

## Racial Profiling and The Larger Impact of Covid-19 on Migrant Sex Workers in France

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### Abstract

In this article we will discuss the first Coronavirus (Covid-19) lockdown and its immediate aftermath on the lives of migrant sex workers living and working in France, drawing on original interviews gathered between May and July 2020. Since 2016 in France, sex workers have worked under the so-called Swedish model legal framework criminalising the demand of sexual services. This has meant that sex workers, both migrant and non-migrant, have had to find various strategies to continue working within a criminalised environment infringing upon their rights and safety. Research in the French context has largely shown that the introduction of the Swedish model increased the financial precarity and impacted in significant, detrimental ways the physical and mental health of sex workers (Le Bail & Giametta 2018). In the context of the existing hardship to which migrant sex workers were exposed under this repressive regime in France, this article investigates if and how the law enforcement and emergency measures around the Covid-19 crisis aggravated their already precarious living conditions. Our analysis here demonstrates that both institutional racism (e.g., government policies and law enforcement targeting racialized migrants) and interpersonal stigmatisation (e.g., poor treatment and stereotyping by clients and civil society) must be combated to reduce the discrimination against migrant sex workers that is amplified in times of crisis.

### Keywords

sex work; migration; sex workers; Covid-19 measures; Coronavirus; racism; sex work stigma; France.

### Introduction

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Covid-19 prevention and control measures have severely impacted the livelihoods of sex workers (Platt et al. 2020). The relentless unfolding of the pandemic has exacerbated their entrenched marginalisation and stigmatisation as well as the socio-economic injustices framing their lives and rights. Migrants working in the sex industry were particularly affected as they were already subject to multiple oppressions due to their race, migration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, language barriers, and stigma around the work they do for a living (Mai et al. 2021). The media reporting of Covid-19 echoes moralising representations of HIV/AIDS from the past, stigmatising sex workers as vectors of disease (Sontag 1989). Moreover, in the context of the onset of first pandemic wave in 2020, migrant sex workers have been specifically affected by the way media and political discourses 'racialized' the virus as Chinese, notably by former US President Donald Trump (Schild et al. 2020). Understanding the implications of these dynamics for the lives and rights of migrant sex workers is crucial in the socio-economic and political context of crisis and 'exceptionalism' produced by the Covid-19 pandemic, which neo-abolitionist organisations are using to legitimise anti-sex work legislation and interventions once more (GAATW 2020; Smith 2020).

During the Covid-19 lockdowns in the early months of 2020, black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) worldwide have reported violence provoked by institutions such as the police, border control, military and other uniformed enforcement institutions (Krieger 2020). At this time, institutional racism and police violence became catalysts for the global reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter mobilisations. The murder of George Floyd, a black man from Minneapolis, in May 2020 showed that disproportionate state violence against non-white people is a regular phenomenon in the US, as it is elsewhere. Floyd's asphyxiation at the hands of police officer Derek Chauvin in the US reignited the collective anger for the murder of Adama Traoré in France (Marlière 2020), a racialised French young man of Malian origins who lost his life two hours after being arrested by the gendarmerie (French police) in the Val-d'Oise during the summer of 2016. Alongside the heightened control of black people and other people of colour under the spread of Covid-19, these events triggered large mobilisations of people in France demonstrating against racialised police violence during lockdown (Human Rights Watch 2021).

In May 2020, the European Union Federal Rights Agency (FRA) organised an event titled 'Racism and the Covid-19 Crisis: Experiences and Responses'. In July 2020, the UN Human Rights Committee followed with a report on racial discrimination in the context of the Covid-19 crisis (UN 2020). Highlighting issues of racism within the UN and the European

Union, this was followed by further research by international NGOs (e.g. European Network Against Racism (ENAR) 2020, Amnesty International 2020). In their reports, ENAR and Amnesty International point out that the most vulnerable populations to racism in the European Union were black people and people of colour, Roma, Sinti, and Travellers. It was also identified that their vulnerability was worsened by intersections with minority sexual orientations and gender identities, and by stigmatised professions such as sex work. That these populations are identified as 'vulnerable' translates into the fact that they are particularly affected by the enhanced racialised policing under Covid-19 (ENAR 2020, Amnesty International 2020).

Covid-19 foregrounded the socio-economic inequalities dividing and polarising people in France when taking into account both the likelihood of transmission and the material consequences of the lockdown measures. Alongside the aspect of economic precarity, it is crucial to refer to the racial inequalities and the violence with which they have materialised in the French context. Diallo and Robine (2020) contend that French politicians and the press frequently mention racial inequalities in contagion statistics in the US or the UK, while the subject is carefully avoided when talking about France. They argue that the lack of collated data on racial segregation in France does not mean the latter does not exist or have material effects. These considerations highlight the ways in which the category of race is both invisibilised, and its lived racialising impact amplified, by its official erasure from French republican egalitarianism. This is compounded by the parallel adoption of neo-abolitionist policies against sex work such as the criminalisation of sex workers' clients introduced in 2016, which negatively affects the lives of migrant and racialised sex workers in particular (Giametta et al., forthcoming).

