

THE EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS OF WOMEN WHO SELL OR EXCHANGE SEX OR SEXUAL IMAGES DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC IN SCOTLAND

MARCH - DECEMBER 2020

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CLiCK (www.click.scot) is a partnership of organisations working together to provide emotional and practical support to any woman involved in selling or exchanging sex or sexual images in Scotland.

Support is provided through an online live chat, helpline, and one-to-one support with women’s workers based in nine locations across the country. Your Voice - CLiCK’s lived experience participation platform - provides women with a space to develop and improve CLiCK and other support services.

In June 2020, CLiCK developed a new creative platform, CLiCK Magazine (www.clickmagazine.online) which aimed to amplify women’s needs and experiences during the coronavirus pandemic via a monthly podcast, anonymous survey platform, wellbeing arts project, and a creative space for women to tell their story.

CLiCK is funded by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport via the Tampon Tax Fund.

CLiCK SUPPORT

Referral form:
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

- In March 2020, **CLiCK** conducted a small needs assessment poll which highlighted money as women's most urgent need at the start of the coronavirus pandemic
- **CLiCK** have worked to address financial need by supporting women to access emergency funds. However, we understood that women were experiencing a high level of need across various aspects of their lives that emergency funds alone could not address
- This needs assessment builds upon **CLiCK's** original poll by examining changes in women's needs over the course of the coronavirus pandemic and asking women for their views on how decision makers and support services should be meeting the rights and needs of women who sell or exchange sex or sexual images in Scotland

METHODS

- The needs assessment was conducted via an online survey hosted on RISE, an anonymous survey platform which forms part of **CLiCK Magazine**
- Women were asked what their needs were at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, what their needs were now (November 2020/December 2020), and what they think decision makers and support services should be doing to meet women's rights and needs. You can view the full survey [here](#)
- Data collection ran from 4 November 2020 – 11 December 2020 with 81 responses in total

FINDINGS

- 36% of women identified money as their most urgent need at the beginning of the pandemic. Money became a more pressing concern as the pandemic progressed, with 52% of women stating money as their most urgent need in November 2020/December 2020
- Examination of women's other needs at the start of the pandemic and in November 2020/December 2020 highlights that women's unmet needs are multiple and intersecting. Crucially, needs such as sexual health and mental wellbeing have become more pressing as the pandemic has progressed
- Women report feeling low, isolated, frustrated, and stressed with some women reporting suicidal ideation as well as suicide attempt:

Very low, finding things difficult, no money for food for me, my partner or our dog. Having to work on the street to get money. Trying to get support for my drug use. It's a scary time.

- Women also called for greater action from decision makers and support services to meet women's various needs – with calls for greater financial support and changes to the benefits system, access to counselling, and greater representation at the strategic level:

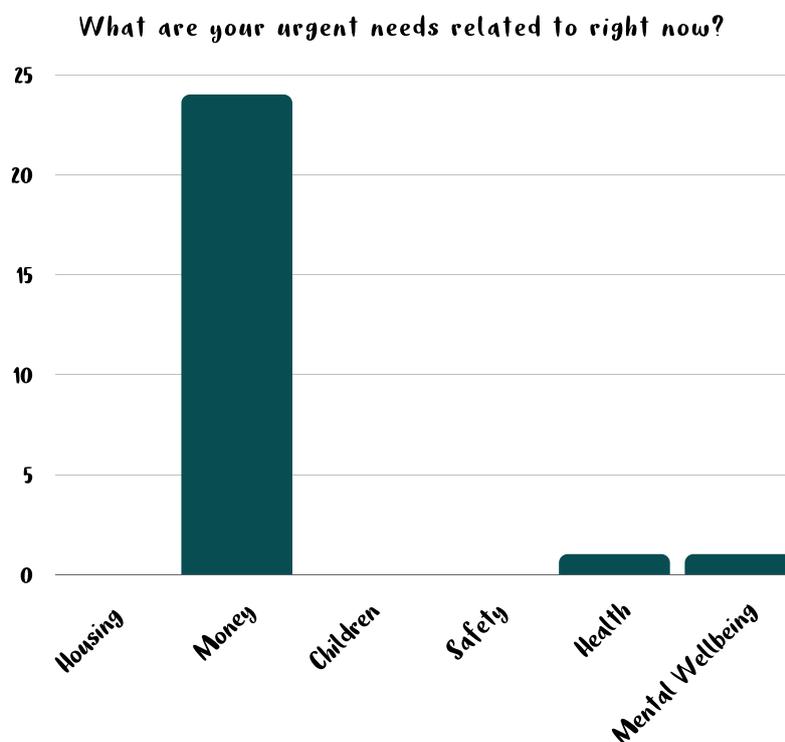
Someone to safe-guard us women. Someone you can speak to, as this is hard times, since this lockdown. These services are vital.

