

## Coronavirus: How do sex workers keep safe during pandemic?

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BBC Wales News

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Coronavirus pandemic



**A charity has changed the way it works to keep sex workers at home during the coronavirus pandemic.**

Safer Wales has been running the StreetLife project since 2005, aimed at helping woman trapped in prostitution.

Chief executive Bernie Bowen-Thomson said: "We recognised that the essential outreach work we do shouldn't come to an abrupt halt because of Covid-19, but had to move to a virtual form."

The Cardiff-based charity has seen a 69% rise in its dealings with women.

Safer Wales said the introduction of lockdown measures left clients faced with the difficult choice of self-distancing with no income or continuing to carry out sex work at a risk to their own and others' safety.

Ms Bowen-Thomson said: "This is a heartbreaking choice for women to have to make, it's essential that these women get the support they need to stay at home."



HUW JOHN, CARDIFF

In the first four weeks of lockdown, Safer Wales delivered 60 individually prepared meals and 10 mobile phones, with a further 13 on order.

The charity said this was vital to ensure women could access support and information and also helped women to know "they are not alone, even though we may not be physically close."

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## 'In those few minutes, they could still give you the virus'

One woman based in south Wales has been doing this kind of work for a year. It is her only source of income.

She is now offering her services online only, but said men still pressure her to meet her in person.

"They still ask if I'm doing meet-ups, and when I say 'no' they just say 'please, it'll only take a few minutes'. But in those few minutes, they could still give you the virus."

She carries out a fetish called financial domination, which involves taking money from men as a form of sexual domination. She also sometimes carries out physical acts. She said depending on the week, she could meet about two men a day.

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But during the lockdown she is urging other women in her position not to meet clients for these kind of services.

"Stop. Please just look after yourself, you don't know how clean they are, you just don't know them. Just be careful. Please."

She is now using online platforms, including a site where users can sell explicit photos and videos.

In a statement, the website said it had seen a big increase in people using the platform during lockdown.

"We welcomed over 140,000 content creators during February and March 2020. This is more than five times the amount than during the same period in 2019."

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One Cardiff escort agency, which has temporarily closed, said it still received daily enquiries from new prospective clients.

It said a "minority of professional full-time escorts are still working independently in Cardiff".

It added: "I can assure you that most of these escorts will not stop working during the pandemic as without income from escort work they would simply be unable to survive i.e. food, bills, rent etc."

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BBC Wales has found evidence of some men and woman advertising online to meet during lockdown for sexual services.

We found adverts online that specifically highlighted it would be during the lockdown period in Wales.



One man based in Cardiff told us he was looking for sex with someone outside of his marriage. We asked the man, who wanted to stay anonymous, if was looking to meet someone during lockdown.

He told us: "If they have been sensible with distancing I would consider meeting them - but only after a lengthy chat/vetting period."

A Welsh Government spokesman said: "We recognise people exploited by the sex industry may be forced to continue to work on the streets and the risks may be higher as the streets are emptier."

"There is help available for those who wish to leave the industry, including support from a number of Welsh charities.

"We urge those supporting sex workers to continue to do so, but to ensure they maintain social distancing and hygiene measures."

It pointed out the **Live Fear Free helpline and website**, which provides impartial support for all victims, including those exploited by the sex industry.

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