

WORLD NEWS

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Streetwalkers to sweet talkers: Chile's sex workers shift online amid virus lockdown

Aislinn Laing

SANTIAGO (Reuters) - When the nightclub in which she touted for business in southern Chile was shut down by the authorities as the new coronavirus Camila Hormazabal was left without access to her sole source of income.



Camila Hormazabal, a 24-year-old sex worker, uses laptops to connect to the web and keep an online erotic meeting with a virtual customer in Concepcion, Chile April 7, 2020. Hormazabal re services online after the nightclub where she had worked was closed due to the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Picture taken April 7, 2020. REUTERS/Juan Gonzalez

The heavily-tattooed 24-year-old had been picking up clients in the downtown bar in Concepcion for four years, making around \$715 a month. Over disappeared.

With no way to pay her bills, Camila switched to video calls conducted from her high-rise apartment bedroom, and asked her regulars to meet her on

"The calls bring in something, obviously it's not the same and the money is not even what it would have been on a bad day before but it's something, phone.

Camila is one of the thousands of sex workers worldwide left in a precarious position after the very intimacy that defines their work was thwarted by measures.

From Singapore to Germany to Mexico, sex workers have been left without an income, and often without a home.

In Chile, more than three quarters of the country's estimated 60,000 sex workers are sole earners and have at least one dependant, said the Margin F provides the workers with social, legal and emotional support.

With an urgent need to replace lost income, many have switched to online services, offering their clients video calls, erotic photographs, and videos i

Older prostitutes who were not technologically literate have been trained up by a younger generation of largely middle-class women who finance uni selling online sex, according to the Margin Foundation.

"We call them 'the virtuals', and some can make a lot of money," said Herminda Gonzalez Inostroza, 59, a former nightclub dancer who now acts as t spokeswoman.

"They're teaching others over WhatsApp how to get into it, how to find clients, how to set up an account to charge credit cards, how to sort a webcar

"For the women over 45, it's not easy but you can always learn."

Relax Chile, a website offering both adult content and a meeting place for prostitutes and clients, said almost all of its accounts had replaced offers o online entertainment. While that meant the loss of some clients, it opened doors to others from abroad, a spokesman said.

Previous to the coronavirus outbreak, a nighttime curfew intended to quell violence associated with months of intense protests over social inequality difficult for traditional street walkers in Chile, the spokesman added.

While sex work itself is not illegal in Chile, hosting sex work is, meaning the trade remains in limbo.

FOOD PARCELS

Inostroza said a small handful of women were still risking physical encounters with clients.

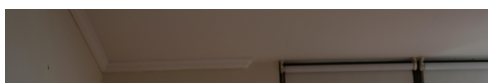
"Their regulars are asking them to meet up and they don't want to risk losing them and have bills to pay," she said. "They are doing it with masks, glc for 10, 15 minutes, no more."

Camila, who sometimes dons a neon pink face mask in her videos to remind clients of the importance of sanitary measures, said most of her custom of her move online.

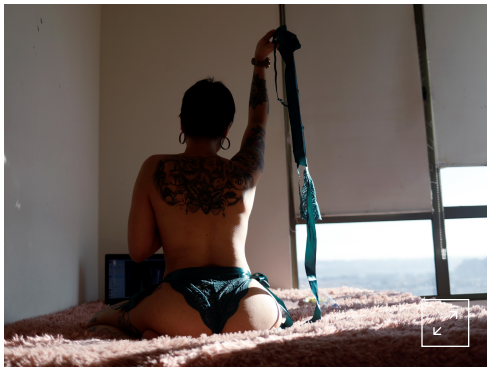
"Obviously some of them still wanted hook-ups but I tell them that would be irresponsible on my part and theirs," she said.

Inostroza said sex workers fell through holes in social safety nets because around a third were undocumented foreigners, while others were too afraid investigation by government agencies to request one of the recently-announced hardship payments offered to those left destitute by the pandemic.

The Margin Foundation handed out 60 food parcels in March and 100 in April to women working in the sex industry who had children to support, sh



The March parcels were funded by some of the clients of the more successful said, along with the workers themselves.



Slideshow (10 Images)

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