



# **Taking the Pulse on COVID 19**

## **The Experiences and Needs of Women in Prostitution during COVID 19: Forgotten Voices of the Pandemic**

**November 2020**



# **Unheard Voices of Women in Prostitution**

**During lockdown and the initial phases of the Government Roadmap, women in prostitution reported the following;**

- **Some men continue to want risky sex (sex without a condom) during a global pandemic**
- **An initial collapse in demand for paid sex significantly impacting women's finances**
- **Venues such as massage parlours and brothels closed during lockdown with many women not able to access financial supports**
- **The closure of brothels made some women homeless**
- **Heightened risk of violence from men who buy sex (punters) using emergency measure restrictions to pressurise women**
- **Struggles to make money from camming/online platforms because of market saturation**
- **A need to turn to unsecure online platforms and private galleries to sell sexual images to paying fans or subscribers (e.g. OnlyFans/ Adultworks/ AdmireMe)**

**Lockdown is similar to the pre-pandemic daily lives of many women in the sex trade. Isolation and being shut off from the rest of society is a regular feature.**

# Case Study in Covid

I have worked across Europe as an escort since I was 19. I used to come to Ireland a few times a year to make money but then I met a nice Irish guy and he persuaded me to move here on a more permanent basis and we decided that I would give up escorting. I had EU citizenship so I was lucky not to have visa issues but I did worry about supporting myself in Ireland as I had a lot of difficulty finding a job. After a few months, we agreed I would go back to escorting because I couldn't earn enough to live independently and it was putting strain on our relationship. Our relationship was deteriorating rapidly and I started to feel like I had to always take his advice or do what he wanted because he paid the rent and brought in the majority of our money. Things only got worse when I went back escorting and he made me describe each punter and their requested services in detail, making him angry and jealous. I began to start travelling abroad to escort again.

When the lockdown came to Ireland, I was back living with my partner in Dublin and had booked accommodation in other Irish locations to work out of. I didn't really understand COVID at first but did notice a drop off in my punters that week and had to cancel accommodation for the weeks after. I didn't think COVID would be that serious but within two weeks' things had slowed down completely. Suddenly I wasn't making any money and I realised very quickly that I could no longer live in the apartment with my partner as he began to verbally abuse me and wanted me to leave – I wanted to leave too but had no money and nowhere to go. I thought about going home or going to see friends but I was scared to bring the virus with me. To make matters worse, I was experiencing some uncomfortable discharge from my vagina and could not visit the drop in clinic due to the lockdown and worried myself to a point of illness at what the possible cause could be. By the time the private clinics opened, I had to make the difficult decision to borrow money from my now ex-partner to get tested.

At this time, I started camming to make some money. This presented its own challenges as I was still living with my estranged partner. Some punters wanted virtual services during the day and I worried he would hear the noises of build-up and orgasm from camming as he was now home all day. Tougher still were the late night requests for virtual services when punters in lockdown could not get away from their wives and children and I worried I would wake him with my noises in the middle of the night.

I ultimately decided to go back to face to face services after my estranged partner met another escort. I was so hurt because I had given up my life to move to this country to be with him. When I went back, the punters had changed – some more demanding and aggressive and they seemed to have realised that if I was working during COVID then I must be desperate for money. They are right. I am desperate for money. I have no other income, no way to pay rent, food, or advertising and I get the sense that these guys don't even care. They don't seem to care about their own health – or mine.

"He made me describe each punter and their requested services in detail, making him angry and jealous"

"I wanted to leave too but had no money and nowhere to go"

"They seemed to have realised that if I was working during COVID then I must be desperate for money"

# Introduction

Covid-19 has had and continues to have a detrimental impact on the lives of women who sell sex on the street and in off street settings such as apartments, brothels, and selling images online. The pandemic has made a bad situation worse with the choices of those currently in prostitution becoming more limited and it has also led to more women being at risk of entering prostitution.

