



How the COVID-19 Crisis Is Hurting Sex Workers



Moira Wyton



Elsi Dawson is the first to admit she's one of the luckiest sex workers in Vancouver.

She's been in the sector for four years, but doesn't rely completely on the income. She has another job running a sex work advocacy organization.

So when she began to present symptoms consistent with COVID-19 early last week, she called 811 and followed the directions for self-isolating with the support of a partner and her savings.

And while she could do sex work online once she feels better, she has privacy concerns about people having recordings and photos of her.

"I'm in a lucky position where I can focus on being sick and dying properly right now, and maybe watching *Handmaid's Tale* as I drift in and out of consciousness," Dawson joked. "But I don't have to worry about where my next meal is coming from."

Dawson is waiting until the crisis has settled to start working again, but many sex workers don't have that luxury.

Sex workers in Vancouver are increasingly fearing for their livelihoods and personal health. COVID-19 has resulted in the closure of safer locations for dates. And concerns about transmission of the virus have slashed demand and workers' incomes.

The criminalization of the sector also leaves sex workers largely unable to claim government supports rolling out to others who have lost income due to the pandemic.

And advocates say the dire circumstances are pushing sex workers to take more dangerous appointments, risking their health and safety to secure their next meal.

"We're seeing more people willing to risk their health to feed themselves and their children and their families," said Susan Davis, a sex worker and executive director of the BC Coalition of Experiential Communities, a consortium of sex worker activists.

PACE Society, a Vancouver-based sex work advocacy and harm reduction organization, has already set-up a sex worker relief fund and had distributed over \$3,000 to sex workers in need by Tuesday. The society has also published a resource sheet for sex workers.

But many need more than one-time relief to stay afloat without working.

“Sex workers are trying to do their best to sit down, stay home, ride it out,” Dawson said. “But you might be looking at missing out on \$1,000-a-day in income.”

Survival sex workers and those who are street-based are most at risk as public spaces empty and options for date locations narrow.

It is estimated

there are up to 2,600 sex workers in Vancouver, and about 20 per cent of those do survival sex work. This means they do sex work to pay for rent, meals or drugs.

Massage parlours in Vancouver have been ordered to close and single-room occupancy hotels (SROs) have banned guests to limit the spread of the virus, removing safer spaces for the most at-risk sex workers to take dates.

“Sex workers are having to make riskier decisions about clients, or having to work in riskier locations like taking a car date, or a date in a park, or in a back alley,” said Kerry Porth, a sex work policy consultant for Pivot Legal Society. “There, it’s much more difficult to look after things like sexual health.”

Porth, who is also a former sex worker, has also heard of some street-based sex workers now taking dates in the daytime because there aren’t enough clients at night to maintain their income. And as they work in more isolated locations, the risk that they will experience violence increases.

Both sex workers and clients are acting to reduce their own risk of contracting the virus.

But that’s challenging for street-based sex workers. Davis says she is advising colleagues to avoid kissing for all dates. She also authored a [blog post](#)

noting ways to reduce risks like using a glory hole — a hole cut in a wall or plastic drop sheet — to work with male clients with limited contact.

While there is no evidence that COVID-19 can spread through sexual contact, it can spread through saliva and fluids from the nose and eyes.

The perception that sex workers are “unclean” is also fuelling cancelled dates.

Challenges like these have led to an increase in virtual services as more sex workers do webcam work or video dates to maintain their income.

Porth is preparing information on how to start setting up virtual dates and the best sanitizing and safety practices, but she acknowledged that it doesn’t help sex workers who don’t have computers or a private space to work.

And while workers laid off in other sectors are claiming unemployment benefits, the legal status of sex work means most survival sex workers don't have the proper paperwork to file for support. Sex work itself is legal in Canada, but it's illegal to purchase or advertise sexual services or be paid for support services.

Porth said the legal status undermines the workers' rights.

"I think it really does bring into stark relief the fact that sex work isn't recognized as work, and it should be," she said.

"Decriminalization would mean sex workers would have access to labour protections that everyone else takes for granted."

Porth, Dawson and Davis say the pandemic is a watershed moment for other labour movements and workers' rights.

It could also be an opportunity to counter the marginalization of sex work by decriminalizing it.

"Sex workers are on the fringe of society," said Dawson. "We forget about them when we think about the relief of everybody else."

But right now, many are still worried for the health and safety of their colleagues.

And for Davis, who became a sex worker during the early days of the HIV/AIDS crisis, the current epidemic is a reminder of what she has already seen her community go through.

"People are going to get desperate and start risking their health," she said, "just like they did then." 🤞