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Sex Work During COVID-19: The Perspectives of Sex Workers in Berlin and New York City





Published by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, New York Office, December 2020

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With support from the German Foreign Office.

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The View from Berlin

Fighting for Money and Dignity: Sex Work in Berlin

By Akynos

In Germany, and many parts of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic highlights just how much sex workers are being held accountable for keeping this crisis under control, even when they aren't the ones responsible for it. As we witness the penis-measuring contest that is taking place on the political landscape in countries like the United States, where people are being allowed to get sick and die for the sake of "saving the economy," the whorephobic, xenophobic, transphobic, racist and classist attack on sex workers persists.

Coronavirus has threatened professions and livelihoods all across the board. From the arts to retail, who and what society views as essential to life has shifted. One thing has remained constant: that society hates women and anyone who doesn't present as acceptable within the cis-hetero respectability gaze. Especially when those women and all others who even present as such, work in an arena where they often earn more than men. This is especially true when the work being done is what most civilians assume should be granted freely to the patriarchy. Despite the relentless cry that prostitution or sex work in general is "the oldest profession," the dominant, patriarchal discourse still refuses to acknowledge this labor as

an actual profession. This denial keeps sex workers perpetually vulnerable, even in Germany, where the legal climate that is considered more “favorable” to the industry.

Sex workers across the world are facing financial loss, homelessness and having to put their lives at risk since governments have left much of this population out of financial relief packages or denied sex workers the right to work, even when similar establishments were allowed to continue business. This kind of stigmatization and undermining of this work and those that perform it opens the doors for scammers, rapists and thieves to attempt to violate sex workers.

In a calculated effort to turn back the clock to the time before sex work was legalized in 2002, German lawmakers labeled sex workers as “super spreaders” of COVID-19 when they were trying to convince themselves and the public that the closing of brothels and strip clubs and banning private full-service sex work should persist --even as other industries were allowed to reopen. The full-service sex work industry was the last to be allowed back in business; a direct result of whorephobia, sexism and ignorance.

During the pandemic, sex worker communities have had to push their mutual aid efforts. Many sex workers were facing financial distress from the loss of clients and the influx of online workers, which made it impossible for many entertainers to make a decent living. It should be of no surprise that many of these workers are women, trans and non-binary people and immigrants who are often Black.

These financial struggles were not caused by COVID_19, though. This industry, and the people involved in it, needs not only a new outlook on how to legally protect its workers, but a destigmatization campaign. The disregard for these professionals corresponds to an uptick in criminals who seek to prey on industry workers—taking advantage of the loopholes many legal models of sex work don’t consider.

It is important to differentiate between the criminals who prey on the industry workers and the clients who actually have respect for the business and the workers who are providing them a service. As a thief who poses as a buyer in a store is not considered a customer, we should not consider someone who robs a sex worker a client.

These criminals begin to appear posing as respectable clients who will push boundaries hoping that workers desperate to make a dollar will give in to their demands. The government is directly to blame for this influx

of potential criminal activity when they refuse to include sex workers in their financial planning or how they make laws during a pandemic, which, because of our capitalist system, forces people to work even when it is not safe to do so.

In Berlin, the common complaint of full-service providers is that the demands for unprotected sexual services have risen greatly. Some workers do feel pressure to agree to this demand, or at the very least, have begun considering taking these risks because demand for their services has been so low, even though unprotected commercial sex is illegal in Germany. This is also directly connected to how the law does nothing to protect sex service providers from these kinds of abusive tactics. Abuses that can be experienced by every kind of worker under capitalism when a crisis is present.

Stealing from adult entertainers is nothing new, especially in the strip club and brothel scenes. Moreover, the pandemic has illuminated how capitalism forces every company to force workers to work more for less pay, and under more dangerous conditions. However, because of stigma and capitalistic designs to divide workers, many people in the broader labor movement do not stand in solidarity with sex workers. This means that the abuse and violence in this industry is as heightened as it is disregarded during the pandemic.

Working conditions for dancers have gone from bad to worse. Strip club owners in Berlin are getting away with exploiting their workers and violating labor laws. Before the pandemic, dancers would receive 30 euros per shift, but owners have not been paying this since reopening, citing the need to “recover” from financial loss.

