

Prostitution, the Sex Trade, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had immediate and severe impacts on women in the sex trade who are already among the most vulnerable women on the planet. Because of quarantines, social distancing, governments' neglect of the poor, systemic racism in all walks of life including healthcare, failure to protect children from abuse, and the predation of sex buyers and pimps – the coronavirus pandemic threatens already-marginalized women's ability to survive. Even before the pandemic, sex buyers and pimps inflicted more sexual violence on women in the sex trade than any other group of women who have been studied by researchers (Hunter, 1994; Farley, 2017). The greater the poverty, the greater the likelihood of violent exploitation in the sex trade, as noted 26 years ago by Dutch researcher Ine Vanwesenbeeck (1994). This article will discuss the impact of COVID-19 as it increases harms resulting from the poverty and violent exploitation of prostitution, an oppressive institution built on foundations of sexism and racism.

Women in the sex trade are in harm's way for many reasons including a lack of food, shelter, and healthcare, all of which increase their risk of contracting COVID19. Understanding what it's like to be anxious about access to food and shelter is key to understanding the risks taken by people in prostitution. Knowing they were risking their lives, many women prostituted during the pandemic. "Poverty will kill us before the coronavirus," said an Indian woman in prostitution (Dutt, 2020). A woman in the US explained, "You might survive the virus, but you won't survive not eating for two months. If you ask any rational person if they'd rather take the virus, or not eat, that's not even a thought" (Gentile, 2020). The pandemic reveals the exploitation and violence in all forms of prostitution, including sugar daddy/sugar baby prostitution, cell phone/escort prostitution, massage parlor prostitution, street prostitution, webcam prostitution (Moran & Farley, 2018; Farley, 2016). A San Francisco group mainstreaming prostitution as work admitted, "People who are doing street-based sex work may not be able to stop doing sex work to survive," (Naftulin, 2020). But this comment obscures the overlap between all arms of the sex trade whether street, cell phone/escort, massage, strip club, webcam/porn. Women don't stay in one location, they move from one physical and online location to another – wherever the sex buyers are located or where the pimps send them (consumer electronic conferences, sports events, military bases, escort to street and back again).

"Prostitution is a microcosm of all imaginable forms of patriarchal violence played out on a body of a woman. It combines dehumanisation with economic inequality, reproductive exploitation with hate speech, sexual violence with racial discrimination. In prostitution all of this is done to a woman while her right to freedom of speech and expression is taken away. Prostitution is a multiple and intersecting victimisation that produces some of the most extreme mental trauma that women are not allowed to name, or seek help for, because society would rather see it as "women's choice." In this there is a difference with many other forms of violence or discrimination – domestic violence, rape or racism – that, at least on paper, have been recognised as illegal acts.

“In the countries that have not implemented the Nordic model[2] and where men’s paid sexual access to women is not seen as socially unacceptable and legally a crime, the coronavirus pandemic for women in prostitution means that all the aforementioned violence will be cast aside in all the state measures supporting any discriminated group, such as victims of male violence. And this means that the women in prostitution will not only continue suffering the consequences of the sex trade, but will have no provisions protecting them from COVID-19 as a particularly vulnerable group. The lack of protection may take different forms – it may be evicting the women from the flats where they are being pimped, depriving them their legal status, or denying access to social benefits – in all these scenarios, the underlying logic is that women are the agents of their own exploitation and as such should not be entitled to protection. On the other hand, in states that follow the Nordic model, women are permitted to claim and receive protection as a victimised group. In this Nordic model approach, NGOs that offer assistance to women in the sex trade can hold states accountable for supporting – not abandoning – women in prostitution. This means that women are offered a genuine choice to escape prostitution, and not a choice between homelessness or contracting COVID-19 from their sex buyers.

– Anna Zobnina, European Network of Migrant Women April 3, 2020

Disposable Humans

Some people are considered more disposable than others. Some people have long been treated as if they were disposable, for example, African Americans in Michigan whose water supply was knowingly poisoned while white city fathers drank bottled water and the Yakama in Washington whose water and food was knowingly contaminated because they lived downwind from a nuclear power plant, and Puerto Ricans who were not given aid in the devastating wake of the 2017 hurricane. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Far Right politicians and their media allies[3] in the US have suggested that there are some peoples’ deaths that should be tolerated or permitted, some old people who should be untreated, some children who will “inevitably” die.

Billions of women in Africa, South Asia and parts of Latin America and the Caribbean have erratic work and live on the margins with no social safety net (Tharoor, 2020). These women are at high risk for both coronavirus and entry into prostitution. A South African survivor of prostitution explained that no one would willingly “take on a job where their life is guaranteed to be at risk” (Naik, 2020). Poor women in Scotland and Germany do not have the option to quarantine at home (McEwen, 2020, Nasr, 2020). Some women may be forced to “choose” between COVID-19 exposure and their family’s starvation. Recommended practices for avoiding the COVID-19 virus are impossible. “Wash our hands frequently?” said a woman in Mumbai, “Sometimes I have to skip bathing to save water for cooking” (Tongia, 2020).[4] Thai women in the sex trade feared for their own and their families’ food supply since tourist/sex buyers were scarce during the pandemic (ASP, 2020). Taking nightmarish risks in order to feed their families, prostituting women in Cameroon sought sex buyers in hotels that were being used to isolate European men who reported symptoms of coronavirus. Their pimps took a large bite out of the women’s survival-earnings (Ndi, 2020; Larnyoh, 2020).

For some women in the sex trade, COVID-19 is lower on the list of dangers than the violence of prostitution. A woman prostituting in Florida explained that she’s “always worried about serial

rapists and killers,” but she was “not so concerned about being exposed to the virus”(Avanier, 2020). “Anytime there’s this type of panic,” said a prostituted woman, “clients [sex buyers] understand that as a shift in power.” For women with no alternatives, “some clients try to take advantage of that. They will push for lower prices, they will push for not having to screen, they will push for unsafe work practices — whether that’s bareback or meeting someone you don’t know or meeting in an unsafe location or being forced to push your own personal boundaries of what you’re willing to do,” she explained. “Because they know that workers are really desperate for money” (Steadman, 2020). Amplifying their abuse of women, sex buyers exploit the coronavirus pandemic.