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Although emergency funds delivered by charities have been a vital support to women in crisis, they are not an effective long-term solution to women's financial need
- Women's continued high level and wide variety of needs highlights the importance of accessible, holistic support services across Scotland
- Investment in longer-term financial support, harm reduction and long-term exiting services, and commitment from **Scottish Government** to deliver clear outcomes for women must start now
- Decision makers and support services should actively endeavour to hear from voices across the whole spectrum of experience within Scotland's sex industry to ensure Scotland's support landscape meets the rights and needs of all women who sell or exchange sex or sexual images

BACKGROUND

As reports of coronavirus (COVID-19) first began to emerge from Wuhan in December 2019, CLiCK became increasingly concerned about how this virus may impact the lives of women involved in selling or exchanging sex or sexual images. By January 2020, women were reporting increased cancellations and declines in bookings as clients became anxious about potential exposure to the virus and travel was restricted[1]. In early March 2020, when the UK entered lockdown for the first time, CLiCK carried out a small needs assessment poll via Your Voice – CLiCK's lived experience participation platform – to capture a snapshot of women's most urgent needs to inform our initial crisis response. Out of 26 total responses, 24 respondents stated that money was their most urgent need.



[1] Anonymous, "I'm a Sex Worker and Coronavirus is Destroying My Business", Refinery29, March 6, 2020, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/sex-worker-coronavirus> (accessed March 8, 2020)

Due to financial desperation and a lack of accessible government financial support, many women had no choice but to continue seeing clients face-to-face[2]. Therefore, many women were forced to put their health at risk to maintain housing and provide basic essentials for themselves and their families. Other women, including women who lost jobs in sectors like retail and hospitality, quickly moved online to connect with clients via webcamming and private gallery platforms to make an income[3]. The financial impact of coronavirus is closely linked to women's safety. Due to a lack of demand, women have reported to workers from both **CLiCK** and other services that they are having to take every booking or every opportunity to sell images and videos that they can[4]. Women also reported clients pushing boundaries – such as asking for sex without a condom – as well as experiencing harassment, doxxing, and image based sexual abuse from clients[4].

Over the course of the pandemic, **CLiCK** have provided emotional and practical support to women as well support to access two emergency funds: the **Encompass Fund** and **Victim Support Scotland's Victim Fund**. **The Encompass Network** was awarded funding through the Immediate Priorities Fund to support women as a “High Risk Non-Shielded Group” and **CLiCK**, as a network member, was able to support women have living essentials. This has included supermarket vouchers, food parcels, help with the cost of essential bills such as heating and electricity along with access to free counselling[5]. The **Victim Fund**, operated through **Victim Support Scotland**, has been accessed for longer-term significant costs such as rent arrears, essential furniture, and council tax. However, the coronavirus pandemic has had a significant and sustained negative impact on women's lives as Scotland has moved in and out of varying stages of restrictions and levels of lockdown. Internal data from **CLiCK** on the issues discussed in support with women highlights that poverty, mental wellbeing, and gender-based violence have been women's most pressing concerns over the course of the pandemic. As a result, women are experiencing a high level and wide variety of need across various areas of their lives that emergency funds alone cannot address.

