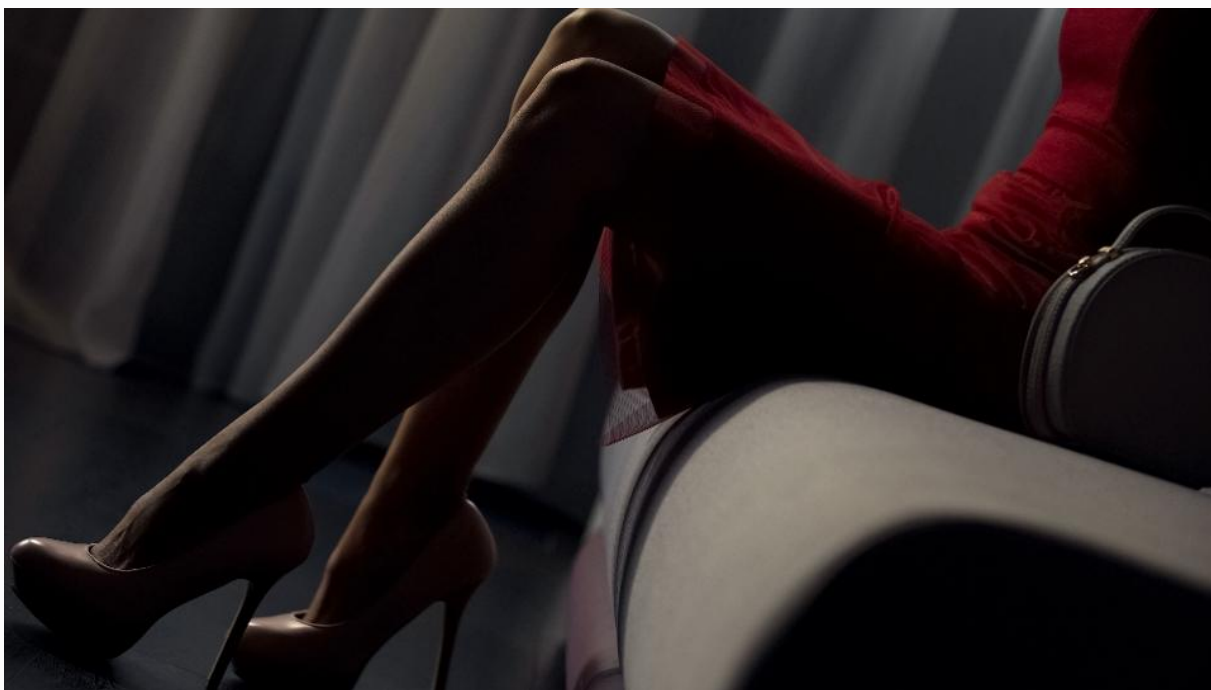


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A Sex Worker Reveals How The COVID-19 Pandemic Has Changed Sex Work

**Susannah Breslin** Senior Contributor ⓘ

Vices



The COVID-19 has radically transformed the landscape of sex work. GETTY

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, a veteran sex worker—we'll call her [Anonymous Was a Woman](#)—has found the landscape of sex work radically transformed. Based in a “smaller city” and in her early 30s, Anonymous has done a range of different types of sex work, including escorting, most of her adult life.

“A few years ago, I went from full-time to part-time, and I have been working towards ‘retiring’ for good so that I can shift fully into the work that

I've wanted to do," she says, "but it looks like that timeline is *way* different now!"

Here, she explains how the coronavirus has changed her work and her income, how the perfect storm for sex workers was brewing before the coronavirus began spreading, and what we lose when we lose sex workers and the services that they provide.

Susannah Breslin: How has the pandemic impacted sex work?