Sex Buyers Chat about the COVID-19 Pandemic

When sex buyers themselves discuss the sex trade, their exploitation of women during the pandemic is explicit. Their posts on online forums highlight exactly how they dehumanize women in the sex trade. German sex buyer forums were reviewed in April 2020 by sociologist Manuela Schon.[5]

German legal sex buyer #1: “Today I was strolling around and of course went after our hobby... To everyone who will now be outraged: Yes I am aware of the current situation and I will not complain if there will be no intensive care bed or ventilator for me, just as I will not complain if I someday will catch the HIV virus.” *Willing to risk his life in order to exploit a woman in prostitution – in this man’s calculations of risk, he does not consider her risk. Some men who buy sex are sexually aroused by the danger of intimate contact during the coronavirus pandemic (see Boroff, 2020).*

German legal sex buyer #2: “I’m afraid the brothels won’t reopen before next year... there will be more sexual assaults on women, since a lot of guys can’t get rid of their pressure. A lot will change. Maybe there will be a lot of fresh meat.” *Some men’s rationalization for prostitution is: if I don’t get to rape a woman who is available to me because she needs my money to survive, then I’ll rape the “nice women” out there. So give me what I want or I’ll have a rapetantrum.* Of course prostitution does not prevent rape. But even women in prostitution have internalized this lie. A woman in Seattle escort prostitution pointed out that during the coronavirus pandemic, “As things get stressed out, we can be a lot of peoples’ outlets” (D’Adamo, 2020, March 13).

German legal sex buyer #3: “I still fuck the whores without a condom. OA can lick the caviar from my ass.” *This man hates women.*

German legal sex buyer #4: “How do you fuck catholic [no condom] in corona times? One could take her doggy, hoping that the virus doesn’t enter through the glans. Allegedly it is a respiratory virus, which is only absorbed through mouth, eyes and nose” *He wants what he wants and to hell with her health, his family’s health, his community’s health, his own health. He lies to himself about the risks.*

German legal sex buyer #5: “Anita is worth a lot in times of crisis (which means now). She only does outdoor meetings. Not without condom sorry needs to be said. But she offers a quite

good oral service without condom with cumming into mouth or on the tits. What can I say? Beggars can't be choosers."

*For this man, women's value is based on how fuckable he perceives them to be. He feels sorry for himself because he can't get her to do *exactly* what he wants her to do.*

German legal sex buyer #6: "At the moment they are all scared. Usually here in the Bremen area you need to pay 200€ when ordering someone to your place. I only paid 130€. The whores need money, so they make it for less money to have customers at all." *Did he think to himself: I saved some money by bargaining with a woman who was scared and hungry. What fun!*

German legal sex buyer #7: "I found a good solution [to the closure of German legal brothels], I now fuck my secretary. I always wished for that, but now it has happened due to the Corona Crisis. I am very satisfied with her"

All women are whores according to this man.

German legal sex buyer #8: "Clubs and brothels will not be reopened anytime soon... we were afraid of the Nordic Model... now we get the COVID-model.... zero prostitution." *The Nordic law on prostitution arrests sex buyers and pimps, but decriminalizes the prostituting woman and offers her exit services. This sex buyer complains that COVID-19 prevents him from buying sex even more than the Nordic law does.*

US sex buyer forums were reviewed in April 2020 by researcher Megan Lundstrom.[6]

US sex buyer #1: "Some of these fat old grandmas are going to quickly figure out what their old coochies are really worth....nothing!!!! Half the population has them and most know how to spread their legs or suck a cock for 30 minutes...so good luck with all that \$300 an hour BS we've been putting up with lately...let me know when your rent's due and we'll have a discussion about your preconceived 'rate'." *Except for sexual use, women are worthless to this man. He enjoys degrading them.*

US sex buyers #2: "I'll still go to restaurants, drive Uber, maybe go to sporting events, etc. I will still hobby [buy sex acts] as before. No changes there." And another man: "I'll comply with most reasonable request to be safe. But a mask means no oral and that would be a bit too much for me. Back during the AIDS crisis had a provider insist on using two condoms. I had no issue with one, but two was too much and I never called her again." *Sex buyers demand sexual access to women during health crises. The second man fails to understand why a woman in the sex trade would use multiple condoms. Women have said that condoms are barriers between her body and his intrusive assault on her. For her, the more barriers the better.*

US sex buyer #3: "Providers who are seeing clients in this time are CHOOSING to engage in high risk behavior with potentially deadly consequences. The reasons for doing so are immaterial, the outcome is the same. It's still a choice....Plus, I'm a little bit annoyed at being constantly bombarded with this 'poor hookers are desperate, have lost all their income' meem. There are jobs out there that you can apply to right now." *This is victim blaming of the*

highest order. He understands that she is in the sex trade at a point in time when there may be lethal consequences to her. There is a willful denial of her poverty, her pimp, or other factors that have compelled her into prostitution.