It is important to understand the consequences of the implementation of the 2016 law banning the purchase of sexual services in France, commonly referred to as the 'Nordic' or 'Swedish Model'. In this 'repressive regime' of sex work (Östergren 2017) in France, irregular, undocumented, or temporary visa holding migrant sex workers are excluded from support measures made available to citizens and documented residents. Covid-19 magnified the enduring power of stigma and marginalisation in preventing many sex workers from availing themselves of the few forms of support in place to which they were entitled (Rigotti et al. 2020, ICRSE 2020). We want to put our analysis in dialogue with the burgeoning scholarship on the impact of Covid-19 on already precarious populations, highlighting that in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, racialised people have been disproportionately controlled, harassed and profiled by law enforcement authorities (Kantamneni 2020; Devakumar et al.

2020). By putting the lived experiences of migrant sex workers at the centre of its analysis, this article specifically examines race and racial profiling at the hands of the police and other local authorities, of which our participants were often the targets. In order to understand how our participants were racially profiled, we will expand the traditional focus of analyses of racial profiling which look at 'the use of race as a key factor in police decisions to stop and interrogate citizens' (Weitzer and Tuch 2002). Thus, following Pickering and Ham's research (2014), we will focus on the racial profiling of those perceived as potential victims. Drawing on Mai's concept of sexual humanitarianism (2018), referring to how sexuality-related humanitarian concerns can legitimise repressive policies and interventions, this article will analyse how, under the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, existing processes of racial profiling expanded their reach by targeting migrant sex workers as both potential threats and as vulnerable victims.

### ***Methodology of the Study***

Between October 2016 and September 2020, the research project *Sexual Humanitarianism: Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking* (SEXHUM) studied the relationship between migration, sex work and trafficking in the global sex industry by analysing migrants' own understandings and experiences of agency and exploitation. The SEXHUM study draws on the concept of 'sexual humanitarianism' to address how the humanitarian fight against trafficking in the sex industry often becomes involved in the enforcement of increasingly restrictive migration laws and control by constructing categories of victimhood in relation to sexual identity and behaviour that often exacerbate sex workers' vulnerability to being exploited and trafficked (Mai 2018). SEXHUM studied the impact of sexual humanitarianism across eight strategic urban settings in France (Marseille and Paris), the US (New York and Los Angeles), Australia (Melbourne and Sydney) and New Zealand (Auckland and Wellington) that are characterised by different policies on migration, sex work (criminalisation, regulation, decriminalisation) and trafficking. The focus of this qualitative research has been on migrant/BIPOC sex workers' own understanding of exploitation and trafficking, and of sexual humanitarian interventions.

Overall, 240 in-depth interviews with (migrant BIPOC) sex workers were conducted between 2017 and 2020. In the French context, C. Giametta undertook 45 interviews with migrant/BIPOC sex workers and 10 interviews with key informants in the originally planned fieldwork time, which ended in January 2020 in France. Just a few months later in March 2020, Covid-19 started spreading across the globe and impacting on the lives of the world population. Therefore, the SEXHUM research team decided to complement the project's data

by undertaking extra interviews focusing on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the socio-political context it created for sex workers. We managed to conduct 45 more interviews with sex workers across the four research sites. Between May and July 2020, during the first months of the Covid-19 crisis, 14 further interviews were conducted in France.

PG. Maciotti oversaw the undertaking of Covid-19 interviews during France's first lockdown using online social platforms. Three of these interviews took place with sex workers contacted through the researcher's own personal networks, while one was with a participant previously interviewed by C. Giametta. In these interviews, several instances of racial profiling and repression by authorities, as well as the increase of isolation and stigma for specific sex workers, namely BIPOC and trans sex workers, came to the fore. In order to deepen the understanding of these issues, a member of the migrant BIPOC sex worker community, D. de Riquet Bons, joined the SEXHUM research team in order to conduct 10 more interviews in July 2020, after the French government announced the end of the travel ban and of the country's first lockdown period.

As most sex workers were quickly trying to find a *modus operandi* after lockdown, participants were directly reached out to across a variety of places, both online and in locations where sex workers gather to meet up with clients. Such places included saunas, parks, and other recreational events through the support of sex worker and health non-governmental organizations. It was our intention to cover as wide a variety of workers as possible in order to reveal common experiences and/or differences among different categories of sex workers. We interviewed 2 French nationals, 2 second generation migrants, and 10 migrants from Asia, South America, Africa, and former colonial or (*Outre Mer*) French Overseas Territories migrated nationals, refugees, black and people of colour, women, male, trans and non-binary people, coming from different socio-economic backgrounds. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 57 years old. The researchers conducted the interviews in French, Spanish, Chinese (with an interpreter) and they subsequently translated them into English. Interview transcripts were coded, sorted, and analysed using a combination of thematic analysis guided by the theory of sexual humanitarianism. They were also analysed by adopting the 'constant comparative method' which is at the core of grounded theory, meaning that 'every part of data, i.e. emerging codes, categories, properties, and dimensions as well as different parts of the data, are constantly compared with all other parts of the data to explore variations, similarities and differences in data' (Hallberg 2006: 143). The option of having included a peer, BIPOC trans sex worker in the research team as interviewer made the overall communication with research participants more open and relaxed as issues such as racism and anti-LGBTQI

sentiment could be answered with less hesitation due to participants' reduced feelings of stigma or shame.

