



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

COVID-19 Impact Survey – Asia and the Pacific

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 18 responses were from 11 countries – Australia, Bangladesh, China, Hong Kong, Myanmar, Nepal, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam – in the Asia and the Pacific region.¹

Overview of the legal landscape²

Australia

Selling sex is legal if you work indoors alone as a sole operator or in a registered brothel whereas working on the streets is illegal. Buying sex is not criminalised. Brothels are regulated and must be registered with the authorities. Sole operators must register before they start working. Brothel workers don't need to register if the brothel itself is registered. Sex work is recognised as work but soliciting on streets remains criminalised.

Bangladesh

Selling of sex is legal but associated activities such as soliciting in public and keeping a brothel is illegal. However, there is a system of quasi-legal brothels wherein sex workers are certified by local authority. Sex work is not recognised as work per se but 'prostitute' can be listed as a profession on the voter identity card.

China

Selling sex is illegal, not under the criminal law but under administrative law. Working as a sex worker while living with HIV or while having an STI is also a criminal offence. Buying sex is illegal - also under administrative law. It is an offence under criminal law to organise or profit from sex work and this applies to third parties such as managers of hotels, restaurants, bars and taxi companies. Sex work is not recognised as work.

¹ Note: We received complete data only from the 6 countries - Australia, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Hong Kong, China, and Thailand.

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



Hong Kong

Selling sex is legal if done indoors by sex workers working alone. Soliciting in a public place or advertising sex services are illegal. Small groups of sex workers working together in indoor premises are also criminalised for running brothels or 'vice establishments'. Buying sex and related activities not criminalised. Yes - brothel keeping is criminalised as is 'living on the earnings of prostitution' and procuring. Sex work is not recognised as work.

Thailand

Selling sex is illegal and associated activities, like soliciting in public places, are also criminalised. Sex workers working in establishments are also criminalised for 'associating with another person in a prostitution establishment for the benefit of prostitution of that person or of another person'. It is also illegal to advertise sexual services for yourself or for another person. Buying sex is not criminalised but procuring, pimping and managing sex work businesses or establishments is illegal. Under a 1996 law "entertainment places" are licensed to provide "service partners" or "bath service providers", euphemistically alluding to sexual services. Sex work not recognised as work.

Vietnam

Selling and buying sex is illegal and clients can be fined. 'Harbouring prostitution', 'organising prostitution activities', 'brokering prostitution' and 'protecting prostitution' are all criminal offences. Sex work is not recognised as work.

Impact of COVID-19 on sex workers in Asia and the Pacific

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

"Sex workers are largely feeling anxious, isolated and unsure of if accessing government money will then 'out' them or link the tax office to them at a later date." – Sex worker-led organisation, Australia

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

"Income decreases, more vulnerable to violence and difficult to identify bad clients as most people wear masks." – Sex worker organisation, Hong Kong

³ ["COVID-19,"](#) NSWP.



As sex workers and their clients self-isolate, sex workers are left unprotected, increasingly vulnerable and unable to provide for themselves and their families. The criminalisation of various aspects of sex work in most Asia-Pacific countries further magnifies the already precarious situation of sex workers in the informal economy.

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.

- 9/10 responses reported social or physical distancing measures.⁴
- 6/10 responses reported self-isolation for the vulnerable.⁵
- 7/10 responses reported quarantining certain areas or people.⁶

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

"Blanket ban on sex work." – Sex worker, Australia

"By introducing the emergency law, there is temporary shutdown of business and activities that may attract crowds of people are also forbidden." – Sex worker organisation, Hong Kong

"Enacting Emergency Decree banning criticism of govt response; closing borders; curfew; closing parks, beaches and markets; Restricted travel in some areas; launched relief program; cut electricity bills by 3%; to release 4000 prisoners." – Sex worker organisation, Thailand

"Awareness through television on hand wash and how to get treatment services. But no treatment services in Bangladesh in reality." – Sex worker organisation, Bangladesh

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:

- 9/10 reported the closure of brothels, bars, massage parlors, etc.⁷
- 1/10 reported crackdowns in areas known for street-based sex work.⁸
- 4/10 reported increased monitoring of independent sex work.⁹
- 2/10 reported increased raids, arrests and prosecutions.¹⁰
- 0/10 reported compulsory testing for COVID-19.
- 0/10 reported prosecution for testing positive for COVID-19.