Along with the loss of the meager shift pay, which equated to less than 5 euro per hour, dancers are getting ripped off in other ways that are hard to legally challenge. Before the COVID-19 restrictions were put in place, owners were already pushing the limits by having too many dancers on shift, sometimes up to 25 on a weekday, up from 10. This decreased average earnings from 200 euro a night, which some dancers were making, to 100 euros per 8-hour shift. On a weekend the club could be packed with up to as many as 40 dancers per shift, which pushes the earning potential much lower.

When restrictions lifted, management forbade dancers from accepting cash tips (ostensibly in the name of safety), and actively sought to punish those who accepted them. One dancer was set up by a friend of one of the

owners for accepting a tip and was fined double the price of the tip she accepted. Owners have been known to go backstage into the dancers wallets and check to make sure they did not receive any tips.

Dancers are being forced to work even when there are more dancers than there are patrons. In one club, where they used close at 4:00 am if patronage was slow, they have now implemented a “three customer” rule. This means if there are at least three customers in the club they will remain open until closing time (6:00 AM). It doesn’t matter if there are 15 dancers in the club, or if the customers are not spending money, the dancers must stay. The punishment for leaving is losing your already meager shift pay or potentially losing your job, depending on the mood of management, who are typically violent toxic men.

To top off the financial and systematic violence sex workers have to endure, there is the lack of respect for social distancing and mask wearing. Workers are now at a heightened risk of contracting coronavirus because management could care less if masks are worn or not. Some dancers have complained that the masks ruin their make-up so why take the risk of losing half your face in a mask that should be changed every few hours anyway?

German law says that if you are sick you are allowed to take off three days of work, but club owners make up their own rules. They will fine dancers if they don’t supply a doctor’s note. This is a contradiction to the freelance nature of the business: these workers are not obligated to explain why they aren’t working. However, where laws leave people vulnerable, shady club owners take advantage.

These legalized pimps know that the choices of many of the people in this industry are slim. Many of these women are migrants who don’t have the proper paperwork to legally work and travel. This also means that they did not receive the 5,000 euro financial relief that was distributed in the earlier stages of the pandemic in Germany. In one brothel, Thai workers are being exploited by their boss by earning approximately 25 euro per client, while management takes the other half.

The fear that intercourse can spread COVID-19 faster than a hairdresser, nail tech or someone working in the medical field who then goes home to their family after a long shift of working with COVID-19 patients, is stigmatizing, whorephobic rhetoric. It also assumes that industry professionals are seeing a large number of clients, which is typically not the case for most of the people who work in the industry. If anything, the strip club, or

even a socially acceptable massage space such as a spa, would see more foot traffic in one day, than any full-service sex worker would all year.

Brothels saw six-figure losses when they were forced to close mid-March. Sex clubs have closed and some are operating by doing live streaming shows. Virtual sex, however, is not bringing in the same kind of money, especially being that the market is saturated with a bunch of newcomers and low membership prices for online content.

Too many unfounded assumptions continue to be forced upon this industry. Sex work may be legal, but so is stigmatizing the women, trans and non-binary, disabled, migrant people who predominantly work this industry. The burden always falls squarely on the backs of women and those who present as different outside of the male-cis-hetero-gaze. Sex workers are losing money and their dignity while the rest of the world gets to bare-back and deny that they are a major part of the problem.

How Germany Failed Sex Workers

By Liad Hussein Kantorowicz

As Germany's first lockdown came into effect in March, my colleagues and I set up an online event series for and by sex workers. We shared information about the changing state of COVID-19 rules and protection measures; answered questions regarding the law, rights and access to the different governmental support systems; and provided an open ear and heart to fellow sex workers in times of hardship. Through co-hosting these weekly events, my colleagues and I were in a unique position to hear from a diversity of sex workers regarding their current situation and the issues they were facing. We held meetings through June, and we have recently re-started them following Berlin's second lock down.

