Introduction

This briefing paper outlines the findings from an analysis of 70 media articles documenting sex work during the coronavirus pandemic. It reveals a number of harmful journalistic practices which have scapegoated sex workers, in turn compounding the stigma and ‘whorephobia’ they face. In addition to this, it is argued that many of the articles analysed enable the repressive social control of sex workers, purportedly in the name of public health. The analysis suggests that media articles primarily present sex workers as a homogenous group. This is argued to increase the visibility of, and distort, certain forms of sex work and sex worker experiences, while entrenching the invisibility of others. Finally, this briefing argues the pandemic is placing sex workers in an impossible situation whereby inadequate welfare protections force them to keep working, for which they are then scapegoated and criminalised.

I argue that the perception of sex workers as a public health threat is highly problematic. This is precisely because of the potential implications such constructions of sex work can, and are, having for sex workers. For instance, the closure of the Leeds Managed Approach area, following extensive criticism by abolitionist groups, has seen the end of a framework in which street workers were able to work more safely without the over-arching fear of arrest. Yet, Basis Yorkshire have outlined how [‘the closure has also left women feeling unable to report crimes against them for fear of the consequences of breaking Covid restrictions’](https://basisyorkshire.org.uk/news/statement-basis-yorkshire-re-managed-approach-june-2021/) (June, 2021). It is here we begin to see how the pandemic, and Covid-19 restrictions are enabling new ways for sex workers to be controlled and policed. The pandemic has created new conditions in which ideologies of exclusion and control can be revisited in a different way to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities.

Sex work in the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated sex worker’s lives in a multitude of ways. The Lancet Review (2020) outlines how the pandemic has financially compromised sex workers, leading to serious levels of harm, increased arrests, deportations, fines and violence. It further reports how the pandemic has intensified the stigma and discrimination sex workers face. Additionally, the demand for shelter and emergency housing has increased due to the forced closure of sex work venues, increasing the likelihood of homelessness and destitution (Lancet Review, 2020). The anxiety over loss of income, precarious housing and food has meant that existing mental health problems are prone to be exacerbated. The NSWP COVID-19 Impact Survey (2020) found that due to the high level of precariousness, sex workers have had to alter their service, including the lowering of prices and providing services they wouldn’t usually offer. Detrimentally, sex workers aren’t able to be as selective with clients, which can significantly increase their proximity to harm. For example a sex worker organisation in France stated that due to this, ‘Many street sex workers who meet many clients have tested positive [for covid] and so far we have counted 3 sex workers dead.’(NSWP, 2020).

The English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) have reported how a lack of income, and concern over future earning potential as a result of the pandemic, makes sex workers reluctant to reject clients, in turn heightening anxiety and fear. The NSWP report also found that, out of 28 responses from different countries, there were no reports of positive government measures, in regards to a ban on raids, arrests and prosecutions, to help protect sex workers. There has been little, if any recourse to state support for the majority of workers; a significant factor in exposing sex workers to destitution. Yet, even before the pandemic, the welfare system in place for sex workers was inadequate, with little support available. This can be seen with the report from the House of Commons (2019) which identified how barriers to accessing support, create and reproduce sex workers’ reliance on the industry.

The following section outlines some of the key themes that emerged from an analysis of media reporting of sex work during the pandemic.

Media Perceptions

It is apparent that a central theme found within this research is the scapegoating of sex workers. 24 articles place blame on sex workers for adding to the concern of public health. One example comes from the Belfast Telegraph, [‘brothel that’s breaching coronavirus rules and is a Petri dish for spreading it around’](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/sunday-life/news/belfast-brothel-breaking-covid-rules-say-neighbours-39898394.html) (June, 2021). This focuses on framing sex workers as part of the problem, under the pretence of COVID-19. This line of argument has been intertwined with the fuelling of police power; [‘they (police) stop people for minor Covid-19 infringements but do nothing about sex workers who have the potential to spread the virus all over the place’](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/sunday-life/news/belfast-brothel-breaking-covid-rules-say-neighbours-39898394.html) (Belfast Telegraph, 2021). This clearly identifies sex workers as a central issue to public health.