### ***Covid-19 and its Impact: Recurrent Themes from the Research Interviews***

The central argument of this article is based on our analytical efforts to flesh out the most pressing themes emerging across the interviews with sex workers. Although we were attentive to include the most diverse types of experiences within the research sample selected for this analysis, interviewees' responses to our questions resonated strongly among each other. They often referred to the role of sex work stigma and how it was specifically activated in times of Covid-19. The pairing of the stigma of sex work and racist stereotypes concerning the spread of the virus produced a context in which it became more and more legitimate among clients and random passers-by to openly enact racist abuse against sex workers. Thus, the problem of racism occupied an important part in many of the interviews. Another recurrent theme was the fear of being discriminated against when facing the health system as a Covid-positive patient. This concern was particularly significant among trans women given their repeated experiences of discrimination in hospital and medical settings. Moreover, participants expressed their concerns about the effects of the long isolation to which they were exposed, particularly those living alone in very small flats in Paris or those sharing small places with a large number of people.

Further, we asked questions about the type of support the government had planned for sex workers and whether they were expecting any support to materialise. Given this very delayed and minor form of government aid, it was important to ask specific questions about the kinds of solidarity acts - or lack thereof - among sex workers themselves at the time of the crisis. Throughout the interviews, participants often expressed the fear of catching the virus and the necessity of continuing to work in order to cover their basic needs, such as paying rent, bills, and buying food. Changing and adapting their work practices to the new environment was an important strategy for many. In this context, sex workers' multiple strategies to feel safer while carrying on working were a recurrent theme. Finally, another important issue that came up in interviews were the similarities between the spread of Covid-19 today and the spread of HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s. Particularly, HIV-positive sex workers discussed how they were reminded of past times, referring to their community's collective memory.

The impact of Covid-19 on many sex workers' lives in France, particularly on those who do street-based sex work and who are migrant and racialized, is clearly summarised by Ana's<sup>2</sup> (42yo, Latina trans woman) interview:

Street workers have been way more stigmatised. They are the most precarious, most exposed, it was an extra factor for them to be marginalised even more. There were sex workers who already had no clients, and had nothing, exposed to the cold, no clients and no work.

**Ana**

To reinforce Ana's words, Sophia, a Latina trans woman in her late 40s working at the Bois de Boulogne<sup>3</sup>, tells us: 'of course no income means no food no money no rent'. Sophia shares her small living space with eight other women. Since the lockdown started she said that there had been more tensions and fighting over food or personal items disappearing in the house. As already mentioned, throughout the interviews many other participants highlighted that the impact of the Covid-19 measures were detrimental, particularly if one takes into account the existing criminalised context in which France-based sex workers find themselves working since April 2016. Vanessa, a 41-year-old Latina trans sex worker, states it clearly when she tells us:

Since 2016, 2017 work has already been much harder – fewer and worse clients. The situation for us has become so difficult, after the Law [from 2016] clients were scared to come to us and to have to pay fines. Everything fell apart and the Internet too, advertising sites came down, it was already so bad.

**Vanessa**

The interview excerpts presented above show clearly how the combined negative role of the impact of the 2016 law to repress sex work (Calderaro & Giametta 2020) and of the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the stigmatisation of migrant sex workers, which we will address specifically below.

### ***Heightened Stigma Towards Sex Workers***

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<sup>2</sup> All respondents' names in the article are pseudonyms. All interviews were translated into English.

<sup>3</sup> The *Bois de Boulogne* is a public park situated in the 16th arrondissement of Paris where large numbers of migrant and non-migrant sex workers meet their clients.

The activist and academic literature on the social stigma directed at sex workers has shed light on its misogynistic, racist and classist character and on the multiple and insidious ways in which it impacts on their lives and rights (Chimienti 2009, Garofalo Geymonat & Macioti 2016, Pheterson 1993). Our interviews with migrant sex workers in the Covid-19 context confirmed the relevance of focusing on the lived experiences of migrants working in the sex sector, as they showed how the stigma against sex workers intersects with gendered and racialised constructions of specific populations as vectors of, and as specifically vulnerable to, disease. Camille, a 22-year-old non-binary participant with mixed French white and North-African origins, told us that when they were able to work again after lockdown, they decided to stop seeing a client as he seemed to be stigmatising sex work. They did so as they expressed that this client's attitude could readily lead to violent behaviour, as a strategy they used to keep safe:

A client told me that he no longer wanted to see sex workers as they could bring the disease as they had intimacy with many men. It felt stigmatising to me and I will never accept this client anymore.

**Camille**

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the national trade union of sex workers in France, the STRASS (*Syndicat du Travail Sexuel*), released a statement in reference to the important claims of sex workers during Covid-19 times, highlighting that the governmental merging of sex work with pornography and domestic violence under the neo-abolitionist banner of 'sexual exploitation' contributes to its further stigmatisation:

We see an increase in stigma like with every epidemic. It is doubled among LGBTI+ and/or Asian travailleurs du sexe (sex workers). The fact that the government does not speak up when one of us is murdered or makes causal links between porn and domestic violence maintains the stigma alive.

