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Prostitution During the Pandemic: Findings Show Need for Nordic Model

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Abstract

The impact of COVID-19 on sexually exploited individuals provides an opportunity to advance the Nordic Model approach and create lasting change. Although subject to gender-based violence and denied safety net services, commercially sexually exploited women are seldom seen as a “vulnerable” group in the pandemic. Interviews from social service agencies in Seattle, Washington show women are experiencing more physical and sexual violence from sex buyers and women who have exited prostitution are finding their stability and security in jeopardy. Advocates can make the case to address disparities with safety net guarantees and structural change with the adoption of the Nordic Model.

Keywords

commercial sexual exploitation, COVID-19, equality model, inequality, Nordic Model, abolition, pornography, poverty, prostitution, racism.

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PROSTITUTION DURING THE PANDEMIC: FINDINGS SHOW NEED FOR NORDIC MODEL

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ABSTRACT

The impact of COVID-19 on sexually exploited individuals provides an opportunity to advance the Nordic Model approach and create lasting change. Although subject to gender-based violence and denied safety net services, commercially sexually exploited women are seldom seen as a “vulnerable” group in the pandemic. Interviews from social service agencies in Seattle, Washington show women are experiencing more physical and sexual violence from sex buyers and women who have exited prostitution are finding their stability and security in jeopardy. Advocates can make the case to address disparities with safety net guarantees and structural change with the adoption of the Nordic Model.

KEYWORDS

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REPORTING FROM THE EARLY PHASES of the COVID-19 pandemic gave hopeful indications the sex industry might collapse. Reports suggested the demand for prostitution had plummeted and there was a decrease in sex trafficking around the globe (Alonzo, 2020; Cowen, 2020; Dickson, 2020). According to the National Trafficking Sheltered Alliance, 7,000 brothels shutdown nationwide and there were reports of a 60-80% decrease in online prostitution (Yao, 2020). These shutdowns should be devastating to the sex industry; however, there are other indications the prostitution business is quickly adapting to the pandemic with increasingly harmful tactics to women (Bien-Aime´, 2020).

With evaporating demand for face-to-face contact, sex industry businesses are desperate to reach sex buyers and their money. Online recruitment is said to be occurring at three times the normal rate, with an increased focus on recruitment of children and adolescents who are spending more time online with school closures (Yao, 2020). From across the country we are hearing that women are being forced into online pornography or to enter the “gig” economy and “perform” in drive-through businesses and offer sex with home deliveries (McNamara, 2020). A news article described an outreach effort to recruit McDonald’s employees into online prostitution and pornography (Olohan, 2020). It is devastating to learn there is an upsurge in online pornography and rape videos to attract paying viewers (Nealon, 2020).

Buyer review boards such as *USA Sex Guide* and *Rubmaps* indicate sex buying continues during the pandemic. Reviews from buyers on these sites show how to “keep in the game “with personal appointments” or find “residential” versions of illicit massage businesses that have been shut down. One review of a woman by a sex buyer claiming to be a hospital worker explained how he was trying to limit his risk by only buying from one specific individual in an illicit massage business. Buyers are exploiting women’s increased vulnerability now with demands for more dangerous sex acts and paying less to women who are homeless or on the verge of homelessness (Beiser, 2020). Any noticeable “plummet” in sex buying, is unlikely to last as demonstrated by sex buyers (johns) attitudes of domination and degradation toward women: “The whole thrill of it, prostitute hunting” (Farley, et al. 2011b).

The male-controlled sex industry has been vying for media space and using women to call attention to the loss of “clients” and income resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Hobbes, 2020; Jordans, 2020). Reporting, such as *Coronavirus Fears Are Decimating the Sex Industry*, should sound alarms because we hear voices from the sex industry using the pandemic to lobby for wholesale decriminalization of prostitution in the name of poor women who need the money (Hobbes, 2020).

Pro-legalization/decriminalization groups may allege interest in keeping women safer, but it is abolitionists who are working to undo the systemic inequalities that both endanger women and make the pandemic worse. Any losses to the industry are gains for the abolitionist movement and offer an historical moment to advocate for structural change to eradicate all forms of sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. Now is the time to elevate and fortify arguments for the Nordic Model and advocate for women in prostitution and pornography to be categorically eligible for safety net services.

Prostitution, Inequality & Pandemics

Critical perspectives on emerging infections must ask how large-scale social forces come to have their effects on unequally positioned individuals in increasingly interconnected populations (Farmer, Walton, & Tartar, 2000).

