

# Pandemic sex workers' resilience: COVID-19 crisis met with rapid responses by sex worker communities

*International Social Work*  
2020, Vol. 63(6) 777–781

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0020872820962202

[journals.sagepub.com/home/isw](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/isw)



**Elene Lam** 

McMaster University, Canada;

Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network), Canada

## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the inequality of social support systems worldwide, revealing the gaps that further marginalize vulnerable people. Despite the fact that sex workers are adversely affected by the pandemic, they are excluded from government relief and protection programmes as well as health services. Sex worker communities have developed rapid response strategies to support their peers in overcoming these challenges. Sex worker organizations all over the world have been working alongside other groups and communities to advocate for income and health support for all, and an end to repressive policing and state-sanctioned violence.

## Keywords

COVID-19, pandemics, public health, sex workers, social justice, social policy

## Sex workers are being left behind

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the inequality of social support systems worldwide, revealing the gaps that further marginalize vulnerable people. Racialized and criminalized migrants and precarious workers are adversely affected by the pandemic, but are excluded from government relief and protection programmes as well as health services – this includes sex workers.

The ability of sex workers to protect themselves depends on their ‘work environment, the availability of community support, access to health and social services, and broader aspects of the legal and economic environment’ (Platt et al., 2020: 9).

However, sex workers, particularly migrant sex workers, have to put their health and safety at risk because they are excluded from accessing social and health services, and may not be able to stay at home, physically distance, or stop work in order to survive. Migrant sex workers face extra layers of exclusion and oppression, including xenophobia, racism, language barriers and precarious immigration status as well as the risk of deportation. As one of the most marginalized

---

## Corresponding author:

Elene Lam, School of Social Work, McMaster University, 1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, ON L8S4L8, Canada.

Email: [eleneprince20@gmail.com](mailto:eleneprince20@gmail.com)

communities, sex workers are being left behind (Global Network of Sex Work Projects [NSWP], 2020; Abji et al., 2020; Jozaghi and Bird, 2020; Lam, 2020; Langille, 2020; Liem et al., 2020; Platt et al., 2020).

Sex worker-led organizations all over the world report that sex workers are experiencing hardship, loss of income and increased discrimination and harassment due to the criminalization of sex work (NSWP, 2020). As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments have developed public health strategies, emergency legislation and economic relief to support their citizens. Most sex workers are excluded from this economic relief because ‘the criminalization of sex work in most countries poses particular challenges for accessing government support’ (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS [UNAIDS], 2020). In addition, sex work is not recognized as work and the sex industry is not recognized as a form of small business ownership. As a result, sex workers are also not able to access labour protection or economic support that would otherwise aid small businesses (Lam, 2020; Platt et al., 2020).

While being denied support and protection, sex workers are also experiencing punitive crack-downs such as raids on their homes and workplaces and increased surveillance, arrests, fines and violence (NSWP, 2020; Platt et al., 2020). Many countries have increased policing and surveillance through emergency orders that relate to social distancing, lockdowns, identification requirements, accessing the personal information of those who test positive (Lam et al., 2020; Rocca, 2020), forced COVID-19 testing, and restricted freedom of movement across borders. These policies directly target people who are racialized, homeless, criminalized, trans, migrant and work in the sex industry (Amnesty International, 2020a; Perez-Brumer and Silva-Santisteban, 2020). At the same time, the pandemic is intensifying stigma, racism, discrimination and repressive policing all over the world (Butterfly, 2020; Lam and Fudge, 2020; Sex Workers’ Rights Advocacy Network [SWAN], 2020; UNAIDS, 2020).

## **Resilience of sex workers**

Sex workers are marginalized, stigmatized and criminalized – they are also brilliant, resilient and resourceful. Sex worker communities have developed rapid response strategies to support their peers in overcoming these challenges. Sex worker organizations all over the world have set up emergency and mutual aid funds and developed resources, programmes and campaigns. They have also been working alongside other groups and communities to advocate for income and health support for all and an end to repressive policing and state-sanctioned violence.

The NSWP and UNAIDS have issued a joint statement to call for immediate and critical action to protect the rights of all sex workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sex workers and sex worker organizations everywhere ‘are calling for equal protection under the law and access to income support and health care’ (UNAIDS, 2020). Their demands include access to national protection, income and emergency financial support; ending information sharing between health services and immigration authorities; increasing emergency housing and ending evictions; halting raids on sex workers’ workplaces and homes; halting arrests and prosecutions; ending the use of criminal law to enforce COVID-19-related restrictions; extending visas and support for detainees; and including sex worker-led organizations in the planning of emergency public health responses (NSWP & UNAIDS, 2020). Toronto-based Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network) has started a campaign to stop raids and racial profiling of workers in holistic centres (Butterfly, 2020).

