



**nswp** Global Network of Sex Work Projects  
Promoting Health and Human Rights

## COVID-19 Impact Survey – Europe

### Introduction

In April 2020, NSWP launched a global survey to understand the impact of COVID-19 on sex workers. The survey received 156 responses in total from 55 different countries out of which 43 responses were from 17 countries – Armenia, Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, North Macedonia, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom – in the Europe region.<sup>1</sup>

*“Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe and Central Asia, sex workers have reported extreme concerns with the dramatic impact on their living conditions, including the ability to earn a living and access to health.*

*This loss of income and support opened a vicious circle of vulnerabilities: homelessness, poverty, inability to pay bills and provide food for oneself or family. Many sex workers reported having to break the rules of lockdown and work under increased risks of police violence, blackmail, detention and penalties, as well as potential exposure to the virus. Especially vulnerable are single mothers with children, trans people, migrants and refugees.”* – Quote from a joint report by Sex Workers’ Rights Advocacy Network for Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (SWAN) and the International Committee for the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE), NSWP Regional Networks.

### Overview of the legal landscape<sup>2</sup>

#### Austria

Selling sex is legal only under certain specific conditions with each province functioning under different rules on what is permitted and what is not. Sex work not recognised as work, although contracts between sex workers and clients have been accepted by the Supreme Court as valid and enforceable.

#### Bulgaria

Sex work is not specifically addressed in the law but some laws that criminalise sex workers such as the “punishment of prostitutes due to idleness” continue to exist. As these regulations continue to form part of criminal law, they contribute to significant legal uncertainty. Sex work

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<sup>1</sup> Note: We received complete data only from the 13 countries – Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, North Macedonia, Ukraine, and United Kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> [“Global Mapping of Sex Work Laws,”](#) NSWP.



not recognised as work and procuring premises for sex work (brothel-keeping) is illegal in Bulgaria.

### **France**

It is legal to sell sex and national level soliciting laws were repealed when France criminalised clients. Some municipal administrative laws still criminalise sex workers by forbidding street sex work in certain areas. All activities including brothel keeping, facilitating sex work, encouraging 'prostitution', advertising and profiting from 'prostitution' are criminalised.

### **Germany**

The German law at a federal level recognises contracts between sex workers and clients as valid. At the local level however, it is regulated in many ways as an "immoral practice" or "public order" issue. There are only a few places in Germany, like Berlin, where sex work can take place freely. Under new laws sex workers are required to register with the authorities to work legally and brothels can only hire registered workers. This means that the work of unregistered sex workers is illegal.

### **Netherlands**

Selling sex is legal in the Netherlands although local authorities have the power to set their own rules on how sex work operates in their areas. This can be a formal policy, meaning that the municipality does not permit the establishment of sex work, or an effective zero policy, meaning that the conditions for establishment are such that it makes it practically impossible. Examples of illegal sex work in the Netherlands include 'commercial home prostitution', escort services, erotic massage parlours and street-based sex work outside the designated zones.

### **Norway**

Selling sex is legal in Norway but buying sexual services is criminalised. There are laws against sex workers legally renting premises to work in. This means that sex work is not criminalised but sex workers are vulnerable to eviction and harassment.

### **Romania**

Selling sex is illegal in Romania as is soliciting, which is treated as a public order offence. Pandering is illegal in Romania, which includes encouraging or facilitating 'prostitution'.

### **Russia**

It is illegal to sell sex in any context under the code of administrative offences. It is illegal to organise/manage in any context. Living on the earnings, brothel-keeping and organising 'prostitution' are criminalised under Criminal Code.

### **Spain**

Selling sex is legal in Spain but there is a law against sex work "in areas of public transit" or close to places where minors are (schools, parks). Each local authority has the discretion to regulate sex work as it chooses. This means that in many areas there are rules against soliciting in certain places in public and sex workers can be fined for breaching these. Sex work is not recognised as work. However, a ruling from a Barcelona court says that sex



workers should be treated as employees and employer should make health insurance and social security contributions.

### **Switzerland**

Selling sex is legal in Switzerland. Working on the streets however is regulated with certain zones where it is legal and others where it is not. If sex workers work outside designated areas they can be fined. Brothel-keeping is legal although licensing systems can be quite onerous meaning it is difficult for small businesses and sex worker collectives to run brothels.

### **North Macedonia**

Selling sex is an administrative offence under Article 19 of the 'Law on Misdemeanors'. This Article also makes it illegal to rent or make available a premises for 'prostitution'. Brothel-keeping is criminalised and this covers owners of hotels and restaurants if they allow sex work to happen on premises. Procuring, encouragement and facilitating sex work is also criminalised.