One of the immediate effects of the lock down were travel restrictions. Initially, the hardest affected workers were temporary migrant workers, non-EU migrants without a permanent status in Germany and recent migrants. With the closing of brothels and borders, workers that come to Berlin and planned to stay for few months' stay found themselves stuck, without work, and without an ability to return home. With the Foreigners' Office temporarily closed, non-EU migrants who were waiting for their visa renewal were put into legal limbo.

Beyond legal residency and visa issues, travel restrictions limited sex workers' ability to travel to different German regions or abroad for work. With traveling out of the question, many of us had to change how we work.

Conversations I've had with hundreds of Berlin sex workers since March underscore how much COVID-19 has impacted our incomes. All forms of in-person sex work were illegal from March until September and have been made illegal again during the second lock down, greatly impacting strippers, professional dominatrixes and brothel workers. Following months of uncertainty, many sex workers decided to try civilian jobs, including minimum-wage positions.

Some of us transitioned to online sex work, such as selling video chats, pre-recorded videos or pictures through sites such as OnlyFans. These platforms were promising at first. Yet only the most tech-savvy workers willing to expose their faces, give up their privacy, part with their data, and who possess English language skills managed to successfully make a living from online work. For others the barriers to entry were too high.

Germany's welfare system did offer relief in the form of several government support programs, most notably "Soforthilfe," the one-time 5,000-euro payment to help freelancers. Sex workers are freelancers, and many applied and received the grant, but looking at those who could and couldn't receive the grant is telling. Sex workers who received the 5,000 euro payment are freelancers who have a tax number, live in Berlin, filed taxes last year, have strong enough German language skills to know about and apply for the program, and previously registered for the ProstSchutzGesetz or "Prostitutes' Protection Act," a 2016 law forcing sex workers to register their data with local authorities. As such, all newer migrants, those for whom receiving government assistance could mean an inability to renew a visa, those who aren't registered under the ProstSchutzGesetz for fear of being outed, those who work illegally because of visa issues and those that didn't file taxes for sex work were ineligible for this aid. Those who stopped to ask if they qualify found that by the time they received an answer, the government-allotted funds were gone.

Generally speaking, sex workers who didn't receive the funds are dealing with multiple marginalities—status-less, illegal workers, new and non-EU migrants, and those without German language skills. Germany's different sex worker organizations, including Hydra, fundraised to supply

immediate cash-in-hand relief to hundreds of workers who didn't receive government grants. But a one-time 200-500-euro payment only paid for some food or a month's rent. The gap between sex workers of different classes only grew. Grant recipients, predominantly white, German and middle class, often used the income and free time to invest in long-term, corona-era-suitable professional skills. Those who didn't receive the grant struggled with lockdown, the illegality of in-person sex work, and the health risks of continuing to work.

Further compounding the already difficult situation is the toxic attitude of the authorities, police and media toward sex workers. The government and the media's division of "essential" and "non-essential" workers made the public view the latter as less worthy of care and financial assistance. Several members of Berlin's senate called sex workers "superspreaders," repeating age-old stereotypes of sex workers as unwashed migrant predators who bring diseases. When this type of language becomes common, it becomes harder for us to control our bodies and legitimize our work. Similarly, while sex work establishments were closed, between the months of April and June, Berlin's police began raiding the homes of workers currently seeing clients as in-calls, out-calls and fining us as businesses for breaking COVID-19 restrictions. Hardest hit were street-based workers, those engaged in survival sex work, who would sometimes receive several fines a day. Independent escorts reported stings more sophisticated sting techniques or with more personnel than they've encountered or heard of.

Inevitably it is those poorer, more marginalized sex workers who didn't receive governmental assistance that continued working, and essentially had to choose between enduring fear, raids, fines, and being caught for working illegally and an inability to survive. The raids were never sanctioned by a higher city authority. Sex worker organizations pressured the city to intervene and stop the raids. Apparently it was the police's independent interpretation of focusing on sex workers as a form of clamping down on Corona-non-compliant businesses. The raids eventually stopped with a compromise not to prosecute sex workers and instead focus on our clients. But with a model of criminalizing clients of sex workers around Germany's corner, this could be a dangerous path to a future legislative model, a model harmful to us.

