

SAVE

Sex Workers Against Violence and Exploitation : A Call For Urgency in Sex Work Reopening Plan.

April 20 2021.

We are confronted in the Netherlands for the first time with what happens when sex work is completely illegal in a country. Sex workers who are raped or robbed, no longer dare to go to the police for fear of consequences. Fearful of fines, restraining orders, violence from police and property eviction. Criminals unfortunately know this all too well and use this to their advantage. In a short amount of time, the situation has gotten completely out of hand. Violence against sex workers has seen an extreme increase and the violence; more malicious and calculated than ever. It's coupled with the disastrous effects of the corona crisis, where sex workers are left unsupported by government and must keep working. Sex work hasn't really disappeared now it's been banned, it's just become more dangerous.

SAVE (Sex Workers Against Violence & Exploitation) is a collective of sex workers and we are very concerned about the violence our community is facing.

We are especially concerned about male sex workers, transgender sex workers, migrant sex workers, sex workers who are homeless and sex workers with addictions. They have a double stigma, face extreme marginalisation and are at an increased risk of violence.

We are repeatedly seeing the consequences of bad policy and planning and discrimination to our peers. We urge you to include sex workers in the pandemic response. We call for our inclusion into the opening measures, the stigma is intolerable and leading sex workers to unsafe working conditions and violence.

You can read some personal stories from our members here:

“In app groups in which sex workers warn each other, we see the most horrible things. On a video filmed by the sex worker's own outdoor camera, we have seen how five men storm inside and then minutes of screaming can be heard from a woman in agony. To warn us, she circulated this video. To the police she did not go.... Another audio clip of a sex worker being violently raped by several men. The screams go through marrow and bone.... In the app groups we see that criminals are actually looking for the sex workers in the most vulnerable situations.”

- Anonymous

“ I am a transgender woman, refugee and sex worker. I have been living in this country for 2 years. As a transgender woman is highly difficult to compete in the society and in the labor market which forces me to do sex work even during the lock down and the prohibition.

I have tried to get other jobs but i have not succeeded. Whilst the language and the fact that I am a transgender woman with ethnic background affect greatly my chances to compete, the current pandemic restriction have only made my way more difficult.

I have tried to get jobs in different sectors, I have accumulated two cases on discrimination and transphobia with two different companies. In one case, after one year of legal procedures and denounces with police, human rights organisations and the company, I got a recognition of discrimination by the company and I was offered a small amount of money as settlement. And also a small contribution to a transgender organisation. But still did not get a job.

The second case just happened in January, I tried to get a job with thuisbezorgd.nl and I also experienced discrimination and transphobia. On my first day, trial day I was immediately dismissed because the supervisor had been my client. Of course I have the opportunity and the right to go to another legal and long procedure to prove discrimination but I know is gonna be a long procedure, discrimination is very hard to prove, I am only a transgender migrant sex worker against a big company.

But this is not gonna solve my daily financial problems or give me a job immediately. I have no other choice than to be doing illegal and clandestine sex work with all the dangers that that implies, especially given my background. Violence, addiction, isolation, mental distress, etc. i could give you a story in each case. I can't afford just not to work, the bills don't stop coming every month, I have big debts to take care of back in my country, I have no other choice to keep doing sexwork against everything and everyone and im afraid im losing control of my situation.”

- Julia

“ I work via the opting-in system, a requirement from the establishment I work at. Since lockdown there has been no support for me or my coworkers. I have depleted my savings and face huge amounts of stress and uncertainty every day. We pay taxes and abide by all the laws and regulations but still after one year we are left totally unsupported and let down. I do feel that I am lucky. My friends face far worse than me. Many have lost their houses and face homelessness, increasingly vulnerable to exploitation and are pushed to work in dangerous unsafe environments. I've lost old coworkers to suicide, they can not see another way out. I hear their terrifying and scary experiences they face. It breaks my heart to see such strong people being pushed to their limits but we are all trying to survive.”

- Penelope

“ I am an indendent escort and I pay taxes, but I don't got permission from my city to work as an indendent escort, so I did not get a licence, so even though I pay taxes, yet I am an illegal sex worker. Because sex work is currently prohibited, I am not allowed and I do not dare to work secretly because a dear family member has weak health and I am afraid of getting corona and passing it on. This means that I have been without income for almost a whole year. My savings have run out. I have not been able to pay rent for 2 months. I don't qualify for TOZO or TONK because I don't have all the necessary permits. If the community wants my tax money, then suddenly it is a normal profession. In all other cases, it is a "special" profession. I also contribute to our community! But when I myself get in need, then the same community drops me. This makes me angry!

- Carola

In addition to the personal stories collected, SAVE would like to provide an overarching view of sex work discrimination during the pandemic.

