




[sex work](#)

Coronavirus Killed the Sex Industry. Now Indonesian Sex Workers Are Coming Together to Survive the Pandemic.

They formed an organisation to fight for acceptance and survival.

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Roni* is not having much luck at his usual spot in North [Jakarta](#), a road usually bustling with honking cars that the pandemic has now rendered eerily silent. Even on a slow night, he would see at least a couple cars pull over to seek out his services.

“Business is slow,” he said with a half-hearted smile. Roni is a middleman for sex workers and clients in North Jakarta’s Mangga Besar area. The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) has shaken their industry to the core.

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“Sometimes we go nights in a row without any business,” the 40-year-old told VICE.

To keep food on the table, he moonlights as a motorcycle taxi driver, although he doesn’t make much. Stay at home orders and social distancing policies dealt a [significant blow to Indonesia’s informal economy sector](#). Despite being largely overlooked by economists, sex work generates a considerable amount of revenue. Before the pandemic, Indonesia’s sex work industry was estimated to generate [Rp5.5 trillion \(\\$369,375,418\) per month](#).

Although sex work is not explicitly illegal in Indonesia, brothels were frequently the target of police raids. But now, the virus is sex workers’ number one enemy.

“I get paranoid when I read news about the coronavirus. It’s like we’re fighting an invisible enemy,” said Susan* a Central Jakarta sex worker with a bubbly personality and an infectious laugh.

“You have to make me look pretty [in the photo], even if half my face is covered,” she joked.

Susan arrived in Jakarta from West Sumatra in 2010 and started working in a karaoke bar. When the business went under, she turned to sex work.

In her 10 years as a sex worker, Susan has been taken into custody of the local Department of Social Affairs, experienced violence from her customers, and been the target of threats many times.

But the ongoing pandemic, Susan admitted, is the toughest challenge she has faced so far.

[Coronavirus](#)

How Sex Workers Are Dealing with Coronavirus

DJANLISSA PRINGELS

03.24.20



“Usually, in a single night, we would get at least two or three customers. Lately, it’s been zero,” she said. “I sold off most of my belongings; my rings and necklaces. And that only lasted me a few days.”

One of her relatives from the neighbouring city of Tangerang offered to take her in, but Susan refused. She did not want to be a burden or risk spreading the disease to their family. Instead, she chooses to continue working as usual, albeit with increased precautions.

“Some people out there must be horny,” she said.

“Basically, they have to take a shower before we ‘get into it.’ I’m not taking any risks. I always have hand sanitiser around. If a customer is visibly sick, I have to turn him away,” said Susan.

Susan charges Rp500,000 (\$33.52) for a single session with her. But Rp200,000 (\$13.41) goes to the hotel and the middleman, leaving her only Rp300,000 (\$20.11). Taking in seven customers per week allowed her to live comfortably before the pandemic without having to take out any loans.

Other sex workers in Susan’s circle are facing the same struggle, especially those who appear in showrooms, a place where sex workers solicit their services away from the streets. Unlike Susan, who goes out on the streets independently, these women operate under the supervision of a pimp.

Showroom sex workers are often younger. Although customers pay more for their services, the women receive a smaller cut of only Rp150,000 (\$10.06).

“I feel bad for them. I’m a bit luckier because in a way, I work for myself. Those girls in the showroom make less money, and now we’re in a pandemic,” said Susan.

The global sex work industry is on the verge of collapse due to social distancing guidelines.

In India, thousands of sex workers are also struggling to make ends meet. In Germany, where sex work is recognised as a profession by law, brothels have been forced to shut their doors.

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Some sex workers decided to take their services to the internet. In the United States, websites like OnlyFans and ManyVids allow sex workers to stream videos and maintain a relatively steady income.

Meanwhile, In Indonesia, sex workers who solicit online could face jail time under the anti-pornography clause of the country’s Cyber Law Act.

“We’d love to make money online, but we’re afraid,” said Susan.

Due to the social stigma they face, Indonesian sex workers are now increasingly relying on each other. A group of sex workers founded the Indonesian Organisation for Social Change (OPSI), which empowers and advocates for sex workers nationwide through training programs and reproductive education.