The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder of our global interconnectedness and the permeability of social networks. Pandemics indisputably reveal the costs of inequality as seen in disproportionate morbidity and mortality outcomes for people of color with COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). By early April 2020 for example, Black and Latinx people in New York were dying from coronavirus at twice the rate of white people (Mays & Newman, 2020). At the same time, 31% of New Mexico COVID-19 cases were among Native people, although they are only 10.6% of the state’s population (Childress, 2020).

It is crucial that we face the roles racism, income disparity, and social inequality play in transmission of the virus, which result in further inequality seen in racial and class disparities in morbidity and mortality (Quinn & Kumar, 2014). A recent article in the *New York Times* suggests: “Inequality itself may be acting as a multiplier on the coronavirus’s spread and deadliness” (Fisher & Bubola, 2020).

As advocates, we must bring the conditions of women in prostitution and pornography into the pandemic conversation. Prostitution endangers women by

increasing their risk for COVID-19 and impedes their ability to protect themselves, but prostitution also links the disparities of racism, violence, and poverty.

The sex industry operationalizes racism leading to disproportionate numbers of women and girls of color trapped in prostitution (Bindel, 2017; Butler, 2015). Women of color have historically been sexually stereotyped and the target of abuse by traffickers and sex buyers and excluded from protection because society views them as “criminals” rather than victims. Vednita Carter described the “deep wounds of misogyny infected with racism” and the need to confront both systems decades ago (Nelson, 1993). Carter’s alert continues to be salient and the consequences are severe: Women of color are both overrepresented in prostitution and as victims of COVID-19 (Lindsey, 2020).

Violence powers the sex industry. It is estimated that 84% of women in prostitution and pornography are under some form of third-party control and are pimped and trafficked, and up to 75% have been homeless (Farley, Franzblau, & Kennedy, 2014). Research findings on the percent of women who have experienced violence and sexual assault in prostitution are all over 80% and approach 100% (Farley, Cotton, and Lynne, et al., 2003). Prostitution is lethal for women; over 1/3 of individuals in prostitution report a buyer or trafficker has tried to murder them (Potterat, Brewer, Stephen, Muth, Rothenberg, et al. 2004). Women in prostitution have the highest incidence of rape and murder (Giobbe, 1991; Potterat, et al., 2004). The statistics for violence in prostitution are higher for indigenous women and women of color (Farley, M. Matthews, N., Deer, S., Lopez, G., Stark, C. & Hudson E., 2011a; Raphael & Feifer, 2020). An expectation to protect against COVID-19 under these conditions is naïve and disingenuous.

As advocates, we need to examine the vulnerabilities and risk behaviors of women in prostitution and the structural context in which those vulnerabilities occur. Now is a time for us to use our informed understanding of sexual exploitation to engage and advance the agenda of abolitionists.

Impact of COVID-19 On Women in Prostitution

Consistent themes have been reported across the globe; commercially sexually exploited individuals are facing increased violence and are denied access to safety net programs available to everyone else (Yao, 2020; Nealon, 2020). To explore these issues in more detail, staff from three agencies serving sexually exploited adults and youth in Seattle/King County, Washington State, were interviewed. The participating agencies included: Real Escape from the Sex Trades (REST); Aurora Commons (AC); and Washington Trafficking Prevention WTP). The focus of questioning was on how women in prostitution have been affected by the pandemic. An open-ended question format was used, and REST provided results from an internal client survey. Two of the agencies, REST and AC, were designated as “essential service providers” and have stayed open during quarantine to provide shelter and basic needs.

Agencies have shifted to technology-based services and increased use of social media for outreach and communication with women. Many agencies had to physically close and baseline services such as drop-in hours are no longer available. Prior to the pandemic, agencies were using text messaging, Facebook, and other platforms, but now direct service contact is reduced or relegated to online meetings as well. Access to services for prostituted women is impeded under these

conditions when they do not have telephones, or access to the Internet or cannot pay their bill.

Agency staff made several observations on the impact of COVID-19 on the “track”—the name for known areas of street prostitution. According to direct service staff, women are in more jeopardy than ever before. Sex buyers are “sheltered in place” with their families and working from home during the day, thus limiting buyer traffic in the afternoons. But, the increase in evening buyer traffic has changed the dynamics of the track. As competition increases, “prices” decrease meaning women must see more sex buyers to meet their quotas set by third-party exploiters, which increases their exposure to the virus.

As the environment changes, staff report women are experiencing more physical and sexual violence from customers and as a result, they are seeing more women carrying firearms for protection. The men who are willing to buy sex in this environment are the same men who will take more risks and be more violent toward women. Sex buyers are emboldened by strategies to suppress the virus. Many states are releasing non-violent offenders and not arresting individuals for misdemeanors to avoid congregation in jails. Unwittingly, this may be contributing to increased violence against women by men who feel more invincible than usual from john stings (Helendi, 2020).