When given the opportunity to add other measures, a sex worker from Australia said, *"An open brothel in Sydney – the owner and the workers were all fined for being there the day the laws changed (and they weren't aware of the law change)."*

⁴ Australia, Bangladesh, China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam.

⁵ Australia, Bangladesh, China, Vietnam.

⁶ Australia, Bangladesh, China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam.

⁷ Australia, Bangladesh, China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam.

⁸ Australia.

⁹ Australia, Bangladesh.

¹⁰ Australia.

How have these measures impacted sex workers?

This open-ended question was answered by 9/10 respondents¹¹, each giving an insight in to the levels of extreme inequality sex workers are facing during this pandemic.

“Has left many destitute.” – Sex worker, Australia

“I’m unable to do my job at all because social distancing and the self-isolation laws mean I’ll get fined.” – Sex worker, Australia

“Massage parlours, clubs, karaoke and sauna are shut down. Workers’ income decrease without any government compensation or stipends.” – Sex worker organisation, Hong Kong

“Greatly reduce the possibility of sex workers obtaining guests, sex workers will also face the possibility of covid-19 infection.” – Sex worker organisation, China

“Nothing special for sex workers. Only all the brothels lock down before take any action in the country. The brothel lock down was the first action by Government.” – Sex worker organisation, Bangladesh

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

“With strict social distancing policy and mandatory closure of entertainment places and hotels, many sex workers had no clients; they were difficult to move around also for accessing health commodities and other support.” – Sex worker, Vietnam

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 :

- 6/10 responses reported reduced access to condoms and lubricants.¹²
- 3/10 responses reported reduced access to harm reduction services.¹³
- 3/10 responses reported reduced access to HIV treatment.¹⁴
- 7/10 responses reported reduced access to STI testing and treatment.¹⁵

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

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

- 0/10 reported a temporary ban on raids, arrests and/or prosecutions for sex work-related offences.
- 1/10 reported their government were ensuring documented and undocumented migrant sex workers can access health services.¹⁶

¹¹ Australia, Bangladesh, China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam.

¹² Australia, Bangladesh, China, Thailand, Vietnam.

¹³ Australia, Bangladesh, Vietnam.

¹⁴ Australia, China, Vietnam.

¹⁵ Australia, China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam.

¹⁶ Thailand.

When given the opportunity to add other positive government or local authority measures, only one respondent provided an answer.

“Massage parlour owners can claim certain government assistance. With the assistance, some parlours can continue running the business and the massage workers will not lose their jobs.” – Sex worker organisation, Hong Kong

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.

- 7/10 reported this scheme is available for the general population.¹⁷
- 5/10 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.¹⁸

Scheme: Emergency funds for those facing hardship.

- 4/10 reported this scheme is available for the general population.¹⁹
- 2/10 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.²⁰

Scheme: Emergency food packs / essential supplies.

- 5/10 reported this scheme is available for the general population.²¹
- 3/10 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.²²

Scheme: Rent /mortgage relief schemes.

- 3/10 reported this scheme is available for the general population.²³
- 2/10 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.²⁴

Scheme: Ban on evictions for rent or mortgage arrears.

- 3/10 reported this scheme is available for the general population.²⁵
- 2/10 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.²⁶

Scheme: Emergency housing options for homeless people.

¹⁷ Australia, Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam.

¹⁸ Australia, Hong Kong, Thailand.

¹⁹ Australia, Hong Kong, Thailand.

²⁰ Australia, Thailand.

²¹ Australia, Thailand.

²² Australia, Thailand.

²³ Australia.

²⁴ Australia.

²⁵ Australia.

²⁶ Australia.

- 3/10 reported this scheme is available for the general population.²⁷
- 3/10 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.²⁸

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

“Workers who are migrant are not included in these measures.” – Sex worker, Australia

“The emergency food is very, very limited...only 1% poor people can get it. Corruption in distribution is a big challenge.” – Sex worker organisation, Bangladesh

“Only those running a massage parlour will be eligible for government support. If the massage parlour owner refuses to support or hire the massage worker, the massage worker will have nothing but lose her job.” – Sex worker organisation, Hong Kong

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

Five of the ten respondents²⁹ who responded to this question, addressed issues relating to discrimination, stigma, and a legal landscape that criminalises sex work.

As a sex worker organisation from Bangladesh pointed out, *“One of the major reason is stigma and discrimination to sex workers. Sex workers are not consider as like other citizen in the country. Many people believe that it’s not right to support sex workers from moral viewpoint.”*

How is the sex worker community responding to this crisis?