In support of these recommendations, SWAN in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia has released a statement to urge all governments to take action to counter the devastating effects of COVID-19 on sex workers. In Canada, the Canadian Alliance of Sex Workers Law Reform is working with Amnesty International and others to advocate for income support, and Butterfly is

working with Migrant Rights Network and other migrant organizations to advocate for income, status and health for all (Amnesty International, 2020b; Lam, 2020; Migrant Rights Network, 2020). Sex workers' organizations have also set up emergency funds to provide income support for sex workers including Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement (SWARM) Collective in the United Kingdom, STAR in Republic of North Macedonia, Red Edition in Austria, BesD in Germany, Ugly Mugs in Ireland, Scarlet Alliance in Australia, National Network of Sex Workers in India, SWOP Behind Bars and Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (Coyote RI) in the United States, and Providing Advocacy Counselling & Education (PACE) Society, Power, Sex Workers' Action Program (SWAP) Hamilton, Maggie's and Butterfly in Canada (NSWP, 2020).

Many sex workers' organizations have developed resources to support their community members: pan-African ASWA (African Sex Workers Alliance) and Maggie's and Butterfly in Canada have developed guides for working during COVID-19; Project X in Singapore has published information on how to deal with stress; Smash in Japan has released a guide on working safely during COVID-19 and Scarlet Alliance in Australia has developed a guide on working online (NSWP, 2020).

Sex workers' groups argue that sex workers should be included and protected in the COVID-19 response, and in line with principles of social justice (Platt et al., 2020). In tandem with these community efforts, long-term social and policy changes are necessary in order to create an equal and just society. This includes decriminalization of sex work, elimination of racism and xenophobia, and income, health care and status for all. These changes will ensure that no one is left behind as we struggle with a crisis of global magnitude.

## Implementation in social work practice

Social workers can be change-makers – supporting marginalized people towards self-determination and empowerment and facilitating a more socially just society for us all. However, when it comes to sex work, social work practitioners often adopt the 'rescue model'. The rescue model comes from the concept of a 'fallen woman', steeped in outdated religious and moral values, which continues to inform contemporary social work practice (Wahab, 2002: 54). In this model, sex workers are framed as trafficked victims or victims who need to be protected and rescued by social workers and law enforcement officers (Lam, 2019). The rescue approach unfortunately conflates sex work and trafficking, and it also undermines the agency and autonomy of sex workers, increases vulnerability and results in arrest and deportation (Rose, 2020). Because of the aggressive enforcement of laws against sex work and trafficking, collaboration between social workers and police can cause significant harm to sex workers and prevent them from accessing support and asserting their human rights (Lam, 2019; Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform [CASWLR], 2017; NSWP, 2019).

Instead of adopting the rescue model, which is disempowering and further oppresses sex workers, social workers should look to a social justice and human rights approach that recognizes the agency of sex workers and promotes their rights as people. The response of sex worker communities to the pandemic demonstrates their power and ability to support their own communities. Social workers can act as allies and work alongside sex worker communities to end the conflation of sex work with trafficking; decriminalize sex work; support self-organizing of sex workers; and increase sex workers' access to sex worker-led organizations, as these organizations are in the best position to support sex workers (Lam, 2019; Lam and Santini, 2017; NSWP, 2019).

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Elene Lam  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0832-1119>