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Anonymous Was a Woman: Every sex worker I know is struggling right now. Everyone is out of work and trying to figure out how to scrape together what they can, either by moving into other types of sex work or other side hustles, but I don't know anyone who's found something sustainable. People are trying to get access to the "safety nets," not that it's enough anyway, but things like unemployment insurance aren't made for us. Sex work is the safety net. For my work, because I'm in a smaller city, I would either travel to see clients, or they see me when they travel for work, so that income is gone.

Breslin: For escorts, the business was already on shaky ground, due to [FOSTA-SESTA](#). Did the combination of FOSTA-SESTA and the pandemic create a kind of perfect storm for sex workers?

Anonymous: It did for a *lot* of people. Immediately after the sites went down, it was a scramble to figure out how to advertise. There's an assumption that sex work is really easy, and you just find another site and go back to normal, but that's so far from the case. Every time you post in a

new place, there's risks. You have to figure out where your clients are looking, you have to send personal information into a black hole of people you hope don't extort you, and even the sites I was used to changed policies and made it harder to post. Even a year later, people are still struggling. I don't know if it's a perfect storm, but it's a gut punch when we were already doubled over.

Breslin: Can you quantify the drop in income that sex workers are experiencing?

Anonymous: It looks different for everyone, but it's pretty extreme. I'm making almost nothing from sex work right now. I have some guys I've been seeing for years who are great, and have reached out to check in and sent me a little bit of help, which I'm really grateful for. I don't know anyone who's still making a living from sex work right now. I know there are people who were primarily online before—cam performers, phone sex operators—but all my friends were doing in-person work.

Breslin: How have sex workers responded, and how effective are those strategies?

Anonymous: Some of my friends have tried to move online, or change up their online presence, but it's really difficult. It's not just about setting up an OnlyFans and watching your bank account explode. Just because there are a lot more people watching porn does not mean there are a lot more people looking for something where you have to participate. It's a whole different kind of marketing to make money doing that, and I know for myself that I am *bad* at virtual sex work. I also know people who have kids who are home now, or roommates who don't know what they do. People are trying, but it's really hard.

The other big thing I have seen is there is such an outpouring of support from the sex work community. I don't think people realize that there's an incredible sex worker community, not just individuals. A lot of mutual aid

funds popped up, and those have been really powerful, and people are trying to figure out how to keep doing outreach and offer each other support. Sex workers have always supported sex workers when no one else will—which is pretty often. It's a whole community of people who are hurting in different ways, but it doesn't mean those bonds go away.

Breslin: Are clients still seeking out dates or are they too anxious to book?

Anonymous: Some clients are still reaching out, but very few. I have friends who don't have the option to say no to a client right now, so they're taking all the precautions they can and just taking the risk, just like other workers. My clients aren't booking and most of them are home and can't do anything online. It's not just that there's a health risk, though that's a big part of it, but their circumstances have changed, and they can't get away for a few hours right now. The only client who has reached out aggressively is someone I blacklisted who hits me up when something serious happens—like FOSTA/SESTA—and he thinks I'll be desperate for cash. I haven't responded, and I hope it doesn't get to that point.

Breslin: How are sex workers, who already expend an enormous amount of often unpaid emotional labor, managing their mental health through this crisis?

Anonymous: That's a great question. Everyone is doing their best? I think it's the same as everyone else—Zoom happy hours, phone calls to friends, offering space and making an effort to check in. One thing that's really nice about having so many friends who are sex workers—especially now that we're all a little older and been at this for a minute!—is that I'm surrounded by people who know how to show love and care, and are comfortable doing that labor. One thing that's hard is that a lot of people I know are in the sex industry because we have health needs that we have to prioritize, both physical and mental, which means that it's a health crisis on an economic crisis draped in existential dread, and just like everyone else, the things we've been using to manage our needs are all of a sudden out of reach. One

complicated thing that's really on my mind these days is that watching people get really sick and losing people has been so painful—mourning alone and together is strange. Sadly, we're a community who is not new to remembering and mourning. I both wish we were not, and I'm glad that's not something I have to learn how to do right now.

