



Global Network of Sex Work Projects
Promoting Health and Human Rights

COVID-19 Impact Survey – Latin America

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 9 responses were from 4 countries – Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and El Salvador – in the Latin America region¹.

“It’s been two months since the pandemic hit Latin America and a lot of sex workers are now starting to work again. But the conditions that they work in are even worse than before. They are more vulnerable, and their rights are not respected. COVID may not kill us, but hunger and desperation will kill sex workers.”

COVID has been really hard on us but at the same time, it’s been a challenging opportunity because COVID has unified many, many organisations in the whole region. The states of Latin America need to listen to what’s going on with sex workers and what they want.” – Plataforma Latinoamericana de Personas que ejercen el Trabajo Sexual (PLAPERTS), Latin American platform for sex worker-led organisations and NSWP Regional Network

Overview of the legal landscape²

Colombia

Selling sex is legal in Colombia when done in permitted zones, however, there are laws against organising/managing as well as encouraging “prostitution” which could be used to criminalise consensual third party relationships. Sex workers can form unions but still have very limited legal protections.

Ecuador

Sex work is legal only when done in indoor establishments and with a license and after presenting medical certificates and the regulations are very restrictive. Selling sex on the streets is a legal grey area and street-based sex workers are liable to police harassment and arrest. Police also raid indoor establishments to enforce licensing rules. Police use laws against loitering and vagrancy against sex workers.

El Salvador

¹ Note: We received complete data only from the 3 countries – Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

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



Sex work is technically legal in El Salvador but municipal authorities create administrative offences against soliciting in public or they designate zones for street-based sex work that are isolated and dangerous. Organised ‘prostitution’ and living off the earnings of a sex worker is criminalised. Sex workers have no access to social security rights at present.

Impact of COVID-19 on sex workers in Latin America

The COVID-19 pandemic, as with other health crises, exposes existing inequalities and disproportionately affects people already criminalised, marginalised and living in financially precarious situations, often outside social protection mechanisms. Sex worker-led organisations from all regions are reporting a lack of access to national social protection schemes and exclusion from emergency social protection measures being put in place for other workers, particularly where sex work is criminalised. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, sex workers all over the world are experiencing hardship, a total loss of income and increased discrimination and harassment.³

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

“In the situation of the closing of all the venues where they work, and on the street, they are victims of the violation of their rights because they don’t allow them to work and they threaten to send us to jail if we don’t listen. How are we going to eat if the government hasn’t done anything for the group of female sex workers to allow them to access a decent life for our family.” – Sex worker, Ecuador

“We cannot access our workplace. Female sex workers are seen as the carriers of the virus because of our work.” – Sex worker organisation, Colombia

As sex workers and their clients self-isolate, sex workers are left unprotected, increasingly vulnerable and unable to provide for themselves and their families. Many sex workers now find themselves in riskier situations and at greater risk of violence.

“They’ve been suffering a lot of violence, not only from the police but also from the clients.” – PLAPERTS, Latin American platform for sex worker-led organisations

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

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

- 7/8 responses reported social or physical distancing measures⁴.
- 7/8 responses reported self-isolation for the vulnerable⁵.
- 5/8 responses reported quarantining certain areas or people⁶.

³ “COVID-19,” NSWP.

⁴ Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

⁵ Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

⁶ Ecuador, El Salvador.



When asked to list other measures that governments have undertaken, six of the respondents⁷ gave answers, touching more upon lockdown restrictions and the impact this has on sex workers.

“They have issued memorandums or decrees of schedules to travel on the street, by number of IDs, curfews, restrictions in areas where you cannot be; delivery of medicines to PLWHA and pregnant women; how the educational system will be this year; teleworking from home; market hours; direct lines to doctors; call lines for emergencies... EMERGENCY BONUSES ONLY FOR PEOPLE WHO EARN LESS THAN 400 DOLLARS AND THE 80% OF WOMEN WHO DO SEX WORK CANNOT BENEFIT FROM IT.” – Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

“Obligation not to go out or they take us to shelters. [They] do not allow women to use sex work but neither do they help us with food and money to cover other expenses.” – Sex worker organisation, El Salvador

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, the responses were as follows:

- 8/8 reported the closure of brothels, bars, massage parlors, etc⁸.
- 8/8 reported crackdowns in areas known for street-based sex work⁹.
- 6/8 reported increased monitoring of independent sex work¹⁰.
- 6/8 reported increased raids, arrests and prosecutions¹¹.
- 3/8 reported compulsory testing for COVID-19¹².
- 2/8 reported prosecution for testing positive for COVID-19¹³.