US sex buyers #4: “they won’t get any of MY money. I’m a GFE guy. If our tongues don’t touch, then I’m outta there.” And another man, “Time to wake up ladies. Over the last ten years, the prices for time with a lady has more than doubled: too bad that most of the ladies have no idea about how a girl friend treats a guy.” and another “What if said gentleman has a family crisis. Two kids lost scholarships and need a financial attention to continue med school and another family member is in the hospital with cancer, does he continue with his re-occurring \$3k/month to his sugar baby? Does she in this difficult time provide him comfort and solutions to these family problems or is she going to just do what she does and buy clothes and mind her business in her expensive condo – fucking other guys too.” *These men expect a convincing performance of an intimate relationship by a woman they pay for, a “girlfriend experience.” They fail to understand the emotional stress generated by such a performance, or the financial stress she experiences during a pandemic. GFE sex buyers demand that she fool him into thinking it’s a “real relationship,” but it’s actually a pretend-relationship, one that he designs and controls. The entire relationship on her part is a lie, except for her need for money.*

New Zealand sex buyer forums were reviewed in April 2020 by Ally-Marie Diamond[7] and Angie Henderson[8]

NZ sex buyer #1 “Lets just say that at the moment, they are tracking down every source of infection. It could be very sticky for me, and I suspect a lot of others, if I had to disclose everybody I had been in close contact within a given time...” *Because of the stay-at-home order in NZ, and because sex buyers could be tracked via contact tracing during the pandemic, some men obsessed about whether the police could locate them.*

NZ sex buyer #2 A NZ sex buyer listed COVID-19 protections for customers: “washing hands, wearing a mask, and placing cash on a table like a fan so it can be easily counted.” Another NZ man quoted sex trade practices in Australia, where prostitution is also legal. “See in oz [Australia] some SWs are still taking bookings with the only requirement you dont have a cold or cough. *Ineffective ‘precautions’ against COVID-19 were mentioned by sex buyers in all locations.*

NZ sex buyer #3 “Girls get back to work .. You have clientele who need to unload stress... This is essential to stop the spread of depressions. Heartaches from stress... even psychological issues, saving marriage’s.”

Ignoring health risks to women he seeks to buy, the narcissistic focus of this sex buyers is commonplace

NZ sex buyer #4 A sex buyer hinted that raping a sheep would be a means to survive the pandemic. “For the guys we can invent a number of ways to relief from porn to other ways (I am writing this watching a sheep walking on the paddock next door).”

NZ sex buyer #5 After becoming annoyed at the many calls she received from men who wanted sex in person, a woman who advertised webcam prostitution reported the following exchange during the COVID-19 quarantine in New Zealand (Conner, 2020):

SB: Are you meeting for sex at the moment?

Woman: Only with people who already have the virus, what about you?

SB: I don't have the virus but want to have sex

Woman: If I give you a discount what about both?

SB: Do you have the virus?

Woman: Do you have cash?

SB: Yes I do

Woman: Perfect I can probably find the virus for you then

SB: Wtf

Racism, Prostitution, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Prostitution causes exceptional harms to women of color and formerly colonized women in the sex trade (Nelson, 1993; Carter & Giobbe, 1999; Deer, 2010; Butler, 2015). Racism is a factor compelling many women's entry into prostitution, since they lack alternatives. Pimps and johns are especially vicious toward women of color. There are fewer exit and escape options for women of color who often receive substandard or culturally irrelevant support and treatment. For many years pornographers have eroticized racism and monetized slavery in filmed prostitution. The harms against all women in prostitution are amplified based on their race/ethnicity and their poverty.

Women of color are overrepresented in prostitution and they are also overrepresented as COVID-19 victims in the US (Lindsey, 2020), with environmental racism contributing to their victimization (Cabrera, 2020). The greatest number of deaths from COVID-19 are among racial groups who have historically suffered more from chronic health conditions and had less access to healthcare (Durkin, 2020; Johnson and Buford, 2020, Horton, 2017). In April, 2020 African Americans were approximately 81% of the COVID-19 deaths in Milwaukee County whose population is only 26% African American. Latinos were suffering from the same high rates of COVID-19 morbidity and mortality in New York as African Americans in Milwaukee. Black and Latino New Yorkers were dying from coronavirus at twice the rate of white people in early April (Mays & Newman, 2020).[9]

In April 2020, 31% of all New Mexico COVID-19 cases were Native people but they are only 10.6% of the state's population (Childress, 2020). The Zuni people once again expressed concern about extinction of their Nation (Agoyo, 2020; Chisolm, 2020). Brazil's indigenous people are especially vulnerable to respiratory infections (Fellet, 2020).

Anti-Asian racism has increased during the coronavirus pandemic, with politicians and sex buyers alike blaming "the Chinese" for COVID-19. This recent outbreak of racist behavior merges with the well-documented racism of sex buyers who stereotype Asian women as submissive, exotic, or newly-immigrated, that is, more vulnerable, a quality sought by sex buyers (Asian Women Coalition Ending Prostitution, 2020; Bindel, 2017). Pornhub, which distributes

elaborately articulated racist pornography – moved quickly to market anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Racist pornography sells well; in March, 2020, there were at least 115 racist COVID-19 uploads to PornHub alone. The PornHub coronavirus pornography fused xenophobia about Asians being ‘diseased’ or ‘foreign’ with fetishization of Asian women as compliant and hypersexual (Lopez, 2020).

Sex trade businessmen exploit the coronavirus pandemic for financial gain

Pimps’ marketing skills were evident during the coronavirus pandemic. Promoting themselves as good guys who were “helping women increase their cash flow,” Atlanta strip club pimps transferred the women online where they sold \$20 Instagram lap dances (BET, 2020). Some pornpimps offered to serve as women’s “central bankers.” “By acting as a central bank, we can increase the money supply and help the new wave of performers survive the crisis,” said a London pornographer (Shehadi & Partington, 2020). When legal locations for prostitution (massage parlors, strip clubs, bars) were closed down because of quarantine, pimps kept the cash flowing by moving to another location. When his Portland strip club was closed because of COVID-19, the club’s pimp shifted his women over to topless food delivery jobs. A strip club in Las Vegas sold drive-up window strip shows during the pandemic (Campamour, 2020). PornHub’s distribution of masks to hospitals during the coronavirus pandemic is the same maneuver as Nevada pimp Dennis Hof’s handing out turkeys at Thanksgiving (Kaye, 2020). The goal is to appear humanitarian: *I’m a nice pimp, just an altruistic guy trying to help the girls. Look at the turkeys, look at all these masks! Don’t look in the women’s eyes!*

