



BEYOND TRAFFICKING AND SLAVERY

## COVID-19 shines a red light on sex workers' lack of protection in Europe

European governments look the other way when we ask them how they will help sex workers survive the coming weeks and months. This has to change.

[International Committee On The Rights Of Sex Workers In Europe](#)

22 April 2020



**S**ex workers have been excluded from support packages developed by European governments in response to COVID-19. As a consequence, more and more sex workers are going to be forced into very difficult choices unless urgent action is taken. In response to this situation, the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe has developed a campaign website with a [Call for Action](#) based on the calls of national sex workers' rights organisations and organisations representing marginalised communities.

The webpage includes immediate and long-term demands of the sex worker movement, video interviews with sex workers' rights activists from many countries, and information about the impact of the pandemic on different sex worker communities. A hundred organisations, including some of the key European networks, have endorsed our call, which will be shared with European Commission, European Parliament and Council of Europe representatives.

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**‘What else am I supposed to do? I have no savings, my fridge is empty and my rent is due. I have to start working again.’**

**Marie**

After weeks respecting the strict confinement regulations in her rented apartment, Marie will break her isolation tomorrow and start booking clients online again. The state has left her no other options. In France, like in many European countries, lockdowns mean that only ‘essential workers’ can work. Everyone else should stay home - if they have one - and wait for the latest announcements.

For Lucia, respecting the confinement rule was difficult from day one. The hotel room she shares with two colleagues must be paid daily. She and her colleagues all

come from Latin America, and key information regarding COVID-19 was not available in Spanish. She only heard about the mandatory confinement from a local trans and migrant sex workers' organisation. The same organisation has helped to cover her hotel room, basic food, sanitiser and gloves through a community hardship fund. However, the funds available will soon be exhausted by need and circumstances.

The French government has not yet provided a meaningful answer to one fundamental question: how do they expect workers such as Marie and Lucia to make it through the pandemic? When sex workers' rights and community health organisations raise this question, the government responds by pointing to a programme to help workers 'exit prostitution'. This highly bureaucratic process comes with a monthly 330 euros, which is far below the basic solidarity income afforded to other citizens. Less than 300 women – from an estimated 40,000 sex workers – have accessed this programme since France criminalised sex workers' clients in 2016. Further complicating matters, most administrative centres are shut anyway, making it extremely difficult to access even this extremely limited support.

**The majority of the sex worker community in Greece, which includes undocumented migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, and transgender people, is ineligible to access government support.**

France is not the only country in Europe where sex workers are excluded from income substitution. Regardless of whether or not sex work is prohibited or regulated, a majority of sex workers are unable to access compensation. This is primarily because the vast majority of sex workers are migrants, often undocumented, and have no legal existence in the country where they work. Authorities work hard to find them when it comes to fines and arrests, but are not invested at all in finding them in order to offer support so that they can stop working and protect themselves. To take but one example, activists in the United

Kingdom report that raids, arrests and prosecutions targeting sex workers continue, despite the fact that the criminal justice system basically shut down in mid-March.

Another major barrier to accessing income substitution is that sex work is not recognised as work: most of the workers in the sex industry are informal workers, unable to access the safeguards provided for many other workers, such as sick pay and social benefits. Even in countries that have a legalised approach to sex work, the majority of sex workers cannot comply with repressive restrictions and remain in the informal and criminalised sphere. In Greece, for instance, only nationals with female sex markers in their documents are allowed to work in indoors venues. This means that the majority of the sex worker community, including undocumented migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, and transgender people without legal gender recognition were not deemed eligible to access government support.

The International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe's Call for Action demands attention to immediate needs, such as income and housing support, continued access to health services, and a moratorium on fines, arrests and prosecutions. In the longer term it demands a radical rethink of how states include and protect marginalised communities. Both are essential and unavoidable.

Income substitution is the most pressing but not the only need. The more fundamental issue is the social and economic exclusion of many communities, which has in turn been challenged by organisations and voices representing homeless people, LGBTIQ, undocumented migrants, and people who use drugs. For decades, these exclusions have been a shameful stain on a European project which promotes itself as defender of human rights and an embodiment of social fairness. Existing inequalities and exclusions are now becoming even more evident and urgent, since they also risk undermining public health responses to the pandemic.

Sex workers have been consistently excluded from crucial conversations regarding their work and welfare. Decisions are too often made about them without them. In this time of acute global crisis there is a pressing need for sex workers to finally be listened to and their demands implemented. Evidence based and progressive policies deemed unrealistic a few weeks ago – such as the release of prisoners or

the regularisation of undocumented migrants – have now taken place in different European countries. As our call demonstrates, the case for taking similar action to support sex workers in Europe is urgent and overwhelming.

**READ AND SIGN THE CALL TO ACTION**

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