When given the opportunity to add other measures, 2/8 respondents provided answers¹⁴, further touching on the total shutdown of sex work and violence against sex workers.

“The total impediment of sex work.” – Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

“Police are arresting sex workers or taking them to hostels; not only that but in one hostel the military raped a lesbian woman.” – Sex worker organisation, El Salvador

How have these measures impacted sex workers?

This open-ended question was answered by 8/8 respondents¹⁵, each giving an insight in to the levels of extreme inequality sex workers are facing during this pandemic.

“Disastrous. Increased anxiety and fear and of course it is affecting the quality of life and mental health.” – Sex worker organisation, Colombia

⁷ Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

⁸ Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

⁹ Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

¹⁰ Ecuador, El Salvador.

¹¹ Columbia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

¹² Ecuador, El Salvador.

¹³ El Salvador.

¹⁴ Ecuador, El Salvador.

¹⁵ Columbia, Ecuador, El Salvador.



“Transit restrictions, precariousness in sex work, death, not using a condom, fighting to survive, demotivation from the government's indifference in social programs to our population, greater violence against sex workers and trans women.” – Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

“It has impacted us a lot and, with tears in my eyes, locked inside without being able to help my peers and I can't see my family because I was at risk because I travelled to New York. They took me to a hotel called Best Western Plus Hotel Terraza and they bring us bad food and they didn't give us the COVID test and we cannot leave and help nor can they leave and bring food.” – Sex worker organisation, El Salvador

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

“Now the sex workers are seen as people who are ‘infectious’. Before they were the ones causing HIV, but now they cause HIV and COVID-19. So there is more stigma and discrimination.” – PLAPERTS, Latin American platform for sex worker-led organisations

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 :

- 7/8 responses reported reduced access to condoms and lubricants¹⁶.
- 7/8 responses reported reduced access to harm reduction services¹⁷.
- 7/8 responses reported reduced access to HIV treatment¹⁸.
- 6/8 responses reported reduced access to STI testing and treatment¹⁹.

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

Given a list of measures, the responses from the 16 complete surveys are as follows:

- 1/8 reported a temporary ban on raids, arrests and/or prosecutions for sex work-related offences²⁰.
- 2/8 reported their government were ensuring documented and undocumented migrant sex workers can access health services²¹.

When given the opportunity to add other positive government or local authority measures, 3 respondents provided answers²². Many of these responses reflected the limited availability of measures.

“Food donation only in cases of extreme poverty and in low numbers.” Sex worker organisation, Colombia

“We are invisible and we don't have access to health if it's not COVID-19. We suffer more raids.” – Sex worker organisation, El Salvador

¹⁶ Columbia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

¹⁷ Columbia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

¹⁸ Columbia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

¹⁹ Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

²⁰ Ecuador.

²¹ Ecuador, El Salvador.

²² Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

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.

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

- 5/8 reported this scheme is available for the general population²³.
- 0/8 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.

Scheme: Emergency funds for those facing hardship.

- 6/8 reported this scheme is available for the general population²⁴.
- 0/8 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.

Scheme: Emergency food packs / essential supplies.

- 7/8 reported this scheme is available for the general population²⁵.
- 2/8 reported this scheme is available for sex workers²⁶.

Scheme: Rent /mortgage relief schemes.

- 5/8 reported this scheme is available for the general population²⁷.
- 0/8 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.

Scheme: Ban on evictions for rent or mortgage arrears.

- 5/8 reported this scheme is available for the general population²⁸.
- 1/8 reported this scheme is available for sex workers²⁹.

Scheme: Emergency housing options for homeless people.

- 2/8 reported this scheme is available for the general population³⁰.
- 1/8 reported this scheme is available for sex workers³¹.

Additionally, four respondents further commented on the extreme inequity of the allocation of these schemes in Ecuador and El Salvador.

²³ Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

²⁴ Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

²⁵ Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

²⁶ Colombia, Ecuador.

²⁷ Ecuador, El Salvador.

²⁸ Ecuador, El Salvador.

²⁹ Ecuador.

³⁰ Ecuador.

³¹ Ecuador.

“Food and vouchers have been assigned to less than a 20% of the population and you still have to pay your rent or mortgage. No specific law has been put in place for the general population, and even less for us, female sex workers.” – Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

“Not all of them are eligible; most of them don’t own a house and the electricity bill is not under their name, which is a requirement.” – Sex worker, El Salvador

“Owners of properties are kicking us out from houses precariously rented.” – Sex worker organisation, El Salvador

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

Seven respondents³² answered this question, addressing issues relating to discrimination, stigma, and a legal landscape that criminalises sex work.