(STRASS, 2020)

In the same statement, STRASS also pointed out that in the health crisis context many sex workers were confined with their partners without being able to work and found themselves at heightened risk of being subject to domestic violence. Moreover, they underlined that justifying the sudden disappearance of income to partners, particularly for those sex workers who were not out to them, was very difficult and it could easily lead to abuse and violence on their part when they realised that they had been lied to.



Some sex workers revealed that they felt judged and guilty for continuing to work, even after the end of the lockdown in May 2020. Those who felt obliged to work during confinement experienced feelings of shame and fear, which they often would not discuss even with their colleagues. Others, such as Ana, a 42-year-old Latina trans woman, felt that migrants were the only ones expected to work throughout the pandemic because, unlike French people, they could not afford not to work. She said:

I feel that clients called us because we are the only ones available during the pandemic, the others, the French etc. they were able to be in lockdown. We are the ones who had to stay available all through.

**Ana**

Among the research participants who were the hardest hit by the racialised convergence between sex work, Covid-19 stigma, and violence were Chinese sex workers, as the excerpt from the interview with Yu Yan, a 32-year-old Chinese cis woman, shows:

We were vastly mocked and called dirty names by youngsters on the street like we spread the disease. This started at the end of January. Young boys from lower economic backgrounds started to throw rocks at us or spit at us while on motorbikes. Then when it became clearer this disease is in Europe I was attacked once by a drunk man who called me a disease spreader and hit me with a bottle on the head. I had to see the doctor because it was bleeding a lot. Then when it really hit us, we had many people angry at us while we still worked on the streets like around April. After this period, it was extremely dangerous for us. People looked at us and said we bring the disease with our food and our animals, but also that it came through having sex with me. One group of men came to me in a car in the rue Saint Denis area and said they will kill me because my people bring diseases to this world and whores are the enemy of men. I was so frightened that I stopped working on the street.

**Yu Yan**

The quote by Yu Yan underlines the specific ways in which the already pronounced racialised stigmatisation of migrant sex workers is exacerbated by the intersecting racialisation of Covid-19 as a 'Chinese virus' from global and national political actors and mainstream

media (Holt et al. 2022), which increased both migrant sex workers' socio-economic precariousness and their vulnerability to violence and abuse.

### ***Racial Profiling at the Hands of the Police, the Local Authorities, and Sex Workers' Internalised Guilt***

Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the huge differential in the entitlement to social protection available to differently racialised strata of the population. Recent research conducted by Amnesty International in Western Europe stresses that police violence and concerns about institutional racism are not new, but the Covid-19 pandemic and enforcement of the lockdowns have exposed just how prevalent they are. For instance:

In Seine-Saint-Denis, the poorest area of mainland France where the majority of inhabitants are Black or of North African origin, the number of fines for breaching the lockdown was three times higher than in the rest of the country, despite local authorities stating that respect for lockdown measures was similar to other areas. In Nice, nine predominantly working class and minority ethnic neighbourhoods were subjected to longer overnight curfews than the rest of the city.

(Amnesty International 2020:20)

Throughout our interviews, participants openly raised the question of race when confronting the police and other types of law enforcement authorities. Many expressed strong awareness of the systemic nature of the problem of racism in society by simply referring to their lived experiences. This was powerfully addressed by the youngest of our participants, Akeem, an 18-year-old Arab male sex worker, when describing the hopes and desires for his future. While talking about his and his girlfriend's wishes, a trans woman from Latin America also working in the sex work sector, he succinctly said: 'I hope we won't die from either depression or poverty...This place is not made for Arab queers and Brazilian trans people. We are either killed by people or by the system'.

Akeem also went on to reveal the links between police control and his identity as a young Arab boy from the banlieues of Paris, continuing to stress his marked difference both from the larger dominant culture (i.e. white French society) and his Arab community of origin:

Police were everywhere. They especially picked out Arabs and blacks for identification, so I was stopped many times. I sometimes deliver drugs, that was difficult now. In fact, parks were closed, the sauna was closed where I work a lot. And then as well I could not move from the suburbs or it was very difficult in the city because of controls.

**Akeem**

He then continued:

I always feel discriminated against because I am, in fact, an Arab boy from the suburbs. I am always seen as a criminal or a scam. I am a low-life, that's the only thing I know. Then I am different because I like trans girls and some boys so I am seen as gay in the Arab community also there I am discriminated. I don't know anything else from childhood up to now. Clients want me because they fetishise Arab gangster boys from the suburbs. But after sex sometimes they think I stole something or they are afraid of me.

**Akeem**

Another young Arab male participant, Claude (20yo) adds that the targeting of the police and other forms of discrimination to which he has felt exposed is to do with the interlocking of their racialised identity and gender embodiment: 'I always feel discriminated because I am an obvious gay and Arab boy. So not extra (discriminated) because of Covid but always felt that way'.