## References

- Abji, S., M. Pintin-Perez and R. Bhuyan (2020) 'In Canada, Non-Status Women are Being Left Behind: Non-Status Women Remain Largely Invisible in the COVID-19 Public Health Response and Emergency Support Programs', *Open Democracy*. Available online at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/pandemic-border/canada-non-status-women-are-being-left-behind/> (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Amnesty International (2020a) 'Policing the Pandemic: Human Rights Violations in the Enforcement of COVID-19 Measures in Europe', 24 June. Available online at: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR0125112020ENGLISH.PDF> (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Amnesty International (2020b) 'Open Letter: Canada Must Protect the Rights of Migrant and Sex Workers during COVID-19 by Ensuring Access to Emergency Income Supports', 22 May. Available online at: <https://www.amnesty.ca/news/canada-must-protect-rights-sex-workers-during-covid-19-ensuring-access-emergency-income> (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Butterfly (2020) 'Call for an Immediate End to Racial Profiling by Municipal Bylaw Enforcement in Holistic Centres and Body Rub Parlours', 2 July. Available online at: <https://www.butterflysw.org/campaign> (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform (CASWLR) (2017) 'Safety, Dignity, Equality: Recommendation for Sex Work Law Reform in Canada'. Available online at: <https://sexworklawreform.com/recommendations/>
- Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) (2019) 'Policy Brief: The Impact of Anti-Trafficking Legislation and Initiatives on Sex Workers'. Available online at: <https://www.nswp.org/resource/policy-brief-the-impact-anti-trafficking-legislation-and-initiatives-sex-workers> (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) (2020) 'COVID-19: Sex Workers Community Responses'. Available online at: <https://www.nswp.org/page/covid-19> (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) & Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) (2020) 'Joint Statement: Sex Workers Must Not Be Left behind in the Response to COVID-19', 8 April. Available online at: [https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/pressreleaseandstatementarchive/2020/april/20200408\\_sex-workers-covid-19](https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/pressreleaseandstatementarchive/2020/april/20200408_sex-workers-covid-19) (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) (2020) 'Feature Story: COVID-19 Must Uphold and Protect the Human Rights of Sex Workers', 24 April. Available online at: [https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2020/april/20200424\\_sex-work](https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2020/april/20200424_sex-work) (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Jozaghi, E. and L. Bird (2020) 'COVID-19 and Sex Workers: Human Rights, the Struggle for Safety and Minimum Income', *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 111(2): 406–7.
- Lam, E. (2019) 'How to Develop a Social Justice Framework to Support Migrant Sex Workers and Prevent the Harm Caused by Anti-Trafficking Initiatives', *Social Dialogue* 20: 30–4.
- Lam, E. (2020) 'How the Asian Migrant Workers in Massage Parlours and Sex Industry are Affected by COVID-19', Butterfly, Toronto, May. Available online at: <https://www.butterflysw.org/publication> (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Lam, E. and J. Fudge (2020) 'Migrant Sex Workers and the Pandemic: Magnifying Inequality and Discrimination', *Canadian Law of Work Forum*, 2 June. Available online at: <http://lawofwork.ca/migrant-sex-workers/> (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Lam, E. and T. Santini (2017) 'Upholding and Promoting Human Rights, Justice and Access for Migrant Sex Part 1: Guide for Services Providers'. Available online at: [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/5bd754\\_3284af1908704da0935a4cf60e66abf3.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/5bd754_3284af1908704da0935a4cf60e66abf3.pdf) (accessed 10 July 2020).

- Lam, E., V. Wong and M. Scott (2020) 'Covid-19, Policing, and the Exacerbation of Pre-Existing Inequalities', *Globalization Working Papers: Covid-Urgent Responses* 19(1): 2013–6.
- Langille, A. (2020) 'How the Canada Emergency Response Benefit is Failing Low-Income Precarious Workers, and How It Can Be Fixed', *Canadian Law of Work Forum*, 17 April. Available online at: <http://lawofwork.ca/how-the-canada-emergency-response-benefit-is-failing-low-income-precarious-workers-and-how-it-can-be-fixed/> (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Liem, A., C. Wang, Y. Wariyanti, C.A. Latkin and B.J. Hall (2020) 'The Neglected Health of International Migrant Workers in the COVID-19 Epidemic', *The Lancet Psychiatry* 7(4): e20.
- Migrant Rights Network (2020) 'COVID-19 Response and Recovery Must Ensure Migrant Rights'. Available online at: <https://migrantrights.ca/covid19/> (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Platt, L., J. Elmes, L. Stevenson, V. Holt, S. Rolles and R. Stuart (2020) 'Sex Workers Must Not Be Forgotten in the COVID-19 Response', *The Lancet* 396: 9–11.
- Perez-Brumer, A. and A. Silva-Santisteban (2020) 'COVID-19 Policies can Perpetuate Violence Against Transgender Communities: Insights from Peru', *AIDS and Behavior* 20: 2477–2479.
- Rocca, R. (2020) 'Coronavirus: Civil Liberties Group Concerned as Ontario Cops Get IDs of Those Who Test Positive', *Global News*, 24 April. Available online at: <https://globalnews.ca/news/6865929/coronavirus-civil-liberties-ontario-cops/> (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Rose, P. (2020) 'The Af3irm Agenda', *Medium*, 10 August. Available online at: <https://medium.com/purple-rose0666/the-af3irm-agenda-b5ec31216904> (accessed 15 August 2020)
- Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN) (2020) 'SWAN Statement on COVID-19 and Demands of Sex Workers', 11 April. Available online at: <http://swannet.org/en/content/swan-statement-covid-19-and-demands-sex-workers> (accessed 10 July 2020).
- Wahab, S. (2002) 'For Their Own Good: Sex Work, Social Control and Social Workers, A Historical Perspective', *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 29: 39–57.

### Author biography

Elene Lam (LLM, LLB, MSW, BSW) is the executive director of Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Networks). She is a PhD candidate at McMaster University.