### **Ukraine**

Selling sex is illegal in Ukraine and is an administrative offence. Brothel-keeping, facilitating and pandering is criminalised.

### **United Kingdom**

Selling sex is legal only if done by an individual alone indoors. Activities associated with sex work are criminalised including soliciting on the streets and working indoors with more than one person. In Northern Ireland soliciting on the streets is legal. Buying sex is legal if done indoors but buying sex on the streets is illegal in Scotland and England and Wales. In Northern Ireland, all clients are criminalised. Brothel-keeping and living on the earnings of a sex worker is criminalised in all countries that make up the UK.

## **Impact of COVID-19 on sex workers in Europe**

### **Please describe how the sex worker community in your location has been impacted by COVID-19.**

The crisis is endangering the lives of sex workers both if they choose to continue working and if they decide to stop.

*"Most sex workers have stopped working but we are facing very high precariousness. Many street sex workers who meet many clients have tested positive and so far we have counted 3 sex workers dead."* – Sex worker organisation, France

*"Some sex workers are planning to return to work. Due to the low demand we can expect the lowering of service prices which means that sex workers will be prepared to accept more risk in order to earn a living. Many clients demand discounts or demand additional services without pay. We have witnessed more robberies of the indoor venues together with the raids which are conducted by the nationalist organisations together with the media and the police."* – Sex worker organisation, Russia



## What measures are governments taking in response to COVID-19?

When asked to respond on their government's measures in the wake of COVID-19, the responses were as follows.

- 27/28 responses reported social or physical distancing measures.<sup>3</sup>
- 22/28 responses reported self-isolation for the vulnerable.<sup>4</sup>
- 19/28 responses reported quarantining certain areas or people.<sup>5</sup>

When asked to list other measures that governments have undertaken, 17 of the respondents gave answers, touching more upon laws and the specific measures taken against sex work.

*"They have made sex work illegal (explicitly) as well as massage parlours – which is a common work place for sex workers in Norway as brothels are illegal."* – Sex worker organisation, Norway

## Have governments or law enforcement taken any repressive measures in response to COVID-19 aimed directly at sex workers?

Based on a list of measures listed in the survey, the responses were as follows:

- 19/28 reported the closure of brothels, bars and massage parlors.<sup>6</sup>
- 12/28 reported crackdowns in areas known for street-based sex work.<sup>7</sup>
- 9/28 reported increased monitoring of independent sex work.<sup>8</sup>
- 5/28 reported increased raids, arrests and prosecutions.<sup>9</sup>
- 2/28 reported compulsory testing for COVID-19.<sup>10</sup>
- 3/28 reported prosecution for testing positive for COVID-19.<sup>11</sup>

When given the opportunity to add other measures, a sex worker from Germany expanded on the impact of the closure of brothels, bars, and massage parlors, saying, *"In the cases where brothels/parlours were closed with migrant workers who would also live temporarily in the parlour – these people were left jobless and homeless."*

## How have these measures impacted sex workers?

This open-ended question was answered by 27/28 respondents, each giving an insight in to the levels of extreme inequality sex workers are facing during this pandemic.

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<sup>3</sup> Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Romania, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> Bulgaria, France, Germany, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Romania, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

<sup>5</sup> Bulgaria, France, Germany, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Romania, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

<sup>6</sup> Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

<sup>7</sup> Austria, France, Germany, Netherlands, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

<sup>8</sup> Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

<sup>9</sup> Germany, Netherlands, Russia, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

<sup>10</sup> Netherlands.

<sup>11</sup> France, Russia, Ukraine.

*“We are not allowed to meet with clients, with the risk of a large fine. Some people like myself do not have the opportunity to take the risk to work as I am high risk/vulnerable.” – Sex worker, Germany*

*“There are restrictions on circulation of all citizens, and one is allowed to go out of their home only with a signed declaration and have a “real” and “urgent” reason. This has led to police and army actually harassing all citizens, and sex workers are facing now doubly this violence, on top of the fact that they were already harassed by police before.” – Sex worker organisation, Romania*

### **Has COVID-19 reduced access to essential health services and commodities?**

In addition to a global economic crisis, access to healthcare has also been severely affected by the ongoing crisis and sex workers are facing the impact in the following ways :

- 11/28 responses reported reduced access to condoms and lubricants.<sup>12</sup>
- 15/28 responses reported reduced access to harm reduction services.<sup>13</sup>
- 5/28 responses reported reduced access to HIV treatment.<sup>14</sup>
- 9/28 responses reported reduced access to STI testing and treatment.<sup>15</sup>

### **Has there been any positive government or local authority measures to help protect sex workers?**

Given a list of measures, the responses from the 28 complete surveys are as follows :

- 0/28 reported a temporary ban on raids, arrests and/or prosecutions for sex work-related offences.
- 2/28 reported their government were ensuring documented and undocumented migrant sex workers can access health services.<sup>16</sup>

When given the opportunity to add other positive measures, some of the responses reflected positive actions while others further highlighted the deep inequality and the lack of respect for sex workers’ autonomy.