Breslin: What's it been like for you personally to navigate your way through this?

Anonymous: It's been hard. The hardest part is to watch everyone around me struggling and feel like there's so little we can do. I have been donating and asking other people to donate and trying to do mutual aid, but it feels like spitting on a house fire. For my work, it's been a serious hit financially and knowing that this is going to last far longer than we thought a few months ago is really getting to me. I have some savings and some income which isn't going to last much longer, so I'm trying to figure out how to start working again. I'm not quite ready to think about how it's going to feel knowing I was so close to transitioning out, but I know that's going to be really hard. And as much as I was ready to stop, it was a job of human connection and care work, so the isolation is palpable.

Breslin: Sex workers in popular culture are often seen by the public in one of two ways: 1) The Cinderella Fairy Tale, as seen in "Pretty Woman," or 2) the street corner prostitute, as seen in, say, HBO's "Hookers at the Point." The public tends to not see sex workers as human beings. What do you want people to see and understand about the real lives of sex workers during the pandemic?

Anonymous: I really hope those people are heading to meat packing plants—with masks—and asking the people who work there if they feel empowered right now. No other profession has to justify itself by performing these very polar opposite experiences and to bleed all of the complexity and nuance that is very human out of our lives. If I can convey anything, it's that having these two stories is contributing to a culture which

dehumanizes sex workers. It's not passive, and it's not neutral, and it makes lives harder. Not letting sex workers be whole people means we're more isolated from everyone, and we have to constantly swallow that dehumanization. It hurts. Seeing and understanding the lives of sex workers is a privilege to be earned, and it takes recognizing one's biases and doing the work to create a safe, nonjudgmental space where people can share. I would also want people to understand that it's truly worth it to do so.

Breslin: What do you forecast for the future of sex work in a post-pandemic world?

Anonymous: I really don't know, which scares me the most. Things are going to be different in a lot of ways, and some things are going to stay the same. But I think one thing to keep in mind is that a lot of things are going digital, and a lot of more mainstream tech spaces are very hostile to sex workers. Everyone knows someone who has had Paypal shut down their account and take the money. Everyone has dealt with Twitter or Instagram closing your account or flagging something and having no idea what about it caught their attention. The history of technology is that sex builds it, and then becomes the sacrificial lamb of it. And when it's still legal to fire people because they were once sex workers, it's terrifying to think about how long these websites are holding your pictures or information, and trying to think about who's going to find it. The only thing I'm certain of is that people are going to get really creative, and that it's going to be painful for a long time.

Breslin: When we lose sex workers and what they provide, what do we lose?

Anonymous: I have had a really large range of clients in my years working. There's something really safe and important about having a place to be vulnerable, and sometimes that needs to be with someone who isn't part of your personal life. Like everyone else, I've been listening to lots of podcasts and I'm hearing those ads for why right now it's important to have a therapist who can hold space for you, and everyone in your personal life is

trying to hold it together and doesn't have the spoons to give you that space. [Sex work is] a space focused on your personal, intimate needs and sometimes desire to connect to another person without the expectation for reciprocating that kind of care or navigating when your needs are not aligned. For a lot of people, seeing a sex worker is holding that space of vulnerability—plus escapism and fun. I have clients I've seen through hard times, many of whom carry a lot of responsibility in work and in their personal lives, and I got to be the one person where they could say: "I'm having a hard time, and all I want is to not think about that for a while." Who *doesn't* need that right now?

I hope we don't miss the opportunity to reclaim our imaginations and build the world of our dreams. The worst thing that can happen out of all of it is for us to go back to an economy and status quo that wasn't working for people, especially folks of color, queer people, people with disabilities, migrants, parents, students, people with records ... most of us, really. We all deserve better.

This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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I cover the business of sex. I've written for The Atlantic, Harper's Bazaar, Slate, Salon, and The Daily Beast. In 2008, TIME named me one of the year's best bloggers....

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