Pimps are flexible in their messaging. In the past, sextrade promoters have trumpeted the funpartytimes and mythical high income from “sex work.” Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, the sexwork and pimp unions shifted the focus to messages about the economic survival of the prostituted. Even some prosextrade groups acknowledged how dangerous prostitution is and how extremely vulnerable women in the sex trade are (Agence France-Presse, 2020). “Without financial security or any safety net, sex workers are some of the hardest hit by COVID-19,” noted UK sexwork unions (Wilson, 2020). In addition to seeking cash for emergency relief, sexwork promoters simultaneously sought support for unions promoting decriminalized pimping and sex buying (SWOPLA, 2020).[9] This same deception was seen in April 2020 in Argentina, where Alike Kinan reported that sexwork lobbyists received emergency funding targeted for prostituted women, but surprise! the funds were diverted and somehow did not get to the women.[11] The exploitation of emergency funding for the purpose of promoting prostitution as “work” for poor women is not a new tactic; it was also used during the HIV epidemic (Farley, 2004). This tactic is being expertly deployed by Trump, as well as sex trade pimps. Trump promises support for “workers” and fails to deliver to them, but pours millions of dollars into the coffers of his wealthy corporate sponsors.

Pimps and sexwork unions have strongly promoted online prostitution/pornography and webcamming during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Porn pimps have taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since indoor sex businesses like strip clubs, massage parlors, and hotel/cell/outcall prostitution have (allegedly) shut down, online prostitution has increased.[12] Online prostitution includes pornography uploaded either via a

private website or a pimp/distributor's site like Chaturbate, StripChat, or MindGeek's Pornhub. Online prostitution includes webcamming or real-time streaming of prostitution via computer or phone. A survivor explained that "camming was worse than the rest of the porn industry because we had direct contact with the consumer, people who were often very cruel and demanding by threatening to leave negative reviews and therefore affecting your pay if you didn't perform exactly as they wished" (Anonymous, 2018). In webcamming as in GFE prostitution, survivors experience intense distress from having to playact whatever the sex buyer asks for, and having to be nice to abusive men. "The emotional labour that goes into camming is unreal – constantly chatting, trying to be yourself [and] pleasant" (Shedahi & Partington, 2020). Research on prostitution and trafficking from 9 countries supports what women tell us about the traumatic stress caused by pornography production. When we compared hundreds of people in prostitution who performed sex acts with and without being filmed, we found that the women who had pornography made of their prostitution had significantly higher rates of PTSD than women whose prostitution was not filmed (Farley, 2007).

Many online sites sell images of women who are coerced or enslaved by pimps and organized criminal groups. Pornpimps exploited women during the pandemic just like other pimps. "They buy a good image, generate clicks and advertising revenue but nothing will be redistributed to us," said a porn survivor. Traffickers advertised "work for coronavirus layoffs" on Craigslist (Moseley, 2020). Another pimp recruited unemployed women for a job as "models" at his porn site (Baah, 2020). Romanian and US pornpimps reported large increases in new models during the pandemic. The pimps hustled webcam prostitution as "a live interactive experience in which models rely on communication and empathy" or as a "virtual girlfriend experience" (Barbera, 2020). Pornhub, a distributor of online prostitution, also recruited models and sold pornography that they produced, taking a 35% cut of profits, just like other pimps.[13]



Photo courtesy Iniciativa Pro Equidad, 2020

In women's real lives, the various tentacles of the sex trade are indistinguishable. Colombian media[14] actively promoted webcam sites as a solution to the COVID-19 pandemic, hyping webcam prostitution as a 'privilege' for those who can work from home. Colombian and trafficked Venezuelan women in Bogota's red light districts live in overcrowded pay-per-day rooms. The women try webcamming only to discover that they have no control over the use and resale of their images on porn sites. Because they lack Internet skills or access to banking, they are deceived and often not paid. Many solicit sex buyers while naked on the streets because they are desperate for survival cash. Others are coerced by pimps to go to sex buyers' homes or parties where they are often subjected to violence, sometimes death. One woman explained, "coronavirus is just another, barely noticeable, danger added to the dangers we face in our daily lives in order to send money to our families (Iniciativa ProEquidad, 2020).

There are many dangers and disadvantages for women in the sex trade who move to online prostitution.

"....the demand for new content from viewers with more than the usual time on their hands may prompt criminal groups to coerce sex workers, drug users, or other vulnerable persons into live and recorded sexual exploitation. Similarly, those with more deviant tastes may use the time to seek out sites offering live child sexual exploitation (CSE) online, where there is a ready supply developing as children are kept home from school, and both criminal groups and impoverished families look for new sources of income. The FBI has issued a warning that children who homeschool, play games online and use social media during school closures may be targeted and groomed by sexual predators, as they spend extended time online. (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2020)

Women who prostitute online via webcams encounter "privacy breaches, potentially dangerous interactions with clients, and laws that are not designed to protect them" (Drolet, 2020). Many expressed fear about the lack of privacy in online pornography, with some resigned to the inevitable privacy violation (Deliatto & Fenton, 2020). A woman feared harassment, blackmail, or being subjected to revenge porn if she uploaded videos to porn sites. Videos are often stolen from porn sites: "The platforms lack security and confidentiality. Anyone can take a screenshot and then share it," she said. In February, 2020, 1.5 TB of women's pre-recorded videos and images were stolen and leaked from the UK porn site OnlyFans (Shehadi & Partington, 2020).

Women were upset by pimps' siphoning-off their earnings. Income from porn and webcamming is significantly lower than other types of prostitution, and many do not have the funds to buy video equipment in the first place (France24, 2020). A woman who was not earning enough to cover her basic expenses via private webcam prostitution, decided to upload her videos to OnlyFans where sex buyers pay for what is allegedly private content. But, she said, "with cams, your face is out there." She decided not to show her face, then discovered that sex buyers paid even less for that.