**Prostitution is not  
the solution to  
women's poverty**

The women involved have faced significant challenges in areas such as lack of finance, housing, social isolation and safety issues but are also facing additional challenges in accessing support due to stigma and fear of disclosing their specific circumstances. Women who are undocumented in Ireland face even further barriers because they are afraid to speak with the authorities and often will not come forward to seek support from services. Research undertaken by the Sexual Exploitation Research Programme (SERP) in UCD<sup>[1]</sup> into the main website used to advertise prostitution in Ireland found that, whilst there was an initial decrease in the number of women advertised during the pandemic and in the height of the accompanying lockdown, there were still hundreds of women being advertised, and these numbers began to rise again as lockdown continued – from 299 on April 20th to 434 on May 28th, and hitting 692 on July 20th of this year. This research suggests that expected increases in the levels of poverty in Ireland post COVID-19 are already manifesting in relation to the sex trade. Action needs to be taken now to respond to these challenges and ensure COVID-19 does not drive even more women into this exploitative and harmful situation.

## Financial Impact on Women

The financial impact of COVID 19 on women in prostitution and victims of sex trafficking has been devastating for some women. COVID 19 restricted movements and social distancing meant that their income was initially removed and is still subject to restrictions. The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is difficult to access for some women with challenges presenting in terms of lack of online access to application processes, a lack of proof of employment for women working in the sex trade, and the absence of a PPS number or a right to work in the case of asylum seekers or migrant women.

There is also direct evidence from Ruhama's Bridge to Work Programme of women who had exited the sex trade to take up mainstream employment and losing their jobs during the pandemic who are now considering re-entering the sex trade as they feel there are no alternatives available to them. Other challenges include:

- Women sending money home to house and educate their children have to continue to do this during the pandemic, fearing the risk of their children becoming homeless many thousands of miles away.
- Some women owe debts to loan sharks and other legal lenders who charge exorbitant interest charges and are concerned what consequences may result if they are unable to pay.
- Women feel excluded from any universal support and saw the lack of direct action during initial lockdown as linked to the stigma and marginalisation they feel. Women accessed emergency packs which included some small financial supports through Non-Government Agencies such as Ruhama, funded by the Department of Justice and Equality.

<sup>[1]</sup> [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/sexual-exploitation-research-project-serp-ucd\\_impact-of-covid-19-on-irelandssex-trade-activity-667400445618873](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/sexual-exploitation-research-project-serp-ucd_impact-of-covid-19-on-irelandssex-trade-activity-667400445618873) Breslin, R. (forthcoming, 2020). Exploitation 'as usual': Emerging Evidence on the Impact of COVID 19 on Ireland's Sex Trade. Dublin: SERP

# Access to Services and Essentials

Women in the sex trade are very often hidden from mainstream services. There are high numbers of women in the Irish sex industry for whom English is not their first language and so are less likely to be able to read and understand public information, which is often rapidly changing and, at times, confusing. Women did not identify with the public health messages as they felt some were not relevant to their situations or were not applicable. Prior to COVID-19, women were not aware what was available in their area, what their rights or social welfare entitlements were and how to engage with systems and processes and during lockdown and early phases required high levels of support and advocacy with this. In some cases Ruhama provided food and supplies for women and their families and sexual health packs throughout the pandemic.

Service users often meet hurdles due to unfamiliarity with local networks and resources, language barriers and existing isolation. Women need access to support in many different forms and must be supported to cope with not only the current situation but also any potential trauma from their involvement in the sex trade which very often takes time to manifest. Additionally, women in Direct Provision experienced stress and fear stemming from outbreaks of COVID-19 in Direct Provision accommodation and were further stigmatised by being refused entry to local shops and pharmacies, having been identified as residents from the Direct Provision system.

Ruhama know of some women who do not have access to the internet or mobile data on a consistent and regular basis and so may not be hearing information and updates on COVID-19. With assistance from the Department of Justice & Equality, we have been able to provide some technical solutions, providing smart phones, tablets, top-ups and some laptops. Some women use shared services such as coffee shops, internet cafés or communal areas in accommodation centres in the case of asylum seekers which are now closed as a result of COVID 19 restrictions and this presents further challenges to accessing services.