Service providers are observing a new population of women on the track who may have worked indoors but now are forced to the street by club closures or who could not survive from online work due to the competition caused by an explosion of pornography sites (Doubek, 2020; Helendi, 2020). Aurora Commons staff note that as many as 50% of the women on the track are new to the area.

Because of the competition for customers on the track, it is overall a more aggressive, violent, and unsafe environment. Diminished income often leaves women unsheltered because they still must pay their traffickers and they cannot pay for motel rooms. Agencies serving the homeless are booking motel rooms along the track to house the homeless as a preemptive measure. Frontline agencies that would buy motel rooms to house women are finding there are none available for them to keep women safer and to help them exit (Helendi, 2020).

Staff are also reporting an increased number of youths on the street who have lost school meals and do not feel safe at home (Doubek, 2020). Doubek noted that recruitment and grooming of youth from social media sites have increased.

Women who have exited prostitution are finding their stability and security in jeopardy and are returning to prostitution. Agencies serving sexually exploited adults report 88 -100% of women have lost jobs due to isolation orders and are not eligible for unemployment and other subsidies. One of the participating agencies, REST, surveyed 75 of its clients in March 2020 to inform their service focus through the pandemic. Of the women contacted, 51 responded to the survey. Seventy percent (36) had a place to live and were paying rent, but 81% (29) were in danger of losing their housing.

The women’s housing instability was the direct result of loss of income from legitimate employment. Of the women with a place to live, 50% (18) reported they could only pay part of their rent and 31% (11) said they would not be able to pay any rent for the following month (April 2020).

Of the 51 respondents, 27 were working, but 89% (24) were facing loss of income. By the end of March 2020, 48% of those working (13) had lost their jobs and 44% (11) had reduced hours. In all cases, the women had not worked enough hours to be eligible for unemployment.

The impact of the pandemic increased by April 2020; staff from REST anticipated worsening conditions for more clients who had successfully exited from prostitution. Of those responding, 25% (13) reported they had less than three days of food. Food insecurity, loss of income, and housing instability are core problems. One survivor told her advocate:

I have Covid. What resources do I have? I have to isolate, and I have no food. I can't feed my daughter. I can't get food stamps. I got a job and then was laid off. I can't get unemployment; I can't get work. I need food for my 9-month old daughter.

The agencies surveyed have received public and private funding, including client aid funds to directly support and help stabilize women. However, the costs of the pandemic are leading funders to shift their priorities. There is growing concern that funding will be reduced for staff and advocates who are essential to building the trust survivors need to support their exits. At the same time, agencies that supply shelter and emergency services are classified as “essential” and expected to stay open, keep adequate staff, and follow COVID-19 safety guidelines.

Prostitution and COVID-19 Risk

Prostituted individuals are on the edge of survival; their edge should sharpen our understanding of their inability to follow COVID-19 safety measures.

All the women are asking for had sanitizer, masks, and gloves, because they must prostitute to survive (Hightower, 2020).

As with other marginalized groups, social inequality increases vulnerability to COVID-19 as well as other diseases and affects their ability to follow public health guidelines (Ennis-McMillan, 2001). We have all been instructed to “shelter” in place, wash our hands, protect our immune system with rest and healthy food, and avoid close contact. These guidelines presume a level of stability and privilege that excludes the prostituted woman. For the homeless woman on the track in Seattle or San Francisco, or any of the thousands of similar streets and encampments across the country, it is all but impossible to protect herself. She likely did not have shelter or a place to wash or healthy food before the pandemic.

One of the ironies of the public health message to “isolate” is that prostituted women are one of the more isolated and stigmatized groups in our society. They have historically been denied services for many reasons including criminal status and misinformed beliefs that they are choosing prostitution. They are ineligible for safety net services such as unemployment or food stamps because of their legal status. Prostituted women have been denied public housing due to their criminal status and not included in homeless counts because of the assumption they would be able to pay for a place to stay (Boyer, 2009). These conditions increase their dependency on exploiters and prostitution for survival and decrease their ability to protect themselves. COVID-19 is showing how social inequalities increase the health risks for all of us, not just the “othered” group (Ennis-McMillan & Hedges,

2020). As said by staff from a participating agency, “What happens on the track affects the whole city” (Helendi, 2020).

Platform for Change

COVID-19 has dramatically changed our physical and emotional lives. Feelings of fear, sadness, and grief mix with hopeful moments when we see the goodness and ingenuity of the human spirit. These moments change our analysis of what is going on around us and help us question what is often accepted as normal.

