

PSYCHOSOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 ON SEX WORKERS: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Usha Rana

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr. Harisingh Gour Central University, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India

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Dear Editor,

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted human life and thrown it into turmoil, which has also brought several health risks for those struggling at the pandemic's sharpest end (Jakovljevic et al. 2020a). The severely affected countries confined their citizens at their homes by implementing nationwide lockdown as a strategy to halt virus transmission, which is resulted in drastically vandalization of the socio-economic structure of the society. Consequently, the rapid proliferation of COVID-19 cases has begotten consternation and mass hysteria among the public, which could potentially be responsible for several psychological problems (Jakovljevic et al. 2020b). Recent studies demonstrated that the global pandemic has not only devastated the world physically but also traumatized mentally. Therefore, it is the public and state responsibility to support and protect the rights of the most vulnerable groups of society.

Due to the given nature of sex work, sex workers are considered to be the most marginalized members. Precautionary measures, including physical distances, have led to the discontinuation of direct sex work worldwide that has possibly made the economically amphibian and frequently marginalized populations one of the most vulnerable to the infection. It has been observed that sex workers who are homeless or illegally migrated face more enormous challenges in receiving financial support or accessing health services. Along with existing health risks, severe mental health issues are emerged due to the fear of being infected and apprehension for income, housing, and food. Recent reports advocated implementing an immediate and necessary action plan for the prevention of the spread of the virus and protecting the rights of sex workers amid the pandemic (Global Network of Sex Work Projects 2020). There are few global reports provided in Table 1, which shows the contemporary condition of sex workers, and the state's responses towards this vulnerable group.

Sex workers live in constant fear of self-infection and spreading the virus to their families. Moreover, sex-workers have reported that are inundated by police fines, tortures, lack of aid by law enforcement, and compulsory deportation. Further, many sex workers are homeless; they work as street sex workers or have neither any shelter nor some savings to pay rented rooms. Adding to their burdens, sex workers who have

previously suffered from health related problems such as HIV, AIDs and other chronic diseases make them more vulnerable to the virus due to weakening of their immune systems. The risk is also heightened due the poor working environment, poor hygiene practices, not following simple precautions, poor existing health and the inability to access appropriate support from the state or their communities.

According to the study, sex workers from Asia, America, and Europe are living on the economic margins, and they have not been provided with support from their respective governments under programs such as the "pandemic response and recovery plans" because in many countries sex work is considered either illegal or criminalized directly or indirectly (International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe 2020). The consequence is the imposition of socio-economic inequity towards these marginalized groups, as well as denial of their human rights.

Without adequate support from the state or civil society, many of them may return to sex work prior to any solution of the COVID-19 pandemic either by medicine treatment or by vaccination. If they keep working without safety precautions they are at heightened risk of contracting the virus. It is evident from several reports that many sex workers have been compelled to return on work for income. Sex and intimate physical contact with their clients without any protection, increases their risk of procuring and disseminating COVID-19 infection to clients, themselves, and their families. A recent study confirmed the existence of coronavirus in man's semen, which can be transmitted to sex workers who do not practice safe sex.

Interestingly, one innovative approach to the sex industry to address the current crisis has been to transfer information online. Many organizations are creating decisive interventions by generating resources, supporting critical health conditions, and making sex workers aware of various precautions during their work (UNAIDs 2020). It is also recommended that government and non-government organizations increase help to protect sex workers from the dreaded COVID-19. Additionally, sex workers deserve dignity in society, equal rights, recognized employment, and education on safe sex practices. It is therefore crucial for the interest of broader society that sex workers be supported and enabled so that they do not become carriers of the virus or themselves become victims of this pandemic.

Table 1. A brief global representation of sex workers during the COVID-19 pandemic

Countries	Impacts of COVID-19	Government responses	Sources
Bangladesh	This causes psychological implications, as they fear for their next meal.	140,000 street sex workers are not receiving required financial support from the government	https://www.nswp.org/news/covid-19-impact-bangladesh
Belgium	After relaxation in lockdown, the demand for sex workers' services has palpably increased again, and Belgium is first who gave permission to reopen sex industry. But, sex workers are worried about being infected with themselves and their families and, on the other hand, financial requirements forcing them to return to work.	The sex workers have no right to receive compensation from the government under various pandemic relief package schemes	https://www.brusselstimes.com/all-news/belgium-all-news/107892/how-the-lockdown-is-impacting-belgiums-sex-workers/
Brazil	Despite prostitution being legal in Brazil, sex workers are struggling to receive government benefits. Many of them started to sell their services at a reduced price. More than 20,000 sex workers were affected in the city of Belo Horizonte alone by the COVID-19 outbreak	Sex workers are not receiving the required help from the state	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/21/if-i-dont-have-sex-ill-die-of-hunger-covid-19-crisis-for-rios-trans-sex-workers
Germany	The impact of pandemic left thousands of sex workers homeless after brothels was closed. Approximately 100,000 to 200,000 sex workers are allowed to work in the country, of which 80% are foreigners. Many of them were tried to return to their homes but closed borders, making it difficult. They are struggling for essential requirements	Prostitution is legal and regulated in Germany; during pandemic Germany government shut the brothels	https://www.telegraphindia.com/world/coronavirus-outbreak-germany-sex-workers-homeless/cid/1761856
Hong Kong	Sex workers are suffering from anxiety due to fear of being infected, but if they do not continue this, they would have to die from starvation. Moreover, female sex workers are scared to transmit the virus to their kids, but they have no other option	Sex workers didn't get support by nation	https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3080490/coronavirus-i-dont-want-infect-my-children-says-hong-kong-sex
India	More than 5000 sex workers are living in only Kamathipura red light area in the Maharashtra state. Due to the decline in client traffic, the sex workers struggle to make enough money for their survival. Therefore, most of them temporarily returned to their native place	Prostitutes are not covered under the pandemic relief fund	https://www.timesnownews.com/mirror-now/in-focus/article/covid-19-petrifies-sex-workers-in-mumbai-s-red-light-area-kamathipura-many-bid-adieu-to-prostitution/565314
Thailand	Thailand is well known for the sex industry and massage parlors, but now 300,000 sex workers are grappling for survival and are out of work. The nationwide lockdown has left them with no income, and they have been forced to live on the streets. After reopening the market sex workers are worried because most of their customers are foreigners and international borders are closed	Sex workers are not getting worth full support for the state	https://www.indiatimes.com/trending/social-relevance/covid-19-has-pushed-3-lakh-sex-workers-in-thailand-out-of-work-and-struggling-for-money-510164.html
USA	A million sex workers in the country have stopped working during past month as the demand for sex has fallen by around 80 percent. The savings of sex workers are rapidly dwindling, but they are not eligible for federally approved relief	Sex workers are not included under the government relief program	https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/04/23/excluding-those-sex-industry-covid-19-relief-is-mistake/
Zambia	The 76 sex workers have been tested positive for COVID-19. They have been asked by the government to help in tracing the people who have contracted coronavirus	No information	https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52604961

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Correspondence:

Usha Rana, MD

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr. Harisingh Gour Central University

Sagar-470003, Madhya Pradesh, India

E-mail: usharana21@gmail.com