Whether it's during a pandemic or not, women in the sex trade usually plan to get in, obtain urgently needed money, and get out as fast as they can. They do not want their images infinitely circulating on the web where their children, future employers, future boyfriends or husbands,

might view them. Nonetheless, sexwork unions have promoted online prostitution. A New Zealand sexworker union which includes pimps in its membership, urged women to move from brothels to web cam pornography during the pandemic. To counteract the deceptive campaigns of the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective regarding online prostitution/webcamming, survivor groups in New Zealand described risks of cyberprostitution and also the financial barriers to moving online from street, escort, or brothel prostitution (Shehadi & Partington, 2020).

Sexwork Unions Exploit the Pandemic to Mainstream Prostitution as Work

Pimps and their neoliberal political friends exploit the coronavirus pandemic in order to promote and mainstream the sex trade. In the early weeks of the pandemic, with a Trumpian fact-free approach, the New Zealand prosextrade union and the Dutch prosextrade unions sought to minimize the harm of the pandemic, advocating business as usual. In March 2020, the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (NZPC) suggested that women in prostitution should take “extra care” during the pandemic and recommended “screening clients for symptoms and travel history before booking them.” The NZPC falsely reassured women that this “will reduce risk and clients may feel more comfortable booking if they know you’re taking sensible precautions” (African News Agency, 2020; Hendry-Tennent, 2020). Like the US president’s suggestion to ingest disinfectant for protection against COVID-19, the NZPC was later forced to walk back their dangerous advice. Lies about prostitution’s safety, hygiene, and “harm reduction” from prostitutes’ and pimps’ unions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and any time, are dangerous. Another New Zealand pimp, attempting to normalize the sex trade in the midst of a pandemic, declared, “Hygiene-wise, the sex industry is quite possibly the safest place to be.” A UK sexwork union recommended the following techniques for COVID 19 harm reduction: bleach, disinfectant, avoiding kissing, and changing bed linen whenever possible (Bindel, 2020). Sex trade unions in Russia handed out lists of healthy positions to use in order to avoid being close to a sex buyer’s face. A Canadian sexwork advocate said, “There are services in there that a lot of us are trying to avoid, such as kissing or missionary position. Any way you can deter your client’s face from being near your face, is a must ..” (Grossman, 2020). These harm reduction techniques fail to protect women in the sex trade from COVID-19 and fail to protect women from the rapes, beatings and verbal abuse that are perpetrated by sex buyers and pimps.

The usual “zombie ideas” have been trotted out by sex trade businessmen during the pandemic. “Zombie ideas” are ideas that have been proved wrong by overwhelming evidence and should be dead, but they somehow keep shambling along, eating peoples’ brains (Krugman, 2020). These sham ideas resurface because they generate a lot of money for pimps and their free-market cronies. Especially popular is the zombie notion that prostitution can be made safe by legalizing or decriminalizing it (Moran & Farley, 2018). “When sex work is treated as actual work and fully decriminalised, sex workers will have access to the same human rights as every other worker” (Shehadi & Partington, 2020). The zombie messaging here is that in the face of a pandemic and financial catastrophe, women in prostitution will be saved by decriminalizing pimps. But there is no evidence that decriminalization of pimps protects women from homelessness and financial crisis – or from the sex trade’s racism, sexism, and violent exploitation. Supporting pimps as managers via decriminalized prostitution is a deceptive and confusing maneuver that exploits anxiety about economic survival during the coronavirus pandemic. Yes, women in the sex trade need emergency support during the pandemic because

they are on the margins, *but not because they have a need to legally define themselves as “sex workers.”* What women in the sex trade need – they have told us clearly – is exit from prostitution, housing, medical care, and meaningful, sustainable employment. The last thing they need is a slick and oh-so-pimpish maneuver that tries to redefine a human rights violation – prostitution – as “work.” Decriminalized pimping helps pimps, but it does not pay the women’s rent or put food on her table. Decriminalizing pimps when people think you’re decriminalizing women in the sex trade is a Trumpian maneuver akin to the COVID-19 “stimulus bill” that bails out billionaires (airlines and banks), but fails to bail out the people who urgently need economic aid to pay rent, mortgages, and household expenses like food.

Another COVID zombie theme is “Breaking the stigma around sex work and campaigning for decriminalisation are other routes to making sure sex workers survive in times like this and are provided for in the future” (Wilson, 2020). Sextrade promoters are correct that the person who is sold in prostitution should be destigmatized and never arrested. But pimps and sex buyers *should be stigmatized*. Pimps and sex buyers *should be arrested*.^[15] There is no evidence that decriminalization of prostitution ensures women’s survival during a pandemic or other crisis, or that decriminalized prostitution provides for women in difficult times. The stigma remains regardless of prostitution’s legal status: women in New Zealand and in the Netherlands avoid joining the prostitute unions and they avoid signing up for government benefits because the government keeps records and because they do not want to be socially labeled as prostitutes. During the pandemic, prejudice against women in the sex trade prevents them from receiving economic and health benefits like other citizens. The solution is economic equality and social support *for all people including* those in the sex trade.

Despite the myth that somewhere there’s a place where “sex workers are safe and condoms are always used” the fact is that women in the sex trade are not safe and johns will always demand sex acts without condoms with physical threats or by paying more (Rao, Gupta, Lokshin, & Jana, 2003; Farley, 2004; Brody, Reno, Chhoun, Kaplan, Tuot, Yi, 2020). This is as true during the COVID-19 pandemic as it was during the HIV epidemic, when that crisis was also exploited by pimps who used HIV funding to promote their own decriminalization. The same misogynist stereotypes about women being dirty or “vectors of disease” during the HIV epidemic, were evident in the 2020 coronavirus pandemic when neighbors in Brussels referred to prostituting women as “spreaders of disease” (Chini, 2020).