Amid the current pandemic, the organisation is employing sex workers to sew masks as a source of income.

“This non-profit organisation is by sex workers and for sex workers,” said Lia Andriyani, OPSI’s national coordinator. “If we don’t unite, who will give us the time of day?”



Andriyani recalled when OPSI's head office became the target of a mob of angry people in January 2019, following the spread of rumours that the organisation was run by the mafia. The crowd forced OPSI staff to the local police station, where authorities confirmed that it was a legitimate and legal organisation.

“That was one of the worst experiences we’ve ever faced. We’re seen as synonymous with immorality,” Andriyani told VICE.

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OPSI doesn't work alone. The organisation collaborates with Atma Jaya Catholic University and the Academy of Health Sciences to create an “alternative economy” for sex workers.

“The ‘alternative economy’ includes everything from unionised cooperatives to jointly-operated shops. The universities we collaborate with provide opportunities for sex workers to learn almost anything, from photography to cosmetology,” said Andriyani.

Andriyani believes that sex workers must have skill sets outside their profession.

“With aging, there comes a time when sex workers no longer make as much money as they did before. That’s why they must possess other skill sets,” Andriyani explained.

Although sex work is technically legal in Indonesia, the profession is largely frowned upon by society. Sex workers often face a new set of challenges when they decide to move on from the profession, gender and human rights expert Tunggal Pawestri told VICE. The stigma of “immorality” clings to them wherever they go. Word gets out, and then no one wants to give them loans or buy their products

“It all goes back to the negative social stigma. Society views their profession as going against morals and norms. That follows sex workers wherever they go,” said Pawestri.



When a lokalisasi, a government-regulated sex work complex, in Malang was shut down in 2014, the local government provided sex workers with a place to start small businesses. They opened a snack bar but did not have any customers.

“People would say, ‘don’t buy from those lonte [a derogatory term for sex workers],’” said Andriyani.

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That was a huge mental blow to the former sex workers, and many of them went back to their old profession, Andriyani added.

When the Indonesian government launched a social safety net program designed to help vulnerable citizens get back on their feet during the pandemic, a majority of sex workers were excluded because they travelled to larger cities to work.

“The allocation of government aid is based on domicile. In Jakarta, only those whose ID cards are registered in Jakarta will receive aid. Many sex workers migrated from out of town,” Andriyani explained.

The Indonesian sex work industry became decentralised following the government’s 2019 “Free Indonesia From Lokalisasi” campaign, allowing the government to shut down sex work complexes.

The shutdown of hundreds of lokalisasi nationwide left sex workers to fend for themselves. It also made it difficult for NGOs to compile data on Indonesian sex workers. This lack of information means that sex workers can no longer be the target of government aid, especially since their activities are now decentralised.

A joint study between OPSI and Atma Jaya University’s HIV/AIDS research centre found that the closure of lokalisasi only made it more difficult to observe and regulate the sex work industry. The campaign also weakened the government’s HIV/AIDS response, which, like the allocation of pandemic aid, is location-based, making it inaccessible to most sex workers who migrated from other cities.

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Without places for sex workers to congregate, they’ve become more persecuted. Because many sex workers have been forced to solicit on the street, law enforcement can arrest them for “disturbing public order” or “causing unrest.”

Pawestri, the gender and human rights expert is now actively working to increase sex worker visibility in the government, so that they can receive help in times of need. She said the negative social stigma surrounding sex workers must be addressed.

“We all have the same standing in the eyes of the constitution. We’re all equal,” Pawestri said.

As Andriyani and Pawestri noted, that change starts with tearing down society’s misconceptions about the industry.

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At the very least, sex workers should be able to access government aid during these trying times. The pandemic has killed their primary source of income, rendering them even more marginalised than before.

“I don’t need a ton of money. I just want people to treat us like they would anyone else,” said Susan. “I just want to be seen as human.”

**Names have been changed to protect their identities.*

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All photos by Hafitz Maulana. Check out his work [here](#).

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