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UK sex workers in 'dire and desperate' need amid coronavirus lockdown

Some sex workers still see clients to make ends meet, while charities report rise in suicide attempts

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Sex workers in “dire and desperate” circumstances across the UK are continuing to see clients during the lockdown, potentially exposing themselves and others to coronavirus, according to charities and sex worker organisations.

“We are facing a massive crisis,” said Niki Adams from the English Collective of Prostitutes. “No one wants to be flouting the rules and putting themselves and others in danger, but those who are still working literally have no other choice.”

On one adult website, there were 800 sex workers across the UK “available to book” on Thursday, with approximately 150 of those in London. Adams said that many of those would not be working, but would be using the site to keep their profiles active in the hope that potential customers could be persuaded to pay for phone or cam sex. But others had not stopped work because they had no other income, no savings or had returned to work when rent and bills were due.

“We need immediate emergency cash payments to these women who at this moment have nothing to eat. We know who these women are, and we need to help them now, not in several weeks’ time,” she said.

Sasha*, a mother of two, had been working in a parlour three days a week while her children were in school, earning between £40 and £70 a day. Now the 33-year-old says she has no work. She has applied for universal credit but when it arrives it will not cover her rent. “I have tried so hard to put some money by, but every week every penny gets used for one emergency or another so I have no savings,” she said. “I spend my whole day anxious. There is no let-up [...] I feel like I am living by a thread.”

Last week the all-party parliamentary group on prostitution and the global sex trade urged the home secretary to safeguard sex workers in the UK, saying that a sudden lack of access to support services and income left them uniquely vulnerable. “We are [...] hugely concerned that when the exploiters are unable to use the women to make money because of coronavirus, the women’s lives literally become worthless to them,” they wrote.

A spokesperson for Beyond the Streets, which supports street sex workers in east London as part of its work, said many of the women the charity worked with struggled to apply for universal credit, because they had no access to email and phones were regularly sold.

While the charity’s usual focus was improving women’s futures, it was now simply trying to stop their lives becoming worse. One woman had described her fear of daily visits to the hospital to get methadone and of other people bringing infection into her hostel. She said food donations to the hostel had stopped, and when she spoke to the charity she had not eaten for days.

Helena Croft, executive director of Streetlight, said the charity had seen an increase in suicide attempts among women using its service since the lockdown began. “For drugs users in prostitution it has tipped some over the edge because they are utterly desperate and cannot get access to drugs,” she said. “This situation is dire, it is desperate and the longer it goes on the more difficult it becomes.”

She urged the men buying sex to heed government advice and stay at home. “If someone is turning up at a woman’s door, they are making that choice. The women are putting themselves at more more risk through potentially seeing more people – but many have no other choice. No one is forcing anyone to go out and buy sex.”

‘Living by a thread’: Sasha*, 33

For the past year Sasha*, who has two children and lives in Lewisham, has been working in a parlour as a sex worker while her children were in school. “The extra money was what kept me afloat,” she says. “I couldn’t afford luxuries but it meant that I had food in the fridge and the kids weren’t just eating bread and jam. When they started speaking about a virus I didn’t think about what it would mean. Then the customers stopped coming.”

The parlour where the 33-year-old worked closed two weeks ago. Like many mothers, she cannot work from home. “I thought about camming but how can I do that when I have children at home?,” she says. She has applied for universal credit but when the payment arrives, it will not be enough to cover her rent.

“As the bills come in I stack them up on a shelf and try to forget about them. I spend my whole day anxious. There is no let-up. I have the worry of the children, the worry of my mother who is old and on her own, the worry of my sister who has mental problems. I feel like I am living by a thread - I am exhausted and scared for our future.”

**Names have been changed*

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