Women in prostitution do what they can to avoid HIV, COVID-19, and the ever-present threat of extreme violence. They use their intuition, ask for or demand condom use, ask for masks to be used, carry a weapon for protection when violently threatened, tell a pimp or a friend where they are, try to locate johns who aren’t too intoxicated (because the ones who are drunk or meth’d up can be the most violent), follow sex worker unions’ rules for checking under the pillow or bed for weapons, never wearing a necklace or a scarf because you can get choked to death (Farley, 2004). But none of it works. Women in the sex trade are raped, even killed, at the highest rates of any women on the planet. Women in prostitution have high rates of HIV because johns rape them and also because johns pay much more for a sex act without a condom. Women in the sex trade will be struck down with COVID-19 for the same reasons: their lives are worth little to sex buyers and pimps. Their lives don’t seem worth much to some governments either.

Even humanitarian billionaires have drunk the zombie kool-aid. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, working with Indian health officials, sought to mainstream prostitution for poor Indian women for more than a decade (Farley & Seo, 2006). In a Kolkata brothel complex, Gates has implemented condom distribution programs and supported unions that promote the sex trade as a way out of poverty. Yet when Indian women in the sex trade are interviewed, they tell us they want to have bank accounts that are not controlled by Mafia pimps. Their life goals do not include putting condoms on correctly and continuing in prostitution until they age out with nothing left. Instead, the women seek housing away from brothels, and they tell us that they want a small plot of land for farming or to start a small business. No Gates funding has gone toward these preferences made clear by the women themselves. The zombie idea that condom distribution solves the problems of prostitution – keeps shambling along. Mickey Meji quoted South African survivors who firmly state, “condoms don’t change our fate; we’re still poor.”[16] On the heels of the Gates Foundation, George Soros funded numerous campaigns to decriminalize prostitution but utterly failed at providing housing or options for escaping prostitution (Raphael, 2018).

A Failure to Protect

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the failure of legal and decriminalized prostitution to protect women from the violence of pimps, traffickers, and sex buyers. In response to COVID-19, Germany closed down its legal brothels and threw women out because the women could not afford to pay the brothel pimps for the rooms they lived in.[17] Nevada also closed its legal brothels and kicked women out[18] with no city, state, or federal financial assistance, no food assistance or shelter. The financial crisis of women in German legal prostitution is much the same as the financial crisis that women suffer in illegal prostitution. In March 2020, the Berlin Senate and the Federal Ministry for Families, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth asked an association of legal pimps (BesD) whether women who flee domestic violence could be sheltered in the closed brothels during the pandemic. Because women were quarantined with their abusers and sought to escape, there was a national shortage of shelter for battered women in Germany.[19] Since their brothels were closed, the pimps welcomed the paid opportunity to house battered women in their brothels. The irony and the insanity of the government’s proposal was not lost on historian Inge Kleine (2020) who pointed out that *prostitution itself* is a cruel variant of domestic violence. Although the Senate’s proposal for pimp-sponsored housing for battered women was quietly rescinded, an alternative solution was not even considered: municipalities could have taken over the brothels, kicked out the pimps and transformed the buildings into long-term housing for trafficked women.

After closing the legal brothels in response to the pandemic, Stuttgart prohibited prostitution entirely. This meant that if a woman with no means of survival had been kicked out of a legal brothel, and if she then resorted to turning a trick in order to feed herself or her family, she could be arrested. The cruelty of this policy was protested by survivor Huschke Mau, who noted that in addition to being coerced into the sex trade by poverty, 80% of the women in the German brothels had been coerced into it by abusive pimps, boyfriends or husbands. Thus, to arrest the women would be to compound the harm and to blame the victims, not the perpetrators. Mau described this arrest policy as a “catastrophe” that endangered women’s health and their survival. She also noted that the pandemic provided an opportunity for German cities to

implement the Nordic law on prostitution. Under the Nordic law, sex buyers, brothelkeepers, and pimps are charged with crimes, *but the victim of the crime* is not arrested. Mau noted that the pandemic presented an opportunity for Germans to show solidarity with the most vulnerable – those who are paid for in prostitution – providing support and exit services rather than arresting them (Mau, 2020).

Although legal brothels and window prostitution were closed in response to the pandemic, many women in the Netherlands who had been coerced by poverty or by pimps, continued to prostitute at home, in hotels, or in illegal brothels. Online advertisements for prostitution were commonplace during the pandemic (Pieters, 2020). Journalist Renate van der Zee observed that Dutch prosextrade groups encouraged women to continue prostituting even though legal prostitution was shut down. Women leapt at the opportunity to escape prostitution even with a small government stipend of €1050 per month during the pandemic. “Many women are asking for help and some use the pandemic stipend as an opportunity to exit prostitution,” van der Zee said, “Now is the time to fortify the prostitution exit programs because they are the first priority. Counseling is not enough. Women need apartments and a job.” In the last 5 years, van der Zee and coalitions of Dutch citizens, outreach workers, and progressive politicians have proposed that the Netherlands adopt the Nordic prostitution law, rather than continue with its failed experiment in legal prostitution.

While the prostitute-and-pimps’ union in New Zealand promoted web cam prostitution as a solution to the closing of legal brothels, a survivor-led abolitionist organization, Wahine Toa Rising Aotearoa, sought emergency stipends like those provided in the Netherlands, so that women in prostitution “don’t feel like the only choice they have is to remain active in the sex trade to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table” (Kronast, 2020).[20] Along these lines, a global coalition of survivors and nonprofit organizations sent an urgent message to the UN Secretary General proposing a similar and multilateral fund for women seeking to escape prostitution.[21]

Homelessness, prostitution, and the pandemic

The lethal capitalism of pandemic pimps who beat women if they resist prostitution provides a grotesque parody of similarly inhumane US state and federal policies that affect people who are homeless during the pandemic. While one US governor sought to use hotels for people without homes during the pandemic, other cities strongly resisted the proposal to compassionately share resources even temporarily (Har & Nguyen, 2020). In Las Vegas, *while the city’s hotels were empty*, Las Vegas officials painted “social distancing boxes” on a concrete parking lot for homeless people to sleep on (Lee, 2020).