*“No, nothing apart from claiming they maintain commissions for the exit path and communicate on support for abolitionist organisations who are supposed to help us quit sex work.” – Sex worker organisation, France*

*“Great, fast financial help for self employed sex workers.” Sex worker, Germany*

### **Are sex workers included in social protection/economic support schemes?**

Respondents were given a list of social protection and economic support schemes and were asked to indicate which schemes are available for the general population and if these schemes are also available for sex workers.

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<sup>12</sup> Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Romania, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

<sup>13</sup> Bulgaria, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, North Macedonia, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

<sup>14</sup> Norway, Romania, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

<sup>15</sup> Bulgaria, France, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Spain, United Kingdom, Ukraine.

<sup>16</sup> Germany and France.

**Scheme: Income support schemes for both employed and self-employed – where some income or unemployment benefit paid for by the state.**

- 24/28 reported this scheme is available for the general population.<sup>17</sup>
- 11/28 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.<sup>18</sup>

**Scheme: Emergency funds for those facing hardship.**

- 10/28 reported this scheme is available for the general population.<sup>19</sup>
- 8/28 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.<sup>20</sup>

**Scheme: Emergency food packs / essential supplies.**

- 11/28 reported this scheme is available for the general population.<sup>21</sup>
- 8/28 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.<sup>22</sup>

**Scheme: Rent /mortgage relief schemes.**

- 8/28 reported this scheme is available for the general population.<sup>23</sup>
- 2/28 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.<sup>24</sup>

**Scheme: Ban on evictions for rent or mortgage arrears.**

- 14/28 reported this scheme is available for the general population.<sup>25</sup>
- 9/28 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.<sup>26</sup>

**Scheme: Emergency housing options for homeless people.**

- 16/28 reported this scheme is available for the general population.<sup>27</sup>
- 10/28 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, respondents mentioned challenges they faced, even if certain schemes were in place.

*“For sex workers who have registered as self-employed they have access to income support like everyone else. However, extremely few sex workers in Norway are registered this way because*

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<sup>18</sup> Austria, France, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

<sup>19</sup> Austria, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine.

<sup>20</sup> Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland.

<sup>21</sup> Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, North Macedonia, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

<sup>22</sup> Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, North Macedonia, United Kingdom.

<sup>23</sup> Germany, Netherlands, Romania, Spain, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

<sup>24</sup> Germany, Netherlands.

<sup>25</sup> France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

<sup>26</sup> France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

<sup>27</sup> France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, North Macedonia, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

<sup>28</sup> France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, North Macedonia, United Kingdom.



*organising sex work is illegal and sex workers do not have any workers rights.” – Sex worker organisation, Norway*

### **If sex workers are not eligible for these schemes, why do respondents think they are excluded?**

20/28 respondents who answered this question addressed issues relating to discrimination, stigma, and a legal landscape that criminalises sex work.<sup>29</sup>

*As a sex worker organisation from the United Kingdom points out, “Being criminalised, sex workers are denied status as workers so we are denied the rights and entitlements other workers may have.”*

### **How is the sex worker community responding to this crisis?**

*“The pandemic has shone light not only on the vulnerabilities and precariousness of our community but – and even more so – on our resilience and strength. Sex workers all over Europe have organised to reach out and protect their community by providing food, money, medication, advice and psychological support. Sex workers, often without official state support or recognition, were essential in ‘flattening the curve’ and protecting their health and the health of their community. States and international institutions must recognise the role sex workers have played and continue to play in addressing public health crises and work in collaboration with sex worker-led orgs to end COVID-19 and any other pandemic.” – ICRSE, NSWP Regional Network*

### **Emergency funds**

24/28 responses recorded that the local sex worker community had established emergency funds.<sup>30</sup> However, a common theme among these responses was that the emergency funding is unsustainable, as there is not enough to go around and the money is allocated very quickly.

