

How has the coronavirus pandemic affected women involved in prostitution?

Yasha is part of a network of projects around the UK that are affiliated to Beyond The Streets (www.beyondthestreets.org.uk) A number of these projects have reported that massage parlours appear to be closing down permanently in certain areas. Whilst this might seem like a good thing, what has happened to the women who relied on this money to pay their bills?

According to researcher Melissa Farley¹, pimps and sex worker unions have strongly promoted online prostitution/pornography and webcamming during the coronavirus pandemic.

The industry is often portrayed as empowering and lucrative, but the reality is often very different. Women can find it hard to set boundaries when clients are demanding more and more degrading acts for their money, many women and there have also been cases of stalking and harassment linked to webcamming. And with more and more women entering the webcamming industry as a way of making money, competition has forced prices down leading to women sometimes carrying out increasingly degrading and dangerous acts online to maintain clients.

Hope Barden's body was discovered by her housemate at her Staffordshire flat in 2018 after she died from asphyxiation during an online sex act. The Chief Executive of Staffordshire Women's Aid said that her death highlighted a need for more awareness of the dangers of online prostitution.

Some women may have turned to lone working from home during the pandemic, or may be accepting

outcalls to clients' preferred locations. Sex worker unions issue advice such as checking under the pillow or bed for weapons, never wearing a necklace or a scarf because of the risk of choking, planning exit strategies, keeping one's eyes on the client at all times, etc. The list of precautions is lengthy. It is nonetheless acknowledged that danger cannot be ruled out entirely and "you may have to submit in order to preserve your life" (National Ugly Mugs safety advice²). Whatever measures they take, the reality is that women in the sex trade are always at a high risk of experiencing violence. The most recent report on prostitution issued by the UK Parliament's Home Affairs Committee cites findings that it is one of the most dangerous occupations in the world, with "near pandemic levels of violence."³

"It is a sign that women are still seen as available for objectification, and it seems to me that there is a strongly misogynistic element to men who derive pleasure from seeing women in pain, fantasy or otherwise."

"Any form of violent pornography is a way for individuals to access violent fantasies, but there are always real people involved, and often very vulnerable women. It seems that there is something about the adult webcam industry that gives the impression of no responsibility because there is no physical contact. But there is contact, and there is risk."

Chief Executive of Staffordshire Women's Aid, 2018

¹ <https://prostitutionresearch.com/prostitution-the-sex-trade-and-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

² www.uglymugs.org

³ Research by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade, reproduced in the Home Affairs Committee report on Prostitution - Third Report of Session 2016-17

During the current crisis, there are likely to be many women who have felt they have had no choice but to continue to try and sell sex in order to cover their basic needs such as housing, food and bills. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some clients have used women's financial desperation to push for more risky or demeaning activities and/or to offer less money. Despite these realities, sex worker unions have sought to use the pandemic as an opportunity to advocate for the full decriminalisation of the sex trade.

The campaign group Nordic Model Now (www.nordicmodelnow.org) is one of many groups countering this call, insisting that legalising the industry of sexual exploitation would be a disaster for vulnerable women and girls. A significant body of prostitution survivors agree, and a letter sent to the Home Secretary on 2nd April 2020 by Sarah Champion MP and co-signed by a cross-bench group of MPs, as well as peers and women's groups, affirmed this position. The letter also states that greater recognition and funding should be given to groups that focus on supporting women to exit prostitution. Given that the pathway into prostitution frequently includes some configuration of sexual abuse, trauma and/or poverty, the solution is surely not to decriminalise the symptom but to address its causes?

Melissa Farley is a clinical psychologist and academic who has researched and published on prostitution for over 25 years across many different countries. Her full essay on 'Prostitution, the Sex Trade, and the COVID-19 Pandemic' can be read here:

<https://prostitutionresearch.com/prostitution-the-sex-trade-and-the-covid-19-pandemic/>