Some participants pointed at the scarce governmental efforts to reach out and provide valuable information to different migrant communities in France during the Covid-19 crisis. Julius, a 25-year-old Senegalese participant, for instance, links this neglect to the racialised discrimination targeting Chinese and more generally Asian gay men, whom he perceives to be doubly disadvantaged because of their racial identity and the likelihood of experiencing language barriers in their daily lives:

I was born in Senegal and moved to Paris as refugee at age 18 because it was dangerous for me as a gay activist and openly homosexual and sex worker... I hope better information about Covid will come in more languages than only French, so it reaches the Latin community better and maybe even the Asians because they are doubly discriminated against. Even in the LGBT

community. Here in Le Marais [Parisian gay neighbourhood] always jokes on Asians are made, now the discrimination against Chinese-looking gays is really nasty and mean too.

**Julius**

Julius' interview excerpt shows the reproduction within LGBT social worlds of negative stereotypes and stigmatising jokes about Asian people, which can contribute to their further marginalisation from communities that could otherwise provide a sense of belonging and support. Unfortunately, these dynamics of racialised marginalisation targeting Asian people within LGBT communities are by no means unique to the French context (Han 2008). Yet, according to Ya-han Chuang (2020), these negative stereotypes are not countered by stereotypically positive features and by positive realities as it occurs in the US for instance. In an edited collection titled *Racismes de France*, Chuang describes how in France, similarly to the US, Asian people are often associated with the image of a 'model minority', as they are seen as successful at integrating better than other migrant populations. However, Chuang notes that 'these "positive" stereotypes tend to mask the discriminations against Asian people in France, which have long remained ignored and underestimated within the collective imagination or within social sciences and anti-racist movements' (ibid,199-214). With the appearance of Covid-19 in China, Chuang stresses the sudden and violent reactivation of a wave of racist anti-Asian sentiments, as evidenced by the widespread use of expressions such as 'yellow alert' or 'Chinese virus'. Some of our research participants testified to a renewed and profound fear of repercussions. For Yu Yan, a 32-year-old Chinese cis woman sex worker, this went as far as feeling ashamed to eat Chinese food in public:

I feel too guilty for this disease as they say it's coming from China. I do not dare to ask for any attention or assistance...Sad and very painful that it is seen as a Chinese disease like it is my fault all those people are sick and died...The worst thing for me is that I even felt ashamed of eating Chinese because the news came that Covid came because of our food.

**Yu Yan**

Yu Yan's excerpt is a testimony of the damage racialised stigmatisation can exert on people's sense of self, which can go as far as refusing to seek help out of the internalisation of guilt and negative connotations of their cultural identities.

### ***Fearing and feeling discriminated against within the health system***

A number of social research projects found that people from marginalised communities such as sex workers, LGBTQI and BIPOC are not receiving the same quality of health care that others do (Hoefinger et al. 2020, Bramley et al. 2011, Hefford et al. 2005). Our findings confirm and complement these observations. Many of our research participants expected to be discriminated against as a person of colour, trans, and sex worker when facing health services, and to be singled out even more under Covid-19 because of their association with risky misbehaviour. Sex workers felt that they were blamed for possibly spreading the virus. For instance, Alice, a 50-year-old trans woman of Asian origins, said:

if you are seen as BIPOC trans doing sex work, and having HIV, for me it is still very difficult to be part of society and this extra burden of Covid makes us extra vulnerable, and it doesn't even matter if you have access to housing, you are still affected, if you have a different skin colour, you are trans, you have HIV and you are a migrant...it makes it extra difficult because you are visible and people are more suspicious.

**Alice**

Ana, a 42-year-old Latina trans woman, also highlighted the fact that having a regular immigration status and benefiting from the national health care provisions is not enough to feel that she would be properly taken care of if she got infected with Covid-19. While addressing this, she critically presented some of her embodied characteristics, that according to her lived experience, would make her less of a priority in the health care system:

I still fear that, even if I have papers, social security etc., if I get the Covid I fear that if I have a complication for my other health problems, that I would not be assisted properly. As I am a foreigner, HIV positive, smoker, transgender, many things that in the case where they would have to choose they'd say: she already has this and that, let her die, we give ventilators to those who are healthier and younger.

**Ana**

Finally, it was noteworthy that the trans sex workers to whom we talked raised the question of discrimination within hospital settings, before and after the spread of Covid-19, as they discussed the blatant forms of transphobia to which they have been exposed:

Of course I know they discriminate against trans women in the hospitals.  
Especially when you have not had a sex-change operation...  
[Do you feel that if you were to contract Covid you would be appropriately  
assisted and cured?]  
I can only pray and hope

**Vanessa**

This excerpt from the interview with Veronica, a 57-year-old Latina trans woman, expresses the real concerns and lived experiences of a highly stigmatised population, fearing that they would be de-prioritised from critical care in case they get infected, which further contributes to the materiality of their marginalisation and precariousness.