This is just the beginning. COVID-19 has short- and long-term effects on sex workers' health, and clients' behavior towards sex workers has changed, often become more demanding and violent. All things considered, our ability to persevere, survive and thrive is commendable, especially in the face of poverty, violence and legal trouble. It's no surprise,

considering that sex work and sex workers exist in legal and illegal forms, especially in times of crisis.

In order to better survive, we need our governments, the media and the welfare state in Germany to do better. Sex work is work and sex workers are active, contributing members of society. We need politicians that acknowledge that. As such we should have the same access to housing, financial support, and a wider social system accessible to migrants that other non-migrant, non-sex workers can access, without the stigma, illegitimation and hurdles. The socio-economic effects of COVID-19 aren't over. In order to correct the damage, this is the least that we'd be willing to accept.

Clothed Until Further Notice: Being a Stripper During the Pandemic

By the Berlin Strippers Collective

Like so many workers in Germany, strippers were hit hard by the lockdown and continuing government-imposed measures anti-coronavirus. Unlike other forms of sex work, stripping as a service was never explicitly banned, but with strip clubs forced to close, many strippers found themselves out of work for a while. In Berlin, strip clubs were closed for four months, and there were initially no clear prospects for re-opening, forcing strippers whose main source of income came from working at these clubs to contend with the prospect of sudden financial insecurity.

Many of those working in Berlin's strip clubs come from outside of Germany. Our colleagues come from all over the world, including neighbouring Eastern and Western European countries, Australia, Canada and the United States. When the clubs closed, they returned home, as they had no source of income to support their living costs. Those who remained in Berlin either had other sources of income or turned to other types of work in sectors still thriving despite the pandemic, such as delivery services or supermarket work. The low wages in these other jobs were a bitter contrast to what many of us were accustomed to earning.

Many also ventured into online erotic work, creating profiles on platforms where they sold photos, videos and other erotic content. At the start of the

lockdown, the Berlin Strippers Collective opened a Patreon page where we uploaded videos of members dancing, doing menial tasks from home with an erotic touch, and published writings by members about topics like sex work and feminism in the capitalist system. The Collective also organized its first online show, featuring a series of striptease acts combined with comedy and acting. Since then, the Collective has hosted a number of other online events, such as life drawing sessions streamed online. These events have brought members some income.

Aside from income through gig and online service work, there was also the possibility to apply for social welfare benefits. This was available to strippers just as it was to anyone else living in Germany. As most strippers work on a self-employed basis, we were also eligible for an emergency stipend of 3,000-5,000 euros that the German government made available to all self-employed workers. However, this stipend was only intended to cover business costs, not living expenses. As many solo artists, including strippers, have little to no running business costs, this stipend was not very helpful to most of us, and those who applied for and received it will eventually have to pay it back to the state. In this sense, there was no reliable support from the state for us during the lockdown.

For those of us working precariously, there was a sex worker action fund supported by private and organizational donors, but these funds are generally only available to the most marginalized and low-income sex workers. For those who might have had enough to survive the lockdown, but continue to struggle due to the ongoing restrictions, there is no real help from the state or other organizations.

Once bars and performance venues began to re-open, there were opportunities for the Collective to perform in-person. However, the strict regulations in Berlin on how many people venues are permitted to allow in limit the earning potential for strippers who have returned to work.

In general, strippers are affected by the same laws regarding freelance or self-employed work in Germany. This includes access to social protections, including health insurance. While the health insurance rates for solo-self-employed people in Germany have recently been reduced to accommodate low-earning freelancers, they are still quite high, as freelancers must pay for the insurance themselves. Especially in light of their reduced income as a result of the COVID-19 protection measures, strippers, like other small-scale artists and creative freelancers, are struggling to pay for basic social protections.

Even though strip clubs re-opened during the summer, they are still a risk for many who feel like they must choose between their economic security and their health. As work in a strip club is based on close, face-to-face interaction with a constant stream of new visitors every night, strippers are particularly exposed to health risks. It is difficult to enforce social distancing and other COVID-19 protection measures in the club environment. The club infrastructure and service concepts would need to change fundamentally to make the work environment safer for strippers.

