the age of 15, with 31 percent saying this had occurred within the last 12 months.
- Twenty-three percent of women responded that they had experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner, while 18 percent said they had experienced this from a non-partner.
- Family members were responsible for 31 percent of non-partner physical violence experienced by women.
- Psychological violence is the most common form of violence against women, with 60 percent of women reporting this from a partner.
- All women can experience violence, but women who are poorer, economically dependent or have children are more at risk.
- Women with a tertiary education tend to experience higher rates of violence, particularly from non-partners.

"Violence against women and girls is a persistent human rights violation," the organization said in its report, adding, "the OSCE recognizes violence against women and girls as both a threat to individuals and a broader security."

Norms and attitudes

The report, which was both quantitative and qualitative, also examined norms and attitudes towards women and violence in the surveyed countries.

"Beliefs in female subservience, spousal obedience and silence surrounding VAWG [violence against women and girls] continue to persist in the region," it said.

Nearly six in 10 women thought that violence against women was very or fairly common. However, the findings pointed out that many women do not report experiences of violence because they distrust authorities or do not feel informed about what to do.

The organization said the survey aimed to address a lack of sufficient data and compliment an EU-wide survey that had been undertaken in 2014.

Goals for the future

The secretary general of the OSCE, Thomas Greminger, described the report as "an important step towards eliminating violence against women."

"Ultimately, we need to use the results to achieve specific policy goals: reduced violence against women, improved services for survivors and greater security for women and girls overall," he added.

Greminger presented the results alongside the EU's gender advisor, Mara Marinaki.

The survey was undertaken in conjunction with various partners, including the European Commission, UN Women and Germany's permanent mission to the OSCE.

UN agencies call for action to bolster rights of Europe's stateless children

United Nations agencies are calling on States and regional organizations across Europe to take urgent action to ensure that thousands of currently stateless children are given the support and protection they deserve.

UN News (14.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2DZCHAh> - With more than 500,000 people in Europe estimated to be unrecognized as a citizen of any country, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) underscored that children without a nationality have limited access to basic rights and services, like education or healthcare, and can face life-long discrimination.

"Life is stacked against a stateless child right from the start", said UNHCR's Europe Bureau Director Pascale Moreau, adding that legal obstacles often mean their dreams are "dashed before they are adults, and their potential squandered".

As the overall number of asylum-seeking children in Europe has grown since 2010, so too has the number of children identified as stateless. In 2017 some 2,100 children were registered as such, representing a four-fold increase compared to seven years earlier.

Basic rights and services, including education and healthcare, are denied to children without a nationality. Lacking official documents, they are also at greater risk of violence, trafficking and life-long discrimination. Moreover, along with their families, they are often exposed to arrest and detention.

"Every child has the right to a name and a nationality," said UNICEF Regional Director and Special Coordinator for the Refugee and Migrant Response in Europe, Afshan Khan.

He underscored that Governments have a responsibility to adopt safeguards that prevent a child from being born stateless and "to provide legal aid and support to ensure every stateless child realizes their right to citizenship."

The UN agencies said children born stateless are at a particular disadvantage, explaining that they cannot inherit their parents' nationality due to gender discrimination and gaps in nationality laws. Children born in Europe whose births are not registered are another vulnerable group that includes minority populations, like the Roma.

And children from countries with known stateless populations who enter Europe as refugees and asylum-seekers are particularly defenseless.

While birth registration rates are high in Europe, UNHCR and UNICEF are pushing for information campaigns that target families most at risk, to help identify and register them.

Achieving legal identity for all through birth registration, is one of the goals of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

While UNICEF is working to ensure all children are registered at birth, UNHCR's #IBelong Campaign aims to end Statelessness by 2024.

What solutions are there to help tackle statelessness?

- Properly identify and protect every stateless refugee or migrant child upon arrival in Europe.
- Simplify procedures for stateless children to acquire a nationality as soon as possible.
- Adopt or amend legislation to include safeguards that grant nationality to all children born in a country who would otherwise be stateless.