***Being Affected by Isolation Under Lockdown While Losing Revenues for Subsistence:  
The Impact on Sex Workers' Health and Finances***

Alongside the impact on physical health, the critical context of uncertainty generated by the Covid-19 pandemic can also have profound effects on mental health and wellbeing, increasing anxiety, stress and depression (Pfefferbaum & North 2020). Our findings confirm these considerations and show that the exacerbation of pre-existing mental health issues, the greater impact on more vulnerable groups, and difficulties in accessing support and services need to be urgently considered. Amongst the various answers to the questions we posed on the topic of (mental) health in relation to loss of income and isolation, our participants provided vivid examples of how precarity and vulnerability influenced the lives of sex workers during the first Covid lockdown in Paris in 2020. Depression, suicides, suicidal thoughts, and malnutrition have all been reported alongside an increase of substance use.

Diego, a 38-year-old Latino male sex worker who was most psychologically affected by isolation, including increased alcohol and drug use, obtained help and anxiety medications. He recalls the sadness of getting together with the sex worker community only for funerals, rather than birthdays or other types of celebrations. In his own words, he added: 'my apartment is smaller than 20 square meters and I was getting crazier than I already am, I started drinking much more and taking more drugs for isolation'.

The reality of isolation exacerbates people's concerns and worries. For instance, in this excerpt from her interview Vanessa, 41-year-old Latina trans sex worker, talks openly of feeling abandoned by friends and about how this makes her feel fragile and precarious:

I felt very oppressed, what would happen in my situation after Covid? My situation, sex worker with family in Brazil and not many close friends and all in the same situation, I felt fragile and abandoned. Some people I was hoping they would call me, I was disappointed, I didn't get these calls...I called my family a bit but not everyday and not all of them.

**Vanessa**

A cis man sex worker participant, Akeem, talked about the negative impact that the pandemic had on his and his girlfriends' mental health, which prevented them from working and constrained them to a claustrophobic environment. He said:

I feel very fucked up. My mental health is zero. I feel sad and tired because I do not see anything becoming better soon, only worse...I felt very depressed during the lockdown like I was chained. Now we can move again. I feel less claustrophobic but it's still very tense. Especially the girls I know without papers are just doomed. It was very bad at the end...The girls (I was staying with) could not get out because many didn't have papers and could not get the attestations to get out to show the police. So in a way they were in jail. The stress of no money, food, people locked up and me and my girlfriends, the only ones with passports and papers, made it impossible.

**Akeem**

Most importantly, the excerpt shows the intersectional and pivotal role of valid documentation in exacerbating migrants' isolation during lockdown, which can become a carceral experience for those who have no, or no longer valid papers.

### ***Access to Support from the Government and How the State Cannot Access Sex Workers Communities: Confusion and Withdrawal***

During the Covid-19 crisis, the Red Umbrella Federation (Fédération Parapluie Rouge), which includes France's main sex work community health organisations, sent a letter to the French head of State, President Macron, and to the minister of Solidarity and Health in order to unblock an emergency fund for sex workers across the country. A formal letter followed this action in April 2020, co-signed by five organisations (AIDES, Arcat, Sidaction, Family Planning and Médecins du Monde) asking for the establishment of an endowment fund. Much of the

budget allocated to the prostitution exit program introduced by the 2016 law was still untapped. A group of twelve MPs called for these funds to be used to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of many sex workers. Yet, the then-secretary of State for gender equality, Marlène Schiappa, countered their argument by stating that it was 'complicated for the state to compensate someone who carries out an undeclared activity such as prostitution'. Only in late October 2020, one MP from the liberal party *République en Marche*, Raphaël Gérard, presented an amendment to the 2021 Finance Law in order to provide 90,000 euros to community health organisations to guarantee their health prevention work among sex workers in the midst of the hardening of anti-Covid-19 measures. Apart from this small contribution to community health organisations across the country, the French state did not provide any other material support for sex workers; it was through the self-organising efforts of a number of sex workers-led organisations to crowd-fund that basic support to sex workers was provided (Fedorkó et al, 2021).

During her interview Alice, a 50-year-old trans woman of Asian origins, underlined that the negative impact of the exclusion of sex workers from state aid was compounded by the difficulty for non-citizens to access welfare benefits in France because the criminalisation of sex work third parties undermines their capacity to prove income. This double exclusion is made even stronger by the anti-trafficking and criminalising law enforcement approach of the Government:

Accessing invisible people is really hard. If the government only focuses on criminalisation, on people who are migrant sex workers through trafficking laws, you never can help them, you lose access to most of them.

**Alice**

Alice's excerpt reminds us of the ways in which the 2016 law, by pushing sex workers underground, also exacerbates their vulnerability to Covid-19 as they become invisible to health care and excluded from financial support, which Diego, a 38-year-old Latino male sex worker, understands as institutional discrimination:

The government was guaranteeing food, they were delivering food through organisations to anyone needing it. Given sex work is not work in France, many of us had impossibility to access any benefits, there is a lot of institutional discrimination.

**Diego**



The forms of institutional discrimination generated by the combined impact of the 2016 neo-abolitionist law and the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic are best expressed by the hashtag *#coronabolo* used by sex work activists to protest their double-tiered marginalisation (due the *corona* virus measures and sex work *abolitionist* discourse). This is further increased for people who are undocumented.

We were told you can only go out with government papers. This really scared me because I am illegal in France and Europe. I was thinking of going home to my country, but then I was afraid because my passport is not valid anymore and I changed so much after the operations. Now I don't look at all like in the old passport photo and they might get me for fraud. So, I am too scared to go to the embassy for a new passport.