One way to do this would be to introduce a peep show concept into strip clubs, where strippers perform behind glass windows and clients sit on the other side and pay tips each time they want the stripper to reveal more. However, in Germany, peep shows were officially prohibited in 1982 based on the ruling that it “undermines women’s dignity”. The law could be more supportive of strip clubs to create a safer working environment by overturning this prohibition. This would allow clubs to shift to the peep show concept and encourage them to revive this form of entertainment.

Generally, laws surrounding sex and erotic work in Germany should be less oriented by moral views and more guided by pragmatic ideas with input from those doing the work. This would enable safe working conditions in the long-term, beyond the present pandemic circumstances.

As Germany moved into a second lockdown in November, strip clubs were forced to close once again. With no further support from the state, strippers will continue to struggle for the rest of the year, and many will attempt to navigate the online market for erotic services again. The Berlin Strippers Collective has had to cancel some live performances that we had planned in November and instead we will use the time to come up with new concepts for online shows this winter, inspired by the success of the first two during the initial lockdown period.

We are already looking forward to the next time we can perform live and have optimistically started planning a cabaret show for next spring with the help of a local Berlin theatre group. If there is one positive thing that has come out of the closures, it is the drive among us strippers to mobilise our creativity to help each other survive, both financially and artistically!

The View from New York City

Invisible: Sex Work and Mutual Aid During COVID-19

By Molly Simmons

A wild assortment of boxes and bags are spread out on my living room floor. I stumble over them as I walk through to the kitchen to turn off the screaming tea kettle. After my tea is made I settle into my place among the harm reduction supplies: needles, Narcan, five types of condoms I will have to sort and bag, snacks, and glass stems. After a few hours all the boxes and bags will be packed up, crammed back into my bedroom cabinet where they will stay out of sight until next week,.

This is my Friday afternoon ritual, preparing the street outreach supplies for our weekly excursions in Brooklyn, trying to do what we can for our community members who work on the streets. Occasionally I am caught by the thought that what we have to offer is so little, practically nothing at all. We are such a small group, all of us sex workers, struggling to take care of each other while trying to manage to take care of ourselves.

The headlines nowadays all read “Sex Workers in Crisis” and “COVID-19 Causes Crisis for Sex Workers.” I should know, I wrote one of said articles. It’s not an incorrect statement; the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States resulted in club closures, loss of work, increased safety

risks, and financial insecurity across large swathes of our community that were previously, relatively speaking, stable. This stability was frail at best, hard-won after a years-long struggle following the devastation caused by SESTA-FOSTA. As the months of this pandemic drag on, however, we've all had to settle into new patterns of struggle, hope and community care.

When you're a member of a criminalized class, sometimes it can be hard to feel the distinction between an acute crisis like that caused by the coronavirus and the chronic crisis that is daily life. I consider myself lucky in many regards – the levels of stress that hum in the back of my brain at any given day are perhaps lower than many other sex workers. Because I am white, because I am cis, because I am documented, I have a level of security that many of my cohort are not afforded.

My day-to-day working life isn't so different than it was pre-pandemic. There was an initial big slump in business, but after about six weeks the men of New York City remembered that they actually preferred to be having sex – virus be damned. Some weeks are busy, most weeks are slow, people scramble to locate their masks as they're leaving.

My phone buzzes on the floor beside me and I read the incoming messages. Who's on for outreach tonight? The message comes in and I respond that I'll be there, that we still need someone to pick up the food. There are 27 unread messages in another thread – a community member in a housing crisis, a rapid-fire crowdfunding campaign, booking them an Airbnb until they can get more permanently situated.

This is the way my life has been changed due to COVID-19; our mutual aid work has increased exponentially, the numbers of hours we put in each day has nearly tripled. So many of our community members have been deeply impacted by this pandemic: loss of work, housing, financial security. Dancers are moving to street work, there violence is on the track, in-person workers are struggling to transition to online work, and new people are weighing the choice to enter the industry under threat of poverty and fewer clients than ever. I would offer statistics on loss of jobs and income but there are no numbers – no one is counting. Our SWOP chapter here in Brooklyn is doing our best to do what we can through mutual aid funds, referrals and other outreach. Though we are limited how quickly we mobilize, we are deeply grateful and humbled and ready to serve those who need us.