Photo credit: Damairs Carter, 2020

Pope Francis criticized the Las Vegas response to the COVID outbreak, saying the homeless should be quarantined in hotels and not in parking lots. The Pope noted that people in need are often treated like “rescued animals” (Gallagher, 2020). Meanwhile West Bengal Minister Panja handed out food to 1500 hungry, prostituted, and despairing women in the Sonagachi brothel complex in Kolkata. With an attitude reminiscent of a zookeeper, Panja said, “We will make them understand what to do or what not to do. We will make them understand to follow social distancing” (Sonevane, 2020).

“How do you wash your hands without a sink? Stock up on food without money? Or shelter in place without a home?” asked an Italian homeless advocate (Povoledo, 2020). People without homes and people living in cars or shelters are more vulnerable to highly contagious diseases like COVID-19. The US National Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2020) attributed much of that vulnerability to “close quarters, compromised immune systems and an aging population” as well as the fact that “without adequate, permanent and stable housing, people lack a restroom for frequent hand washing, laundry facilities, and personal hygiene.”

Conclusion

“The biological virus afflicting individuals is also a social virus,” Viet Thanh Ngyuen (2020) wrote, “whose symptoms include “inequality, callousness, selfishness and a profit motive that undervalues human life and overvalues commodities. Our real enemy is not the virus but our response to the virus — a response that has been degraded and deformed by the structural inequalities of our society.” These structural inequalities affect everyone, but for women in the sex trade during the pandemic, the inequality is life-threatening, and the transformation of oneself into a sexual commodity inflicts a gnawing sense of degradation and shame.

The coronavirus pandemic has vividly exposed the failure of capitalism. “Who’s going to pay for it?” were the last words of a dying man as he was put on a ventilator (Elassar, 2020). “I think that [the pandemic] has highlighted how we systematically fail to protect really all freelance workers

and *people in general*,” a woman in US prostitution said (Campoamor, 2020). Vast numbers of poor and working class people in the US are threatened with food and housing crises. [22] Financial relief from the economic damage caused by COVID-19 arrived quickly for the rich, but not the poor (Goldstein, 2020).

The failures of malignant capitalism were on full display during the US pandemic where the least vulnerable rather than the most vulnerable are cared for by the state (Ngyuen, 2020). Referring to the sex trade as “prurient services,” the first package of US economic aid excluded from emergency support: women in legal prostitution, stripclub prostitution, women in porn and webcam prostitution (Mansfield, 2020). The coronavirus aid bill excludes many other classes of people including the homeless, incarcerated people, and indebted students (Poor Peoples’ Campaign, 2020). South Africa and Japan also proposed policies that restricted subsidies to women in the sex trade. Women’s human rights lawyer Yukiko Tsunoda (2020) criticized the exclusion of prostituted women from the program, saying “it is like telling them to go die.”

Toxic and hypocritical disinformation campaigns about who deserves food and water and who does not, who deserves to be sacrificed to prostitution or not – must be challenged. We must reject the notion that there is a class of women – mostly young, mostly poor, mostly ethnically and racially marginalized – who deserve prostitution in order to survive. And we must reject the Republican administration’s cruel budget that includes removal of healthcare for coal miners with respiratory disease (Taylor, 2020). These political maneuvers are symptoms of a system that sets aside some categories of humans as less deserving than others.

The made-for-media responses of many capitalist states to poverty are often inadequate and corrupt. Emergency stipends, boxes of food, and short-term housing all fail to address the real needs of class-segregated cultures that have been decimated by corporate capitalism. In many “global south” countries, women are shuffled through “social integration” programs where local governments turn a blind eye to the fact that women are brutally exploited in prostitution. Protection (by the government or by civil society) simply does not exist for trafficked, migrant, poor women and girls who have been traumatized by civil war and/or family abuse. As in Nevada and Germany, corrupt local officials in Latin America work closely with pimps. The harms of prostitution are ignored while the women are used up in prostitution and discarded. At that point, they are sold to drug trafficking networks or other criminal enterprises. The system is designed to disappear the poor while exploiting them throughout their lives.

Life-threatening inequality has become more visible because of the COVID-19 pandemic. While there has not yet been a serious challenge to the wealthiest class in the US, Colombia, or elsewhere, there are signs of resistance. The failure of billionaire Jeff Bezos to pay his Amazon and Whole Foods employees a fair wage, his refusal to provide them with sick time and safe working conditions – has caused outrage and strikes in the US. In April 2020, the Trump Republican administration legally forced a meat packing plant to reopen, despite multiple COVID outbreaks and dangerous working conditions. Some workers refused to give in to the demand to work in unsafe conditions (Telford, Kindy, & Bogage, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic provides some urgent lessons. We need coronavirus *harm elimination* (via vaccine), not stopping at coronavirus *harm reduction* (via social distancing, treatment of

medical emergencies). We also need prostitution *harm elimination*: the abolition of the racist and sexist institution of prostitution and provision of meaningful, sustainable alternatives. We are not satisfied with stopping at prostitution *harm reduction* with its condom distribution, “bad date” lists, and a friendly coffee. Emergency donations of food and shelter reduce the harm of prostitution only briefly. Is that all prostituted and trafficked women deserve? No. All of us – those who are in the sex trade and also those who are not – deserve universal health care, a universal basic income, secure housing including an indefinite moratorium on evictions and foreclosures, the cancellation of student-loan debt, and the reversal of all cuts to food stamps (Taylor, 2020). Wealthy citizens in the US have more than their share of resources which should be shared equitably. This requires major financial restructuring that would promote equal distribution of resources to all citizens. Prevention of poverty and homelessness would decrease the flood of women and girls into prostitution, and would permit women’s survival so that we can join them in challenging the sexism and racism that are baked into their poverty.