With a heightened focus on the arrests made by officers, there has been a spotlight on the number of officers who have been appointed to combat sex work, due to the belief that sex work is problematic for the community. Buckinghamshire Live reported that during the pandemic [‘a total of 154 offences were committed, with 92 people were caught soliciting for the purposes of prostitution, and 62 investigated for exploitation of prostitution.’](https://www.buckinghamshirelive.com/news/buckinghamshire-news/buckinghamshire-residents-broke-covid-lockdown-5447076) (May, 2021), and the Belfast Telegraph (2020) wrote that [‘New measures introduced by the PSNI earlier this year saw three oﬃcers appointed as dedicated liaison oﬃcers with sex workers.](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/sunday-life/news/belfast-brothel-breaking-covid-rules-say-neighbours-39898394.html)’.

Further evidence that the media has been used to denounce sex workers comes from the presentation that workers have enabled others to increase their proximity to harm. 15 articles emphasise that despite the pandemic, clientshave continued to use sex workers, for example;

[*‘Lockdown did not stop people going out to visit prostitutes, new ﬁgures show.’*](https://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/news/leicester-news/city-bucks-trend-increase-prostitution-5444766) *(Leicestershire Live, 2021),*

[*‘Coronavirus: Sex workers meet clients despite lockdown’*](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-birmingham-52579788) *(BBC News, 2020),*

[*‘Social distancing guidance and a ban on mingling with strangers didn’t stop some people from leaving home to visit prostitutes’*](https://www.getreading.co.uk/news/reading-berkshire-news/covid-lockdown-rules-were-broken-20651725) *(Berkshire Live, 2021).*

Homogenised reporting?

Within sex work, trans and migrant workers experience significant marginalisation due to pre-existing marginalisation, stigma and systemic structural violence, the pandemic has exacerbated this. The Lancet Review (2020) demonstrates that this can be seen in relation to precarious housing, barriers when accessing healthcare, and increased risk of police violence and arrest. Throughout the research, it was obvious the focus was predominantly on single mothers. Whilst there is nothing inherently problematic with this, it was clear that there was a considerable lack of attention given to trans, racialised or migrant workers. 15 articles involved the identification of single mothers, with reports such as [‘Mother-of-four Victoria said her earnings have gone from £2,000 to £200 a week’](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-nottinghamshire-52579634) (BBC News, 2020) and [‘Sasha, a mother of two, had been working in a parlour three days a week while her children were in school, earning between £40 and £70 a day.’](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/13/uk-sex-workers-in-dire-and-desperate-state-amid-coronavirus-lockdown) (The Guardian, 2020). However, there is minimal coverage when discussing the intersecting vulnerabilities experienced by trans and migrant workers. Seven articles simply quoted the ECP, writing that ‘Women working on the street, migrant and trans workers, who already have the highest rates of poverty, arrest and violence, are particularly suffering*’*. Whilst the inclusion of this quote from a sex worker led organisation is to be welcomed, few journalists wrote articles that centred these accounts. It is of note that articles discussing trans workers, e.g. [‘The deadly epidemic we must acknowledge this Pride – the murder of transgender people of colour’](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/pride-transgender-lgbtq-black-b1858349.html) (The Independent, 2020), weren’t easily accessible and were found once specifically searching the term ‘transgender sex workers’. This indicates the lack of representation of trans sex workers, which can lead to further stigmatisation and harm. It also reveals how existing narratives around vulnerability, and deserving ‘victims’ or ‘fallen women’, can translate to media discourse around sex work.