## Housing

COVID 19 presents significant housing challenges for women in prostitution and victims of trafficking. Women are very concerned about their homes and precarious housing situations. Some women express concern about mortgage payments and rent arrears with some women initially paying 2 sets of rent – for their home and for any apartments/ flats on which they have leases from which they sell sex.

Women who were homeless or rough sleeping were accommodated during lockdown. However, some women living in homeless accommodation reported working throughout the lockdown by taking greater risks and using the buyer's car as the location for the sexual exchange. Some vulnerable women are forced to exchange sex for drugs and somewhere to stay. In addition to these concerns, women reported:

- Some landlords do allow women to stay without paying rent in money, but instead the woman has to give sexual favours in exchange.
- Apprehension about approaching services for support and advice around rent arrears due to possible repercussions from landlords if they knew women were involved in the sex trade.
- High levels of coercion and control for some women. Some women reported being thrown out by their pimp once lockdown began, making them homeless.

# Health

## Mental Health

Women who sell sex and victims of trafficking are often already attempting to overcome social isolation as a result of the sex trade and a bad situation is only becoming worse as a result of lockdown. One of the major challenges around supporting our service users during a time of COVID has been assisting in providing a means of digital connection in difficult circumstances. Some women feel they have had a sudden “forced exit” from the sex trade which can be distressing as the process of exiting is not linear and can be difficult, complex, and usually requires a high level of planning across a number of years. We know that as women exit the sex trade very often the full trauma comes. We are concerned that in the coming months they may have to deal with this in very isolated and intense circumstances.

Ruhama has set up a service user social group and virtual meetings in lieu of face to face meetings where possible and some service users have established support groups online. Ruhama has also set up a parenting group during lockdown where mothers were able to give each other much needed peer support around parenting. Women with children report struggling during lockdown. They feel unable to support their children's education either through a lack of equipment, their own lack of a formal education, or, in some cases, both.

## Sexual Health

While Ruhama continues to provide condoms, lubricants, and panic alarms during the pandemic, it doesn't provide other forms of contraception or STI testing and these are crucial health services for women in the sex trade. It is vital that free walk-in sexual health services are made as accessible as possible, taking cognizance of the challenge of COVID 19 in this context. It is important that women can easily access sexual health services with specialist support such as the Women's Health Service in Heytesbury Street and St. James GUIDE Clinic. Pathways to triage need to ensure that women involved in selling sex are given a priority in accessing services as they must continue to provide sexual activities during the pandemic. Women still have to see sex buyers but may not be able to maintain boundaries around safer sex due to pressure from pimps and their dire financial situation. Women still need access to contraception and those on longer lasting methods such as injections will need access to repeat services.

## Addiction

At the beginning of lockdown, some women on drug treatment programmes were concerned as to how they would continue to access treatment. Drug services had to develop new approaches and measures were implemented, ensuring ongoing treatment and support which alleviated womens' concern around accessing treatment. Some women had to continue selling sex to get the money for drugs and some women had to start exchanging sex for drugs themselves. Ruhama is currently developing key partnerships with addiction/homeless organisations that offer support around addiction and housing. These organisations have reported that women are particularly vulnerable to selling sex in order to survive homelessness and maintaining their addiction. This is borne out by the experience of Ruhama's Outreach Van team that operates on the streets of Dublin at night time.

## Staying Safe

Women in the sex trade face some very specific challenges about maintaining their safety. Some women have no choice but to accept bookings from sex buyers whom they would not accept in other circumstances, sex buyers using women's financial vulnerability to pressurise them to remove their existing boundaries to make money and encouraging them to breach emergency measure restrictions. Women in brothels report concerns about social distancing with sex buyers and ability to implement public health recommendations around COVID-19 transmission.