**Sophia**

This excerpt from the interview with Sophia, a Latina trans woman in her late 40s working at the Bois de Boulogne, shows the multiple and practical ways in which being undocumented can act like a catalyst accelerating people's vulnerability, marginalisation and isolation, as well as their exclusion from key health services in Covid-19 times.

### ***Working Under Covid-19 and Adapting to Changes Through Different Work Practices***

Alongside the threat to public health, economic and social disruptions endanger the long-term livelihoods and wellbeing of many sex workers. On the one hand, governmental regulations, lockdown and curfew ended many possibilities of working within the informal economic sector including sex work. Oftentimes, sex workers with no other source of income and no possibility of financial support by the government were forced to continue working. This had consequences; clients still reached out towards sex workers and, in their precarious financial situations, many of them answered those calls. Social isolation seemed to increase the demand for sex work on the side of the clients. Sex workers saw themselves placed in a schism between high demand and no legalised possibility to work, including the stress about the then unknown virus that paralysed the country.

One participant, Ana, describes the paradox of being extremely concerned about catching Covid-19 while still seeing clients to cover for her basic needs, as well as the difficulty of keeping safer practices in place during the sex work sessions. She said:

The clients I had during lockdown, it was all very quick and always beginning with masks, gel and all the hygienic measures of Covid, even though in the moment we did that, later they were all gone, masks and all.

**Ana**

In the reminder of her interview, she describes how she still sees clients while setting rigid boundaries elsewhere, which she frames as having become obsessive about disinfecting everything in her apartment.

For people who are racialised as Arab men and socially constructed as ‘dangerous’ in France (Guénif-Souilamas 2006), selling sex in times of Covid-19 means crossing entrenched socio-economic and spatial boundaries. According to Akeem, the cis man sex worker participant we cited above:

In the first weeks of the lockdown it was very very quiet, but after a while my phone started to ring again. Especially from my online ads, Snapchat and Grindr. I think men got horny and wanted to make risky dates with sex workers again. To go to clients' homes meant entering war time through the detection gates of the state. They are already focused on catching sex workers, migrants and in my case Moroccans/rebeu<sup>4</sup>. Then mostly clients are living in bourgeois places, so I am quickly detected as a person who does not belong there.

**Akeem**

Akeem's experience of increased online requests during lockdown is corroborated by the following excerpt from the interview with Claude, a 20-year-old Arab male participant, who overall had more requests even though his usual place of work (a sauna) was shut because of Covid-19. Claude told us:

The sauna closed and I could not get my pay dates to go there anymore. But I saw my online work piling up. Guys on Grindr/Snapchat etc. I don't work in Bois de Boulogne, so for me this did not affect anything, with the lockdown I

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<sup>4</sup> In French Verlan argot, the term rebeu designates a young Arab man of Northern African origins, it comes from the colloquial French word 'beur'.

only got more demand online. It was too much, I got sort of exhausted by the phone and constant DM.

**Claude**

Akeem and Claude's experiences of increased work and of adaptation to the changes imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic were not unique. Overall, Monique, a Latina trans woman in her 40s, was satisfied with the extra income she was able to make during Covid-19 by switching to online work and porn films, which she sees as less dangerous than working in the street out of her van.

Well, it was a bit stressful in the beginning but in the end actually I made good money with the online stuff and we made some films which bring in very good money. Sometimes even better than the road shows I do. It's as well less dangerous than the van.

**Monique**

Another participant, Myriam, a 47-year-old cis woman of Guadeloupian origins, decided to keep working at the Bois de Boulogne in her camper van by making material adjustments to her work practices, as well as switching to porn and online. Myriam built a plastic screen with a glory hole inside the van and used a plastic face shield, gloves and alcohol for her and clients. When asked how she responded to the closures, this was her answer:

I responded well, I was only thinking about how to see clients now. It was more difficult in a way. I switched over to porn and online. I have friends in the porn industry and already made some movies in my van but now it was more studio work. And in a collective we worked online from my house.

**Myriam**

The experiences of Monique, Akeem, and Claude show that the possibility and ability to switch to online work made an important difference for migrant sex workers as it enabled them to keep working as and sometimes more than before lockdown. On the contrary people whose work was not online were unable to work and make a living. The experience of Veronica, a 57-year-old Latina trans woman, is very relevant in this respect:

I work less now after the law changed in France before I did street work and in a club. Now I have a part time regular job and see my frequent clients in this sauna...When the sauna closed I could no longer arrange dates to come to this place so my income from sex work stopped.

**Veronica**

Overall, the experiences analysed in this section reveal a plurality of individual responses to the dilemma posed by the competing necessities to survive economically and to avoid contracting Covid-19. Although these responses depended on people's ability and willingness to adapt to changes through different work practices, overall, they were determined by the refusal on the part of the state to support sex workers so that they could afford to remain safe and afford not to work during lockdown and beyond.