“For the simple reason that we have always been discriminated against and viewed in a bad way; we have not been given the rights that we deserve as ordinary human beings and because they see us as an infectious focus and transmitter of HIV/AIDS. In order to have the rights that we have achieved so far, we have suffered and it has been difficult for us to let society know that we exist and deserve more rights than prophylactic health. [We have been] fighting since 1982 to achieve comprehensive health and improve a little our work places.”- Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

“Well our society is indifferent and its lack of response to our sector makes us see clearly the inequities, insensitivity and believing that we have pockets full of money, that we enrich ourselves with a job that is part of the solidarity economy... SEX WORK IS NOT RECOGNISED AS WORK.” – Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

“They do not give us the help we need, we do not have to eat, we do not have money to pay for housing, they don’t let us work. We have reported that to the groups where we are members and they ignore us, they do not pay attention to our situation, they discriminate against us because they think we are bad. I got to the point to tell them that if they do not take us into account then we will not continue in these spaces but they do not pay attention – they are passive abolitionists. Here each of us look for their own interests.” – Sex worker organisation, El Salvador

How is the sex worker community responding to this crisis?

“What we have shown during this pandemic is that sex workers are very resilient, and they have been very well coordinated with other organisations they have worked with. In Ecuador, for example, with funds from CARE, sex workers can create a little business so they can have some income until they can start doing sex work again. For example, little restaurants in their houses or little clothes stores. This little bank for sex workers will help them to be more empowered. We’re also working with a lawyer to try to create a strategy that that will protect sex workers somehow until they can work again.” – PLAPERTS, Latin American platform for sex worker-led organisations

Emergency funds

3/8 responses³³ recorded that the local sex worker community had established emergency funds or were in the process of trying to find funding.

³² Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

“Through the program with CARE International we achieved to transfer money for victims of violence; to sex workers, people living with HIV, and migrants.” – Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

Emergency food supplies

3/8 responses³⁴ reported that the local sex worker community had set up emergency food supplies.

“In our organisation we have always believed in self-support between us to buy food and deliver it to most vulnerable, like elderly women, PLHIV, single moms. Still a lot to do.” – Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

“Food kits have been delivered but on few occasions and they are small and don't reach all people.” – Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

Emergency housing

1/8 responses³⁵ mentioned emergency housing support from the sex worker community.

“Support, yes. NGO fighting for human rights and HIV NGOs participating in virtual meetings.” – Sex worker organisation, El Salvador

Virtual support

The sex worker community has been relying on digital spaces for providing support, emergency services and for training each other on moving their work online. When asked specifically about virtual support, 3/8 responses³⁶ provided further details on other ways in which sex workers were using the virtual environment to cope in the current crisis.

“We have used all tools: telephone calls, WhatsApp groups. With another organisation we set up a virtual platform and this is what we are doing, sending each other messages daily to explain how we feel, to support us emotionally.” – Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

“Virtual advice has been given on violence.” – Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

“We are carrying out some virtual campaigns regarding safety, self-care and collective care for female sex workers.” – Sex worker, El Salvador

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. All respondents answered this question and provided further information on the differences.

“Yes, they follow the instructions that the government said and all female sex workers have remained home because of the health measures.” – Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

³³ Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador.

³⁴ Ecuador, El Salvador.

³⁵ El Salvador.

³⁶ Ecuador, El Salvador.



“They don’t mention us and we don’t have the support of the government. I have been in a hostel since March 17th and no one has taken us into consideration and we haven’t received the voucher from the government.” – Sex worker organisation, El Salvador

Other

When asked about other ways in which the sex worker community were supporting one another during the COVID-19 pandemic, only one respondent³⁷ gave more information.

“Cleaning kits have been delivered to Ecuadorian and Venezuelan populations.” – Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

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

All eight respondents provided answers to this final open-ended question. These responses ranged from the urgent need for decriminalisation, to better social protection mechanisms, and calls for alternative sources of entrepreneurship for sex workers during the crisis.

“Create channels of entrepreneurship with empowered partners.” – Sex worker organisation, Colombia

“Permanent donation of supplies and the economic, social and cultural protection of sex workers and other informal jobs. This pandemic showed the weakness we live in and it is hoped that they can be replaced.” – Sex worker organisation, Ecuador

“We have expenses we need to cover, and we are hungry. We need masks, gloves, hygiene gel. We want to be included.” – Sex worker organisation, El Salvador

³⁷ Ecuador.



Project supported by:



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 for more information.