Ruhama remains concerned about the outcomes for potential victims of trafficking still in situations of exploitation as, even with lockdown being eased, there are fewer opportunities for proactive identification or for women to seek assistance. Ruhama knows from previous research carried out (Reach Project) that these are the hardest to reach victims and there is grave concern for their lives during a pandemic as they are seen by their traffickers as a commodity and expendable. Ruhama continues to provide remote support and individual face to face supports during the pandemic for those women.

However, some women are reporting a willingness to report crimes committed against them to An Garda Síochána and they welcomed the Garda National Protective Service Bureau initiative (Operation QUEST) that involved Gardaí reaching out during the pandemic.

## Changing Landscape of the Sex Trade

The pandemic has meant that some women in the sex trade have turned to digital mediums to provide sexual services or sexual content in an effort to keep within the government restrictions while attempting to sustain themselves financially. Many make the decision out of necessity without reflection, preparation or being in a position to make an informed choice. These are not safe and secure sites for women and existing legislation does not cover the images being stolen and shared without consent. There are long term risks for the women if this happens with impacts on their mental health, family relationships, and future employment.

One such site, OnlyFans, received 1.85 million new registrations globally since the end of February of both those selling such images and those wishing to subscribe and pay [2]. OnlyFans has a reported 75% increase in new sign ups in May, with 7000 to 8000 new creators joining each day, with 29% aged 18 to 21 and 33% aged 22 to 25.

There is already a recognition that as saturation and competition has increased, women are pressured to override their boundaries – making content that they are not comfortable with – to ensure subscribers and sex buyers continue to pay. Women report having to take every opportunity they can to sell content as the level of demand for images and videos is lower than the demand for face-to-face selling of sex. Furthermore, Ruhama are concerned that more students are turning to selling sex and camming during the pandemic because their part-time jobs are generally in the service/hospitality industry which has been one of the sectors hit the hardest.

[2] <http://www.thenational.scot/news/18685630.choice-empowering-choose-dismantle-capitalism/>

# Navigating the Pandemic

**As we move through the COVID pandemic, it is becoming increasingly clear that Ireland will be facing financial hardship and increasing pressure on state supports in the coming years. Women will be disproportionately negatively affected by this and none more so than women in the sex trade. We are concerned that more women will be drawn into the sex trade who would not have considered this in other circumstances but feel they have no alternative options. Certain parts of the sex trade have promoted the ease of access to sign up and start on image selling platforms. As in any emergency, more women and girls are incredibly vulnerable to being sexually exploited. Preventing this from happening is a matter of urgency.**

**There is a substantial need for comprehensive harm reduction outreach services to support women but there also needs to be a clear approach on a national level in respect of exit pathways. Exiting is often a long, complicated process which requires planning and support. In the absence of a clearly defined and agreed model of exiting support in Ireland, COVID 19 has exacerbated the gap in services to assist an individual wishing to exit the sex trade. This gap means that there is not a substantial body of guidance to draw upon but Ruhama and other entities such as SERP, the Immigrant Council of Ireland and the National Womens Council of Ireland continue to lobby for a comprehensive exit strategy that includes state funded exit pathways out of prostitution.**



# Key Recommendations 2020/2021

The following recommendations form fundamental elements of a roadmap to recovery for women in prostitution and victims of trafficking ;

- **Access to finance via an emergency fund and an assistance payment scheme for women seeking to exit prostitution**
- **Provision of access to suitable housing and accommodation, including gender specific accommodation for victims of trafficking**
- **Increasing provision of exit supports for women affected by prostitution and sex trafficking. This includes;**
  - **increased access and opportunities to education and development programmes**
  - **increased provision of adequate trauma therapy and trauma informed responses**
- **Effective implementation of the current legislation, the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 with a particular focus on adequate resourcing of An Garda Síochána to ensure enforcement of the legislation**
- **Ongoing awareness raising campaigns, education and research opportunities to bring about change in the sex trade in Ireland**
- **Implementation of a Spent Convictions Bill so that previous convictions of women in prostitution can be expunged**
- **Eradicating women's poverty in Irish society as a matter of urgency to eliminate one of the key push factors for women entering the sex trade**



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