There has also been a recognition of student sex workers. Whilst it is indispensable that there is an understanding of student sex work, the media coverage tends to have an optimistic stance with a focus on profit and income. Sky News (2020) issued a report discussing the number of students turning to sex work during the pandemic, stating that [‘The woman, in her 20s, says she "loves" her new source of income and refers to it as "one of the best things" she has ever done.’](https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-more-students-are-turning-to-sex-work-during-covid-19-pandemic-12066700) – this narrates the liberal feminist argument which has previously been empowering, yet can be detrimental as it can eliminate room for other more harmful areas of sex work to be seen. When discussing student sex work and OnlyFans, The Mirror quoted ‘["I COULD BARELY AFFORD TO BUY FOOD - NOW I EARN £7,200 A MONTH"](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/desperate-students-sell-sex-pay-23890764)’ (April, 2021). This was presented as a subheading to emphasise the importance. This representation distorts the realities of sex work for many workers, and arguably detracts from key issues such as the absence of workers’ rights due to the precarity of work online, structural inequality, and education access.

It is important to identify that when conducting this research, the articles weren’t of abundance. Despite this research analysing 70 articles, it took a while to find them, whilst actively searching – this is not how the general public access news stories. It is also of note that the majority of articles were produced by local news. The arguments made by sex worker organisations are important within a national and international context, though these arguments must be grounded within local news. Local news reports are crucial as it is known that people are more concerned with news that is in closer proximity to them. In relation, ‘Not In My Backyard’ refers to the phenomenon whereby residents of a neighbourhood decide that a new development/change in occupancy is deemed inappropriate and unwanted. Thus, the media must communicate an accurate representation of sex workers to enable space for a decrease in stigmatisation.

Why does this matter?

It is clear that media articles fail to represent what sex workers are calling for – ‘the decriminalisation of sex work and an immediate moratorium on raids, arrests and prosecutions’ (ECP, 2020), in addition to the constant ‘campaign for the rights and safety of everyone who sells sexual services’ (SWARM, Mission Statement). It may be the case that journalists are aiming to project a representative picture of sex workers and the harm faced, but accounts of the structural issues underpinning the stories, which are often focused on by sex worker activists, are often omitted. To avoid this, it is essential to involve the voices of sex workers as often as possible.

It is evident that this is an ongoing crisis. As discussed we have seen the eradication of the Managed Approach area – a success for abolitionists, and this line of argument is also common amongst politicians when calling for legislation that contradicts what sex workers are calling for. For example, Diana Johnson (MP) is advocating for the criminalisation of the buyers of sex, with a focus on tackling sex trafficking. This proposal would be extremely detrimental for sex workers as there is statistical evidence that the implementation of the Nordic Model undermines sex workers’ safety. If this is successful it shows contempt for the sex worker community, who are working extremely hard to have their voices heard. Another contemporary example where sex workers are being silenced can be seen with the recent ban of strip clubs in Bristol, which is in line with the abolitionist ideology, thus proving that this is an enduring crisis.

This briefing paper has considered the ongoing attacks on sex workers rights and freedoms, and has argued that there is a need to recognise and resist the harms being imposed on all workers involved across the industry. There is a need to call out and resist the paradox, whereby in the absence of any effort to address those structural issues created and enabled by the state, public health concerns are being used as a tool to reinforce and further expose sex workers to stigmatisation, surveillance and control.

As there has been little to no help in this time of crisis, sex worker organisations are demanding action from the government. The NSWP Impact Survey (2020) found that COVID-19 has enabled law enforcement to take repressive measures directed at sex workers, including the closure of brothels, bars and massage parlours, and a general crackdown within areas of street-based sex work. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the demands of the ECP include the decriminalisation of sex work due to the hidden nature of the crisis, and the immediate moratorium on raids, arrests and prosecutions, as well as easy-to-access financial support for sex workers in crisis, they support the demand for a care income and the demands for the release of people in immigration detention and of non-violent prisoners. As seen in the NSWP survey, it is evident that sex workers have been left out of schemes which the government have provided for other workers – further supporting evidence comes from the Lancet Review, UNAIDS, NUM and SWARM.