Everyone has the opportunity to learn from sex workers and how we take care of each other. When tragedy strikes there are few people faster

than us who are ready. Unfortunately tragedy is a language we are well acquainted with. From meal trains to marches, sex workers have always been at the helm of political movements, though we have often been overlooked. We exist at the border of the hypervisibility of sex and the relative invisibility of marginalization. We are seen as queer, as trans, as women, as Black, as migrants, as disabled. We are seen as all of these things before we are seen as sex workers, as if these varying aspects of our identity could be separated.

In the wake of the coronavirus we have again adopted the roles of our own community's first responders, meeting needs on the ground while we continue to stay on top of local and national political battles that will affect our lives in the long term. It was disheartening to find out that none of my civilian friends had even heard of the Earn It Act – a threat to digital security for everyone and the safety of almost any sex worker who works or advertises online. Somehow we must find the time, space and energy to fight all these battles that are brought to us, because every single one could mean the death and disenfranchisement of so many.

We all cram into the car together, bags of food on our laps, chatting and catching up as we head out to set up for outreach. In the lulls we talk some more, cracking jokes and making plans. I love our laughter, and our quickness, and our wit. I love how easily we move from what new shows have you been watching to I have some ideas about implementing mobile medical services.

Until we see the full decriminalization of sex work in the United States, all the work we do is limited, caged by the illegality of our own actions. There are other battles happening – the repeal of the Walking While Trans bill in New York, the continued fight against Earn It, the struggle to provide free and accessible healthcare, defending our reproductive rights. We are working to reduce the harm done to our communities on many fronts, and, as always, I have hope for the future we are building. Even when our institutions inevitably fail us we are there for each other, moving in shadows and secrecy, providing the compassion and care that no one else seems prepared to offer. Though we are often invisible, we are always taking care of each other. And chances are, we're taking care of you too.

Not My First Pandemic: Sex Work Through NYC's Health Crises

By Jay/Jae

I grew up in New York City with dirty streets and garbage on the sidewalks. Coronavirus is not the first pathogen to strike our city. It's not the first pandemic that has caused our city to do things differently. This pandemic is just wildly different from all the others.

In the days following New York Governor Cuomo putting the state on "PAUSE," I sat glued to the television in horror. I began having flashbacks of news clips from when I was a kid and HIV was exploding in New York City. In 1986, I was six years old, and HIV was at its peak. The similarities between the early news coverage of COVID-19 and HIV were striking. The experts didn't know where HIV came from, what it actually was, who could get it, who was immune, how it spread-the world was in a panic.

At home in March 2020, I'm watching the news announce a pathogen called Coronavirus, which is reported to be as virulent and deadly as HIV in the 80s. I immediately think of SARS in 2003 and H1N1 in 2009.

When H1N1 struck, I was at home watching the news with my grampa. He warned me not to go outside, take the trains, hang out with folks. I was in my late twenties just a couple of years into domination work, still doing street-based work when I wasn't in my dungeon.

I didn't listen. I had to work.

I worked the streets of Brooklyn where the virus wasn't talked about much. When I went home, grampa and I would watch the news together. Sure, I was aware and concerned about the virus. But again...I had to work.

I took precautions by assessing potential clients for cold- and flu-like symptoms or labored breathing. I wore a mask on the train, didn't touch anything outside the house (elevator buttons, stair/train railings, etc.).

Fall 2010 I fell ill while working in an in-call location, which allow networked street-based workers to rent space to host clients at flexible rates and intervals. It wasn't luxurious, but it was a nice, clean apartment frequented by folks who all worked in the sex trades.

When I first started feeling sick I didn't stop working, thinking I only had a cold. I told clients I felt ill, gave them the option to book or not, took over-the-counter medicine to suppress my symptoms and kept working. After a few days I knew it was more than a cold. I had a high fever and could barely get out of bed. I couldn't breathe. I brewed tea, made soup, took theraflu to suppress symptoms and went to work. Living with an elderly man with heart and lung failure, I was scared to go home after running around Brooklyn. I commuted an hour both ways twice a week. I would spend three days in Brooklyn and four days at home Manhattan with Grandpa. In Brooklyn I got sicker. A client provided holistic care for me for almost a week, then called my family when I couldn't make it home.