Prostituted women are often not considered human; they are objects for exploitation who are constantly endangered by systematic violence, racism, and cultural indifference. We can do more to change those attitudes in the current environment because the times have opened minds to new analyses of old injustices. In the specter of the current and future pandemics, a few of these opportunities are:

- Recognition that social disparities lead to “hot spots” in disease spread and disproportionately affect the vulnerable;
- Increased engagement with marginalized communities to employ effective methods to communicate safety guidelines and mitigate spread;
- Repurposed funding priorities to address COVID-19 and to provide stability to vulnerable groups and social service agencies that serve them;
- Opportunities for opinion pieces describing invisible groups and the strategies and policy changes needed to protect individuals in these populations because “we are all in this together;”
- At decision-making levels, more opportunity for discussions on structural changes that need to be in place for long-term change; and
- At this time when the issue of racism is taking center stage in public discussions, opportunity for the relationship between racism and sexual exploitation of women and other marginalized groups to be heard.

Within this context, we can do more to educate on the fundamental disparities of sexually exploited women, the systematic abuse they suffer, and confront the myths that feed social indifference. We can also offer our solutions for lessening disparities with guarantees of housing, food, and income and for structural change with the adoption of the Nordic Model (Nordic Model Now, 2020).

Structural Change

In a recent editorial, survivors of prostitution proposed three priority areas for policy reform to address inequities and support exits: criminal justice reforms, fair employment, and standards of care (Hatcher, Bernard, Franklin, Morrissey, Jacobs, Jimenez, Hardy, Carson, Bell, Bender, Charleston, McKenzie & Carter, 2018). The authors provide a rationale for each “pillar” of reform from the perspective of survivors, which is an essential framework for those working for change. These pillars of reform are critical points for discussion on COVID-19 and addressing the disparities faced by women in prostitution and pornography. As advocacy moves forward in our altered world, we should prepare to advocate for the adoption of the Nordic Model and safety net services, and continue to confront the main themes that lead to cultural indifference: the questions of choice and decriminalization.

Advocate for Adoption of the Nordic Model

The Nordic Model (often referred to in the United States as the Equality Model) is a holistic approach to reduce demand for prostitution by decriminalizing prostituted individuals, criminalizing buyers, traffickers, and other third-party exploiters, supporting services for exiting the sex industry, and supports education of the public on the harms of the sex industry. The approach was developed in Sweden in 1999 and has been adopted by eight countries (Nordic Model Now, 2020).

The Nordic Model is a systemic approach to reduce disparities by decriminalizing prostituted and trafficked individuals, while supporting provision of services to maintain exits and ensure the real criminals and exploiters including buyers, and all third-party exploiters are held accountable with increased penalties. In the U.S., prostitution is a crime for adults in all states except for ten counties in Nevada (ProCon.org 2018). Thirty states plus Washington D.C. have moved to exempt minors from prosecution for prostitution (Shared Hope International, 2019; Boyer, 2013). In a pandemic, criminal status should not be a roadblock to safety. Fear of arrest will increase vulnerability to exploitation. The Nordic Model offers the social justice framework we need to lift women out of their position of inequality, poverty, and social disparities, through non-criminalization and services. As these arguments are made, it is important to underscore that none of this works unless basic needs, including income, are met.

Advocate for Safety Net Services

It is imperative in the context of a pandemic, that we squarely face the core causes of disease spread and advocate for standards of care and employment services to protect women and support exits to help them establish lives without fear of exploitation. We have learned from the HIV epidemic that cognitive interventions and education will not change risk behaviors unless individuals have basic needs met and the resources to comply (Abad, Baack, O'Leary, Mizuno, et al., 2015; Baral, Beyrer, Muessig, Wirtz, et al., 2012).

What are the core needs for prostituted women and youth; they are stable housing, food security, basic income, and health care. Individuals in prostitution and pornography must have real choices to survive; harm reduction methods of hand sanitizers and masks will not result in eliminating the harms they suffer or the marginalization and “othering” that bars them from basic resources and increases their risks.

It is time to make the case that prostituted people receive eligibility for basic services and needs provided to other marginalized and impoverished groups now in the pandemic and beyond. It is important for advocates to educate others on the consequences of criminal status of prostituted women. It blocks their access to medical care, subsidies such as food stamps, health care, social security, and Medicare, and disqualifies them for housing and jobs. Non-criminal status with the adoption of the Nordic Model would ameliorate these injustices and support exits.

Conclusion

Prostitution operates at the intersection of dispossessed women and privileged men and is an obvious crossing point for COVID-19. For women in prostitution and pornography, public health strategies will not release them from traffickers and buyers; they cannot protect themselves from the virus or the life-threatening conditions under which they live. Women in prostitution and pornography must

be included in the pandemic response for their well-being and everyone's safety. But the end of the pandemic will not end the daily rapes unless we take the opportunity now to implement structural changes needed to safeguard their futures and to end the abuses of the sex industry.

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