

Blind Fold Legal Journal
Volume 1 Issue 2



BLIND FOLD LEGAL JOURNAL

VOLUME-1 ISSUE-2

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PRECARIOUS STATE OF SEX WORKERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the inequality of social support systems worldwide, revealing the gaps that further marginalize vulnerable people. Racialized and criminalized migrants and precarious workers are adversely affected by the pandemic but are excluded from government relief and protection programmes as well as health services- this includes sex workers. The ability of sex workers to protect themselves depends on their 'work environment, the availability of community support, access to health and social services, and broader aspects of the legal and economic environment.' However, sex workers, especially migrant sex workers, are forced to put their health and safety at risk because they are denied access to social and health services and may not be allowed to stay at home, be physically separated from their employers, or stop working to live. Exclusion and injustice are compounded for migrant sex workers, who suffer xenophobia, racism, linguistic challenges, insecure immigration status, and the threat of deportation. Sex workers, as one of the most marginalised groups, are being forgotten.

During the pandemic, countries all across the world are providing financial assistance to their residents. However, even in nations where sex work is legal or decriminalised, sex workers are generally entirely excluded from these laws, or they can only qualify for assistance if they meet certain criteria, such as being self-employed or producing proof of income. Many sex workers, particularly those who are most vulnerable, are left out, including irregular migrants, asylum seekers, LGBTQ persons, and survival sex workers. In the United States, these financial support exclusions are significantly broader, encompassing all sorts of sex work or adult job. Because they are not eligible for government assistance, some sex workers have broken their isolation orders to see customers because they have no other way to make the money they need to survive and support their families.

The novel coronavirus, which was once limited to India's elite—international travellers and their contacts—has now spread to all strata of society. Direct separation and limitation of mobility, or "lockdown," as recommended by the World Health Organization, was viewed as the major strategy of prevention because its spread is dependent on people's physical touch with one another. This resulted in a complete ban on human mobility and restrictions on interpersonal physical contact. This is especially harmful to people whose livelihoods are dependent on the human touch. They've been left in the dark about when this will stop due to the approaching uncertainty. Aside from

doctors, other professions that require physical touches, such as masseurs, hairstylists, and athletes, are all affected by the lockdown. Sex workers, a big group of people who make a living from jobs that revolve around human touch and intimacy, have been particularly hard hit. The COVID-19 epidemic, along with the resulting lockdowns and limitations, has exacerbated existing schisms, driving those on the periphery closer to the edge. Women working in the sex industry have historically faced numerous problems, with their marginalisation forcing them to strive on a variety of fronts, including health, education, and social justice.

Sex workers move around a lot to avoid being identified by their families or to improve their earning potential. This makes it much more difficult to deliver help through government channels, which need ration cards and other forms of identification and evidence of address. Many sex workers were stuck in cities, towns, and districts as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, particularly those from Kutch and Ranchi. They were denied meals and relief because they lacked ration cards issued by the city or district in which they were discovered. During the nationwide lockdowns, ladies were asked to depart their rented lodgings after their money ran out. Women said they tried everything they could to get back to their hometowns.

Furthermore, many sex workers (male, female, and trans people) work from home and arrange clients over the phone, either independently or through an agent. A huge number of women are housewives, and their families are unaware of their employment (VAMP 2020). Their livelihood came to a complete halt during the outbreak. They were unable to explain their loss of income to their families or approach collectives that assisted brothel workers. During the epidemic, the state's invisibilities and a long history of conditional government assistance were on display. While the government designated several marginalised groups needing immediate assistance, including transgender individuals, people with disabilities, informal sector employees, and migrants, sex workers were left out of any aid packages. Historically, states have made receiving aid contingent on giving up sex work. For example, the Karnataka government's 2018 support scheme for "exploited" women compels them to sign a promise that they will not return to sex work.

Sex workers are ostracised, stigmatised, and criminalised, but they are also bright, resourceful, and resilient. To assist their peers in overcoming these obstacles, sex worker networks have devised rapid response tactics. Sex workers' organisations around the world have established emergency and mutual aid funds, as well as resources, programmes, and campaigns. They've also been

advocating for universal income and health care, as well as an end to repressive police and state-sanctioned violence, in collaboration with other groups and communities. Sex worker-led organisations around the world indicate that the criminalization of sex work has resulted in hardship, loss of income, and increased discrimination and harassment for sex workers. Governments have created public health policies, emergency laws, and economic relief to help their citizens cope with the COVID-19 epidemic. Because 'the illegality of sex work in most countries provides significant hurdles for getting government support,' most sex workers are excluded from this economic relief. Furthermore, sex work is not considered work, and the sex industry is not considered a type of small company owner. As a result, sex workers are unable to obtain labour protection or financial assistance that might otherwise be available to small enterprises.

In 2002, Germany made sex work legal, and there are now over 200,000 sex workers in the country. On March 14th, the government ordered the closure of all brothels and other "non-essential" businesses including clubs and pubs. According to Susanne Wilp, a spokesman for the Association of Erotic and Sexual Services Providers, the business has dropped by 90%, and they are facing homelessness as a result of their loss of money. Sex workers in Amsterdam, where sex work is also allowed, are facing a similar fate. In rare situations, Japan has enabled sex workers to petition for government assistance. However, the application standards are strict, forcing workers to 'out' themselves to their communities. Employers may be qualified for rebates if their staff are required to stay at home to care for children during school closures, and sex workers may be eligible for cash assistance. (However, the qualifications are unclear as to whether the handout is intended for people who have lost a portion of their salary or those who have been fired totally.) Workers must present proof of income, which is difficult to do because they are frequently paid under the table.

Due to a fear of penalties and a sense of stigma, many sex workers do not mention their occupation or total income on their tax filings. Admitting to not disclosing income could have its own set of ramifications. The Thai government has included sex workers in its pandemic assistance package, and the Malaysian government is providing accommodation and monthly remuneration to the homeless, the majority of whom are sex workers. Because sex work is illegal in Malaysia, despite its widespread use, these workers must conceal their vocation to get benefits.

One option for workers to protect themselves during the pandemic is to do sex work online. Photos, movies, video conferencing, and phone sex are used to accomplish this. This type of job, however, has its limitations. Workers may lack the necessary equipment or technical knowledge to make work easier in this manner. It is easier to commercialise internet services for workers who already have an online following. Furthermore, posting on the internet may jeopardise the privacy of employees who do not want to disclose the nature of their employment to family and friends. For workers with children and families at home, working online may not be a practical option. The inability to function online may also be hampered by a lack of consistent internet connectivity. Furthermore, workers earn less money working online, and laws aren't in place to protect them from data breaches or violent clients they can meet as a result of working online.

UNAIDS and the Global Network of Sex Work Projects have urged countries to take steps to safeguard sex workers' health and human rights. These measures should include offering migrant sex workers access to national social security initiatives, unemployment benefits, and financial aid, offering healthcare services to migrant sex workers, allocating emergency housing for homeless sex workers, ending the use of criminal law, promoting COVID-19 testing, and extending visas to migrant sex workers. More allies are needed for sex workers. Amnesty International and the World Health Organization, for example, endorse their calls for legalisation and decriminalisation. Everyone who cares about gender inequality, migration, public health, or poverty should be concerned about sex worker rights. Because sex workers are one of society's most marginalised groups, protecting them during this pandemic is critical. When it comes to legislation and programmes that affect sex workers, they must be included in the decision-making process. They should be able to operate safely and on their terms, which includes protection in the event of a global pandemic.