I went to the hospital two weeks after the onset of symptoms. I was diagnosed with pneumonia, sent home for six weeks of bed rest. It devastated my work and bank account. I isolated myself in my bedroom away from Grampa as much as I could, but after a few weeks, Grandpa had also pneumonia. Luckily, we recovered together.

During H191, the MTA took steps to lower risk in the subways- masks and social distancing were a widespread voluntary thing (arms-length was the saying), and city and state leadership led the way. Now, COVID-19 is happening, and feels like all of these pandemics combined.

The shelter in place response to COVID-19, that's different.

I've been working in HIV and sexually transmitted infection education and prevention and sexual health since 1992 in professional and volunteer

capacities. When shelter-in-place orders were announced my thoughts raced. What about the populations I serve? My work centers around street-based workers and houseless folks. The people I serve cannot shelter in place. Many are substance users and chemically addicted. What about all my folks in the sex trades who don't work online? Our income depends on intimate interaction, many of us hold barriers to traditional mainstream employment.

Sheltering in place myself in spring, I could only think about the folks who trade to pay for hotels to sleep in; communal living and transient sex workers; and in-call locations, parlors, dungeons...my mind was racing! What would happen to sex work!?!?!?

Then I remembered: we are the oldest profession in the world. This is a cliché often used to minimize our worth, but in this case it highlights how resilient sex workers are. Personally, I have lived and worked through several smaller-scale pandemics. But would I, and other sex workers, survive this one?

Fast forward to the summer. As long-term renters sheltered in place, we couldn't imagine that our landlord would decide to sell his home with tenants in place. He did. Due to SESTA/FOSTA, which shut down websites that facilitated sex trafficking, but also destroyed the online networks sex workers depended on, my BDSM work has slowed, and I consider myself to be semi-retired. My long-term regulars are hand-picked, and we've known each other for years. I hadn't seen any of them since spring but now, I needed the cash to move and pay my bills.

During my first session during COVID-19, we were both scared of exposure. He's a nipple torture guy. Should it be a car date? Are hotels safe? How safe is being in the car with each other? We have families. Getting COVID-19 from a session is a terrifying thought for both client and provider.

When I sat down in his car he immediately asked, "What are the new rules? I know you have new rules?" I hadn't thought of new rules! Immediately I told him "If my mask is down, yours is up. Windows open in the car at all times, let's stay here for ventilation." It didn't go well. We were both too nervous. We met again the following week. Same protocols, it worked. The following week I met him, hopped in and he drove to a hotel without telling me that's where we were going.

I refused to book a room with him. I'm not ready to be in an enclosed space with a client.

I don't know when I will be. If I were in a Dungeon, maybe. Naturally, we do a lot of decontamination before and after every session in a dungeon. For now, with COVID-19 rates rising, I'm not comfortable pulling nips in a car wearing masks with windows down, at least for now.

Authors

The Incredible Edible **Akynos** is a stripper and immigrant who founded The Black Sex Worker Collective where she is the executive director. She is studying for her masters of fine arts at Goddard College.

The Berlin Strippers Collective is a creative and political collective that has grown out the solidarity and sister*hood, and difficulties, we have experienced in the industry.

Jay/Jae has extensive experience in the industry and works with street-based, survival sex work and marginalized communities of color.

Liad Hussein Kantorowicz is a long-time sex worker and sex workers' rights activist, a co-founder and project manager of the Peers Project, a project focusing on peer education, information distribution, and support for and by Berlin's more marginalized sex worker communities at Hydra e.V, Germany's oldest organization for sex workers.

Sasha is provider working in Brooklyn, New York.

Molly Simmons is a full-service sex worker and sex-worker activist in Brooklyn. She is a chapter representative for SWOP Brooklyn, fighting for the decriminalization of sex work and providing mutual aid to sex workers in the New York area.

