



POSITION PAPER ON SEX WORK AND COVID-19

By The Caribbean Vulnerable Communities (CVC)
& The Caribbean Sex Worker Coalition (CSWC)



Caribbean
Vulnerable
Communities
Coalition





CARIBBEAN SEX WORKERS FACE SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATION

Caribbean sex workers face pervasive stigma from the state and general public when trying to access goods and services, housing and accommodation, employment opportunities and justice. Sex workers face extra layers of exclusion and oppression when they practise survival sex, use drugs, are trans, are migrants, are living with HIV or work on the streets. The day to day stigma faced, curtails the capacity of sex workers to fight for basic human rights. Both external and internalised stigma impacts sex workers mental health and emotional resilience and interferes with their ability to engage in advocacy, organising and activism. Stigma is socially isolating. It reduces the options for sex workers to receive support and acts as a barrier to accessing health care, human rights, and justice. Stigma manifests in policy and regulatory frameworks that criminalise or require sex workers to have mandatory medical testing or permanent registration on police or government databases.



SEX WORK IS A CRIMINALIZED BEHAVIOUR IN MOST OF THE CARIBBEAN

Throughout most of the Caribbean, sex work remains a criminal offence making sex workers one of the most marginalised groups. As Kempadoo notes “In the English-speaking Caribbean almost all activities for female and male sex workers are criminalized. These include aiding prostitution and procuring for the purposes of prostitution; soliciting, loitering or wandering in a public place for purposes of prostitution; the use of premises as a brothel; living off or on, partially or wholly, the earnings of prostitution; sexual intercourse with a minor (person under the age of 16), and same-sex sexual intercourse” (Citation). This pervasive criminalization has significant implications for the wellbeing and livelihood of sex workers. Additionally, criminalization is often used against sex workers by abusive partners or clients, as blackmail or suggesting they are unfit parents in custody cases. Various reports also indicate that police regularly target, harass, extort and assault sex workers or those they assume to be sex workers, such as trans women. These law enforcement officials usually get away with this abuse because sex workers fear being arrested if they report. If sex work was not criminalised, sex workers could better protect themselves and seek justice when they are harmed.



STIGMA AND CRIMINALISATION HEIGHTEN THE VULNERABILITY OF SEX WORKERS DURING THE COVID -19 PANDEMIC.

Stigma and discrimination plant hatred and revulsion, whilst criminalisation creates opportunities for violence and abuse. COVID has intensified stigma, racism, discrimination and repressive policing throughout the Caribbean. When a national emergency like COVID is added to the mix, the situation for Sex Workers becomes even more dire.

Increased policing and surveillance through emergency orders that relate to social distancing, lockdowns, identification requirements have also hit sex workers hard. With social distancing and lockdown rules in place and sex establishments closed, sex workers around the Caribbean have seen their incomes disappear almost overnight as a result of coronavirus. They are often not entitled to health insurance and face added barriers accessing health services during COVID. This situation becomes even more challenging as testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections and HIV services for sex workers have also been disrupted by the pandemic.

CVC has documented experiences of sex workers throughout the region being excluded from government emergency relief, national protection, and emergency financial support programmes. Many report having experienced punitive crackdowns such as raids on their workplaces and increased surveillance, arrests, fines and violence by police and clients alike. Fearing for their livelihoods, as well as their health, some are offering services, while others are turning to organisations like the Caribbean Sex Worker Coalition (CSWC) and local charities for help.



FAILURE TO ACT IS CONTRIBUTING TO THE PANDEMIC

It is well established fact that the health and well-being of sex workers is inextricably linked to that of their clients and the broader public. We know from HIV and sexually transmitted infections that we cannot leave sex workers out of public health responses. Sex workers should therefore be fully included as part of COVID planning and response mechanisms, thus ensuring the issues and challenges they face are adequately addressed. The COVID-19 pandemic has placed many sex workers in a particularly precarious situation, economically and in terms of their safety. As a result of the drastic reduction in earnings due to a decrease in regular clientele (or the fact that trusted regular clients are often no longer available) sex workers have reported¹ that the need for money can sometimes outweigh the ability to vet new clients, making it difficult for some sex workers to feel safe from COVID-19.

Caribbean sex workers experience the social repercussions of stigmatised and criminalised work that frequently limit their ability to adhere to COVID-19 prevention practices. Furthermore, criminalization, targeted policing, and environments impact sex workers' abilities to practice harm reduction and health promotion behaviours.

1 Reports made to the Caribbean Sex Work Coalition

CALL TO ACTION

The Caribbean Vulnerable Communities Coalition and the Caribbean Sex Workers Coalition call on Caribbean governments to:

1. Take careful note of how the increased policing and surveillance through emergency orders that relate to social distancing, lockdowns, identification requirements, accessing the personal information and restricted freedom of movement across borders can adversely impact sex workers and other vulnerable groups
2. Take action through policy and regulatory frameworks to counter the intensifying stigma, racism, discrimination and repressive policing generated by COVID
3. Listen to the growing group of institutions that are calling for the decriminalisation of sex work, including United Nations bodies, civil society (e.g. Amnesty International) and governments (New Zealand).
4. Fully involve sex workers in the COVID response to address the specific challenges they face and current exclusion from government relief and protection programmes, and in line with principles of social justice
5. Recognise community-based organizations as essential to providing an immediate, short-term COVID-19 response for vulnerable groups like sex workers, and equip them with the necessary resources to do this.
6. Ensure that sex workers, their organisations and providers have personal protective equipment to distribute among sex workers and their clients to help reduce the overall burden of COVID-19 infections, hospitalisations, and resulting deaths.

ABOUT CVC

Caribbean Vulnerable Communities Coalition (CVC) is a coalition of community leaders and non-governmental agencies that are advocates and service providers, working with and on behalf of Caribbean populations who are especially vulnerable to HIV infection or often forgotten in access to treatment and healthcare programmes. CVC and its member organisations are working to remove barriers of stigma and discrimination and to reduce the prevalence of HIV among the key populations. We take action to ensure increased access to services, to promote a human rights framework for policy and programmes at national and regional levels and to build the capacity of the most vulnerable populations for effective self-advocacy.

ABOUT CSWC

CSWC is a group of sex worker led organizations across the Caribbean who share a common goal of advancing the rights of all sex workers in the Caribbean.

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