*“We are gathering money in an emergency fund and giving out direct economic aid in the form of “cashcards” or direct bank transfers. We run out of money very fast because the need is much greater than we can cover.” – Sex worker organisation, Norway*

*“Yes, SWARM set up a hardship fund of £200 one off payments for sex workers in need. I was very grateful for this but I’m still going to struggle to afford food and bills without work.” – Sex worker, United Kingdom*

### **Emergency food supplies**

12/28 responses reported that the local sex worker community had set up emergency food supplies.<sup>31</sup>

*“We are providing emergency food and hygienic supplies for sex workers in three cities.” – Sex worker organisation, North Macedonia*

*“We have been working continuously to try to get food parcels, food vouchers and other essential survival items to women in our network who are destitute, especially women who don’t have*

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<sup>30</sup> Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, North Macedonia, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

<sup>31</sup> Austria, Bulgaria, France, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, North Macedonia, Ukraine, United Kingdom.





*immigration status in the UK or who aren't entitled to any state support."* Sex worker organisation, United Kingdom

### **Emergency housing**

7/28 responses mentioned emergency housing support from the sex worker community.<sup>32</sup>

*"Our organisation gives money to sex workers to help them pay their rent or hotel."* – Sex worker organisation, France

*"Financial support for emergency accommodation at the hotel."* – Sex worker organisation, Switzerland

### **Virtual support**

17/28 responses provided further details on the ways in which sex workers are using the virtual environment to cope in the current crisis.<sup>33</sup>

*"Our activists reach out with news on rights, legal situation and information on available services in different languages. We answer questions about specific issues from sex workers, but do not have resources to offer significant psychological support or virtual gatherings and such."* – Sex worker organisation, Norway

*"We disseminate information about the pandemic for sex workers through social networks, chats, groups and channels; we explain how to minimise infection risks, what are the hygiene measures that have to be taken by the clients, and what sex workers themselves should do to stay safe."* – Sex worker organisation, Russia

### **Sex worker community response vs government advice**

The survey asked for respondents to detail how the sex worker community response to COVID-19 has been different from that of their government's advice. 18/28 responses provided further information on the differences.<sup>34</sup>

*"Yes, the government only says that we must stop sex work and that they can help with the exit path. We are giving advice to reduce risks and give concrete material support for people who have no income."* – Sex worker organisation, France

*"The sex worker community has stepped in where the government has failed. We have established the hardship funds that work for us, set up support that works for us, lobbied for change and equal access and the rights of all in our community."* – Sex worker organisation, United Kingdom

### **Other**

When asked about other ways in which the sex worker community has been supporting one another during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2/7 responses gave more information on the ongoing legal support that organisations are offering to sex workers.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> France, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

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<sup>34</sup> France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Spain, North Macedonia, Ukraine, and United Kingdom

<sup>35</sup> Russia, United Kingdom.





*“Our lawyer compiled a list of social benefits to which some of the sex workers are entitled. It has to be said though, that very few sex workers will be able to receive them. On top of that, we are working on a leaflet which will explain what form of liability is envisioned for the violation of the lock down rules. We regularly update information on measure to be taken to protect oneself from police abuse in the case of arrest for prostitution. We provide moral and informational support to all sex workers, and legal support upon request.” – Sex worker organisation, Russia*

*“Police raids on the street and of premises and trawling of sex worker websites have continued so our own work of defending sex workers from raids and arrests has continued.” – Sex worker organisation, United Kingdom*

### **What else is needed to help protect sex workers during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

21 answers were provided to this final open-ended question.<sup>36</sup> These responses ranged from simple requests for basic PPE, to re-emphasising the exclusion of sex workers from government schemes due to criminalisation of sex work.

*“We need full rights for undocumented migrants as long as this crisis persists and we need governments to offer income support to people who are not registered as workers. We need rent relief and appropriate and accessible housing (beds in a gymnasium is not enough - we should use empty hotel rooms and apartments!). We need the government to stop criminalising sex workers for selling sex/transmitting COVID-19 through sex work.” – Sex worker organisation, Norway*

*“Now more than ever it is clear sex work needs to be decriminalised and we should receive labour rights! Sex workers in Romania cannot access state aid, cannot access social benefits and aid, because of the fines received in the past, as our work is penalised. Moreover, the presence of army and police in the streets has resulted in even more police abuse. Sex workers have lost all income because of this, and are faced with precarity, poverty, and risk of losing their housing.” – Sex worker organisation, Romania*

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<sup>36</sup> Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Russia, Spain, Ukraine, United Kingdom.



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NSWP is an alliance partner of Bridging the Gaps – health and rights for key populations. This unique programme addresses the common challenges faced by sex workers, people who use drugs and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in terms of human rights violations and accessing much-needed HIV and health services. Go to: [www.hivgaps.org](http://www.hivgaps.org) for more information.