Emergency funds

6/10 responses recorded that the local sex worker community had established emergency funds.³⁰

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.

“Emergency fund, but it empties very fast and can’t help everyone.” – Sex worker, Australia

“There is a fundraiser page set up by Scarlet Alliance to raise money for sex workers. We are aware of individual sex workers doing this also. We have access to limited brokerage which is being used to help sex workers with food vouchers, petrol vouchers, and accommodation. Our drop in service is still active on a Friday evening, although at a reduced capacity, and we are conducting outreach multiple times per week.” – Sex worker organisation, Australia

Emergency food supplies

5/10 responses reported that the local sex worker community had set up emergency food supplies.³¹

²⁷ Australia, Thailand.

²⁸ Australia, Thailand.

²⁹ Australia, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Vietnam.

³⁰ Australia, Thailand, Vietnam.

³¹ Australia, Bangladesh, Thailand, Vietnam.

“Food boxes by sex workers for sex workers.” Sex worker, Australia

“Food basics given in seven provinces to around 400 sex workers.” Sex worker organisation, Thailand

“HARC is supporting sex workers during this period of crisis. The HARC management decided to dedicate all their energy to support sex workers as much as possible within our power. The management committee decided that right now food is necessary for survival, therefore distribution of food is the priority. The outreach workers is using PPE for their protection against the virus.” – Sex worker organisation, Bangladesh

Emergency housing

3/10 responses mentioned emergency housing support from the sex worker community.³² From the responses, this support seems limited to offering advice and support.

“Skype, online help, email and Zoom to help get government assistance and housing applications.” – Sex worker, Australia

“Connecting to each other through phones and social media for advice and support.” – Sex worker, Vietnam

“We use WECHAT public account, Weibo and other methods to communicate with different sex workers and help them to solve some simple problems online.” – Sex worker organisation, China

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 to online spaces. When asked specifically about virtual support, 3/10 responses provided further details on other ways in which sex workers were using the virtual environment to cope in the current crisis.³³

“Skills sharing and training on moving online, staying safe etc.” – Sex worker, Australia

“We are offering phone, web, and limited outreach support to sex workers who contact us.” – Sex worker organisation, Australia

“Over 200 sex workers connected in social media groups with daily contact and information sharing.” – Sex worker organisation, Thailand

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. 8/10 responses answered this question and provided further information on the differences.³⁴ Most agreed that there was a clear difference between the sex worker community’s response and government’s advice, emphasising the community’s commitment to ‘flattening the curve’ but also calling out

³² Australia, Vietnam.

³³ Australia, Thailand.

³⁴ Australia, Bangladesh, China, Hong Kong, Vietnam.



governments that do not provide for sex workers amid the crisis, leaving them stuck between surviving and following social distancing.

“Absolutely. Fed govt has just left migrant workers in the lurch. No plans to allow sex work businesses to re-open though comparable industries (beauty therapy, cosmetic injectables, hairdressing) are/will be allowed.” – Sex worker, Australia

“Sex work is illegal in Vietnam so there is no specific support for sex workers from government.” - Sex worker, Vietnam

“Despite that the government insisted to remain social distance, sex workers especially those working in one woman brothel and street based sex work, continued providing sexual service to clients.” – Sex worker organisation, Hong Kong

Other

When asked about other ways in which the sex worker community were supporting one another during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the ten responses gave more information on the advocacy work being undertaken to try and ensure that sex workers are not left out of government relief packages.

“Advocating to government for access to cash relief, free utilities etc.” – Sex worker organisation, Thailand

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

Three answers were provided to this final open-ended question. These responses re-emphasised the lack of government support, exclusion of sex workers from government schemes due to criminalisation of sex work, and the fact that the sex worker community must rely exclusively on one another in lieu of proper support and social protection.

“HARC experiences that only sex workers are thinking about sex workers without stigma and discrimination. So, only sex workers organisations can support sex workers and more support needed to sex workers organisation. Non-sex workers will not support sex workers in this crisis period...” – Sex worker organisation, Bangladesh

“Police is more reluctant to go to the crime scene, even sex workers call the police hotline 999 for help. Sex workers will be more protected if police is willing to go to help.” – Sex worker organisation, Hong Kong

“International agencies, private and community service providers can work through the local networks of sex workers to provide temporary monetary, housing and food support.” – Sex worker, Vietnam



Project supported by:



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