Since March 23, contact professions are permitted with exclusion of sex work. The reasoning behind this seems to be because sex work is understood to be defined by close, personal touch. However, sex work is varied and nuanced. It entails much more than simply to have sex with another person in exchange for money. For many, it involves mostly talking and listening which can always be done at a safe distance. Touch is of course important, but it is often more limited than non-sex working people may think. A year of isolation has been hard on many and intimacy comes from more than physical sex. Sex workers are in close contact and touching clients just as much as a hairdresser, eyebrow waxers or a massage worker would be with their clients. This unfair discrimination is unfounded. Sex workers are models for safe sex and good hygiene. Our health is always our biggest priority, without it we can not work. We are vigilant towards our own health and the health of our clients. We too, care about being responsible in our work for community health while also being able to earn a living. Why are we not given the same opportunity?

Not only have sex workers been discriminated against from working with other contact professions, many people in the community are also barred completely from accessing government support during this time. TOZO is still unavailable to the entire opting-in branch of the sex industry because all professions that work with opting-in do not qualify for TOZO. However, half, if not more sex workers who worked in the licensed sector are obligated to work under opting-in if they work for escort companies, private houses, and sex clubs.

Some sex workers who are registered as ZZPers have been fortunate to qualify for TOZO, but not everyone who applied actually received financial support. The most marginalised sex workers struggle the hardest to access financial benefits, especially those with migrant status and uncertain residency status.

Since so many sex workers have been barred from receiving government benefits/compensation, options for survival have been limited. Without other income alternatives, some sex workers have had to continue working not because they want to, but because they have no other means of survival. People who have continued to do sex work during lockdown have found no security or comfort in police who send threatening messages about punishment instead of protection.

Sex work did not pose a serious threat to society in terms of virus transmission back when it was the first reopening in June 2020. Our work has now been differentiated from other contact professions like hairdressers, nail techs and masseuses. These professions are allowed and they have been enforced with restrictive and thoughtful safety measures. Why have we not been afforded this same luxury. We would be happy to consult in a few ways that will see us going back to work safely. It's unfair that we again have been left out of the conversation in which we are experts. Continuous infantilization of us as workers takes away our agency, and as we can see can have disastrous consequences. In the meantime we have come up with a few strategies we feel can be done for sex work to reopen safely.

SWers can meet the rules for contact-based professions who can already work:

<https://business.gov.nl/regulation/rules-contact-based-professions/>

1. Keep 1.5 m distance → also possible in sex work
 - a. Actual intercourse usually does not last longer than a haircut and takes much less time than a tattoo.
 - b. Fair amount of SW involves simply listening and talking, which does not require close contact.
 - c. Intercourse positions can be adapted so clients and professional are never face to face (professions such as eyebrow waxing, there is very close contact!)
 - d. Kissing is not done by the large majority.
2. See clients by appointment → already the norm for many sex workers
 - a. Some sex workers (ex: windows, private house, clubs) do not take appointments beforehand, but it's not necessary if clients pass a health check and both parties take proper precautions.
3. Health check → sex workers are already used to performing some sort of health checks on clients

- a. Back when sex work was still allowed during COVID, many sex workers' health checks on clients included questions about COVID symptoms, etc.
- b. Many sex workers pre-covid refused anyone exhibiting signs of illness coughing, runny nose, sneezing.
4. Regular cleaning → common practice among sex workers.
 - a. SWers already practiced great hygiene and self-awareness ex: hand-washing, cleaning/disinfecting workspace regularly, health checks on clients, condoms and gloves.
5. Wearing a face mask → possible in most positions
 - a. Other contact professions seem to be required to register their clients. Sex workers should not have to do this to protect the privacy of clients, who might not come if they have to provide their real information. It is already enough if SWers and clients do health checks.

If it is truly what you believe, that sex workers are more inclined than other contact professions to pose risk to the community health and if you really want to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID: give sex workers vaccine priority. Give them rapid tests for free or at a discount. Sex work will not disappear as we have shown you. The most vulnerable will continue to work. Canada has already implemented this strategy, <https://torontosun.com/news/national/sex-workers-get-priority-vaccine-access-in-vancouver> in two districts.

We thank you for the opportunity to tell our stories and we hope that you can reflect on our arguments. It has been a disastrous year for the world. We as sex workers have faced it with great difficulty. We are back to being treated like criminals, with police sending threats of punishment instead of being a source of protection and safety. We are targeted and violated. We are left to fend for ourselves, forgotten and ignored by politicians. It is with great urgency that sex work should be reopened. We can not allow any more of our community to be robbed or raped. We are tired of the violence that follows when sex workers are forced into working unsafely. Trust that reopening and allowing sex workers to begin working again will see the violence decrease, and trust that sex work can be practiced in a safe and responsible way.