Endnotes

[1] The author is grateful for editing and content from Harvey Schwartz. She thanks Debra Boyer for inspiring and supporting this essay.

[2] The Nordic or abolitionist law on prostitution was passed by Sweden in 1999. It decriminalizes the person sold in prostitution, provides exit and support services, and arrests sex buyers and pimps. The law’s remarkable effectiveness in reducing trafficking has been well documented and has resulted in the lowest rate of trafficking in the EU (Waltman, 2011; Kotsadam & Jakobson, 2014). Following Sweden, Iceland, (2008), Norway (2009), Canada (2014), Northern Ireland (2015), France (2016), Republic of Ireland (2017) and Israel (2018) have implemented the Nordic law.

[3] Texas Republican politician Dan Patrick (Stieb, 2020), Dr. Phil, Dr. Oz (suggesting there are “tradeoffs” for children’s deaths) (Scott, 2020). See also Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, and Georgia Republican politician Brian Kemp (Mull, 2020). The malevolent attacks on WHO by the Trump administration will soon result in more deaths in Yemen, deaths in parts of Africa, and deaths among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories (Polychroniou, 2020).

[4] Race/ethnicity affects the rate of exposure to coronavirus. Social distancing is a privilege that many do not have, especially poor or working class, people of color. Those who are economically and racially privileged can afford social distancing, can access healthcare, and can avoid public transportation, and often can work from home (Blow, 2020).

[5] Manuela Schon is co-founder of Abolition 2014: For a world without prostitution <http://abolition2014.blogspot.com/>

[6] Megan Lundstrom is Executive Director of Free our Girls, in USA <http://www.freeourgirls.org>; <http://www.gettingoutthegame.com>

[7] Ally Marie Diamond is co-founder of Wahine Toa Rising Aotearoa, a survivor-led abolitionist organization in New Zealand.

[8]Angie Henderson is professor of sociology at University of Northern Colorado, USA.

[9]As in nursing homes, the coerced proximity of people in prisons place incarcerated women and men at highest risk of COVID-19. Many women are incarcerated for crimes resulting from racism or poverty such as theft of food or clothing. They are also charged with the “crime” of being victimized by pimps. The US incarcerates overwhelming numbers of Latino, African American, and poor people. US prisons are a for-profit business rather a system of justice (California Coalition for Women Prisoners, 2020).

[10] These groups also promote decriminalization of the person paid for in prostitution. The author agrees with this, and has made it clear that no one who is sold for sexual use should ever be arrested. But pimps and sex buyers are predators and should be both stigmatized and arrested.

[11] Alika Kinan, April 30, 2020. At the Edge of the Margins: COVID-19’s impact on women in the sex trade. Online conference sponsored by Coalition against Trafficking in Women (CATW).

[12]According to reports from advocates, survivors and law enforcement sources, the United States sex trade stayed steady or increased during March and April 2020. Detective Joseph Scaramucci from McLennan County Sheriff’s Office in Waco, Texas said that he saw no significant change in response to prostitution ads and no change in the extent of sex trafficking. In Phoenix, Arizona, men’s demand for paid sex *increased* during the pandemic, possibly because Phoenix was one of a minority of US cities which remained open during the pandemic. Sergeant Mark Doty of Phoenix Police Department reported that street prostitution, trafficking and also online prostitution all increased as pimps transported women and girls from quarantined cities (Houston, Miami, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles) to Phoenix, because it remained open during the pandemic. Activist Nick Lembo from JustMenAz reported that he had no difficulty making massage brothel appointments in Phoenix.

[13] Thanks to Laila Mickelwait, Director of Abolition, Exodus Cry, for information about Pornhub. ModelHub is part of the online prostitution and trafficking business run by Pornhub and MindGeek. ModelHub advertises its production of porn at <https://www.modelhub.com/model-program> and <https://www.modelhub.com/information/about> and <https://www.modelhub.com/blog/7341>

[14]For example, Agence France-Presse (2020, April 19) glamorized Colombian webcam prostitution. Many US media sources take a similar pro-porn stance.

[15] The Nordic model law on prostitution does just that: women in prostitution are decriminalized and pimps and johns are criminalized.

[16] Mickey Meji is a leader of the Kwanele survivor movement and advocacy manager at Embrace Dignity, Cape Town. She spoke April 30, 2020, at an online conference sponsored by Coalition against Trafficking in Women (CATW), At the Edge of the Margins: COVID-19’s impact on women in the sex trade.

[17] Prostituting and trafficked women rent rooms in the brothel where they live. “Pascha’s [German brothel] main income is the rent we get from the girls,” explained Hermann Müller, the pimp/manager of Pascha. Women pay €175 for 24 hours’ use of a room at Pascha. They must service least four men to break even (Dia, 2015).

[18] As in Germany, many women who would otherwise be homeless, live in the Nevada legal brothels.

[19] Battered women are in great danger from abusers when they are quarantined with no escape from the abuse or have no privacy for phoning for help.

[20] There were barriers to emergency funding for women in the sex trade in NZ. Ally-Marie Diamond, a co-founder of the organization explained, “Many women in the sex trade don’t have the records and evidence that the government requires to show what their earnings have been before having access to financial support, and many women in the sex trade in New Zealand are not New Zealand residents, therefore, may think they do not qualify” for government assistance (Kronast, 2020).

[21] The letter to the UN Secretary-General is accessible at <https://prostitutionresearch.com/un-response-to-covid-19-must-include-exploited/>

[22] During the pandemic, a mile-long line of cars in southern California waited for emergency food donations (Nicholson, 2020).

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