***Safety: Who is Providing it and What are the Strategies to Feel Safe(r)?***

A large part of the research conducted internationally by the SEXHUM research team points at how the protection systems directed at sex workers focus almost entirely on women, mostly cisgender women, as they fit into the institutional and sexual humanitarian understanding of vulnerability (Fehrenbacher et al. 2020, Hoefinger et al. 2020, Mai et al. 2021). However, this focus on cis female subjecthood/victimhood is often counterproductive for many of the women in the sex work sector, who are positioned as the ideal beneficiaries of social protection mechanisms while being specifically surveilled, bordered and deported in the process (Giametta et al. forthcoming). In this context, trans people tend to be excluded by humanitarian concerns, protection and social interventions while being also subject to immigration law enforcement and deportations (Musto et al. 2021). These considerations were corroborated further by our Coronavirus-related interviews, showing that throughout the Covid-19 lockdown many Latina trans women kept receiving deportation orders from the government as their visas had not been renewed at the Prefecture. This excerpt from the interview with Diego (38-year-old Latino male sex worker), for instance, shows that some migrant sex workers had their passports confiscated by the authorities as the number of controls incrementally augmented during lockdown:

We do know of many cases of colleagues who were contacted by police during the lockdown only for receiving clients. Police took away passports and accused them of having Covid without checking them. They did not give them a fine, but their passports were taken away. They were mostly Latina

cis-women. It is always more the women who are targeted, we as males, authorities don't really think of us as whoring. They go after the exploitative networks as they call them, and this is cis-women and trans women.

**Diego**

In the context of the sexual humanitarian bordering established by the 2016 Law and exacerbated by the heightened controls legitimised by anti-Covid-19 measures, a few participants described how they managed to find a safe space through their clients, particularly those who were more isolated and with a fragile social network of which they could avail themselves:

I had a good and old client. He always helped me with things. One day he said, "Yuyu if you can take care of me like cooking and cleaning then you can stay with me." I did this and he saved me

**Yu Yan**

Yu Yan's experience of having been helped by a client while having been excluded by Covid-19 relevant state support is emblematic of the failings of the 2016 Law and of France's neo-abolitionist position more general, both of which equate clients with exploiters while failing to adequately provide the most vulnerable strata of the sex working population with sustainable alternatives and adequate support even during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **Conclusions**

Social injustice sparked by the interlocking of racism and anti-sex work imageries is part of the lives of all sex workers of colour. Moreover, the intersecting nature of sex work stigma, racism and transphobia multiply affects and exposes trans sex workers of colour to discrimination and violence (Fehrenbacher et al. 2020). Our research found that in France the police use racial profiling or frisking as a tool to investigate sex workers of colour while asking non-white sex workers or sex workers with North-African or Arab backgrounds for ID papers. These extra-scrutinising and controlling procedures pose a high risk of producing racialised violence by uniformed forces. Our findings also indicate that, through the enforcement of lockdown directives and regulations, white Eurocentric institutional and systemic structures

have had violent and racist consequences on sex workers and particularly BIPOC sex workers - in France as well as across the other research settings (Mai et al. 2021).

Prior to the second lockdown phase in France, President Emmanuel Macron announced a curfew from 9pm to 6am for the month of October 2020. Large numbers of sex workers work mostly at night, and their fear of being massively impacted by these new social control measures were well founded. Many trans sex workers' main source of income, for instance, is their night-time work at the Bois de Boulogne. When one participant, a Brazilian trans woman, became aware of the curfew, she said she felt desperate, as she was already significantly impoverished since the beginning of the first lockdown and its aftermath in March 2020. In the interview, she expressed her thoughts about going back to Brazil, but when doing so she felt even more frustrated and hopeless because of the difficulties she would find to access HIV treatment in her home country. Chinese female street-based sex workers also experienced a devastating impact during this time. SEXHUM sex worker participants in the Belleville area in Paris, where many Chinese women work, reported a huge downfall in clients.

The coming of the second lockdown was perceived as an even bigger threat to the livelihood of many people who work in informal economic sectors. In this economy of scarcity and fear, many among the migrant sex workers we interviewed have countered their precariousness through self-organising and crowd-funding actions. However, solidarity among sex workers can easily decrease as the labour sector on which they rely continues to shrink.

The broader findings of the SEXHUM project showed how within sex workers' communities, often those most oppressed are being overlooked, or generally they are a lesser concern of research (Bennachie et al. 2021). Our analysis of the development and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives and rights of migrant sex workers in France demonstrates that the more racialised barriers there are for people to access citizenship, labour rights and social protection, the less protected they are from abuse and exploitation as well as from poverty and ill-health, effects which are further amplified in times of crisis. Our research highlights the critical need for intersectional and collaborative public advocacy to end racial profiling in the Covid-19 pandemic response. The lived experiences of our participants during the pandemic point to the urgency of confronting the systemic injustices and inequalities that are normalised by white-dominated dominant culture and a French political system that ignores the realities of racialised populations disproportionately impacted by state control measures. The data we collected specific to the impact of Covid-19 further corroborate our broader findings that the decriminalisation of sex work, including the purchase of sexual

services, is a strategic starting point for the reduction of the marginalisation, stigmatisation, and socio-economic vulnerability of the people directly concerned, particularly when they are racialised (Mai et al. 2021; Maciotti et al. 2020).

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