We conducted a needs assessment from 4 November 2020 to 11 December 2020 to find out more about women's needs as the pandemic has progressed and to identify what women involved in selling or exchanging sex or sexual images in Scotland think decision makers and support services should be doing to better meet their rights and needs.

[2] CLiCK, “CLiCK Cast Episode 1 Show Notes: Women's Needs Right Now.” CLiCK Magazine, <https://www.clickmagazine.online/click-cast-1-notes.html>

[3] Vivienne Nunis, “Coronavirus: Sex workers fear for their future”, BBC, June 3, 2020, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-52821861?intlink_from_url= (accessed June 3, 2020)

[4] CLiCK, “CLiCK Cast Episode 3 Show Notes: Online Safety”, CLiCK Magazine, <https://www.clickmagazine.online/click-cast-3-notes.html>

[5] CLiCK, “Reflections On The Encompass Fund So Far”, CLiCK.scot, <https://www.click.scot/news/blog/reflections-on-the-encompass-fund-so-far-/>

METHODS

The needs assessment was published on our anonymous survey platform RISE at www.clickmagazine.online on 4 November 2020. The survey featured 13 questions which explored how women were feeling, what their needs were at the start of the pandemic in relation to November 2020 / December 2020, and what they would like to see decision makers and support services do to better meet women's rights and needs. You can view the survey in full [here](#). No demographic information was collected to provide women with a high level of anonymity.

Women were compensated for their time and learned experience through vouchers and the needs assessment was promoted to women directly supported by **CLiCK** as well as shared widely via **CLiCK** social media, the **Encompass Network**, and **Violence Against Women and Girls Partnerships**. It is important to note that our recruitment methods (e.g., promoting the survey to women already supported by **Encompass Network** services) may have resulted in an under-representation of women who receive support from sex-worker led networks. Data collection ended on 11 December 2020 with 81 responses in total.

FINDINGS

QUANTITATIVE

Women were asked a series of questions relating to their needs at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, their needs in November 2020 / December 2020 and whether they had accessed any support services or crisis funds during the pandemic.

MOST URGENT NEED AT THE START OF THE PANDEMIC

Women were asked what their most urgent need was at the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Women could select only one option in response to this question. In line with our initial needs assessment poll in March 2020, the majority of women reported that money was their most urgent need at the start of the pandemic.

36%

of women stated

money

23%

of women stated

**mental
wellbeing**

21%

of women stated

housing

16%

of women stated

safety

3%

of women stated

other

(including support with applying for benefits and for drug use)

1%

of women stated

**sexual
health**

OTHER NEEDS AT THE START OF THE PANDEMIC

Women were also asked what other needs they had at the start of the pandemic. Women were invited to select all options that applied to them. The findings demonstrate that women were not experiencing a high-level of need in only one specific area of their lives, rather women's needs were multiple and intersecting needs:

24% of women stated **mental wellbeing**

24% of women stated **safety**

19% of women stated **housing**

19% of women stated **money**

12% of women stated **sexual health**

2% of women stated **other**
(including needing support with drug use)

MOST URGENT NEED NOW (NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2020)

To gain an understanding of whether women's needs changed over the course of the pandemic, women were asked what their most urgent need at this stage (November 2020/December 2020) of the pandemic was. Again, women could select only one option in response to this question. The findings suggest that money remains the most urgent need for many women and has also become a more pressing need over time for others.

52%

of women stated

money

17%

of women stated

safety

15%

of women stated

**mental
wellbeing**

9%

of women stated

housing

6%

of women stated

**sexual
health**

1%

of women stated

other

(including needing support with drug use)

OTHER NEEDS NOW (NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2020)

Women were again asked if they had any other needs at this stage of the pandemic (November/December 2020), other than their most urgent need. Women were invited to select all options that applied to them. These findings suggest that, across the pandemic, women have continued to experience a high level of need in various areas of their lives.

29%

of women stated

**mental
wellbeing****23%**

of women stated

housing**19%**

of women stated

safety**16%**

of women stated

**sexual
health****11%**

of women stated

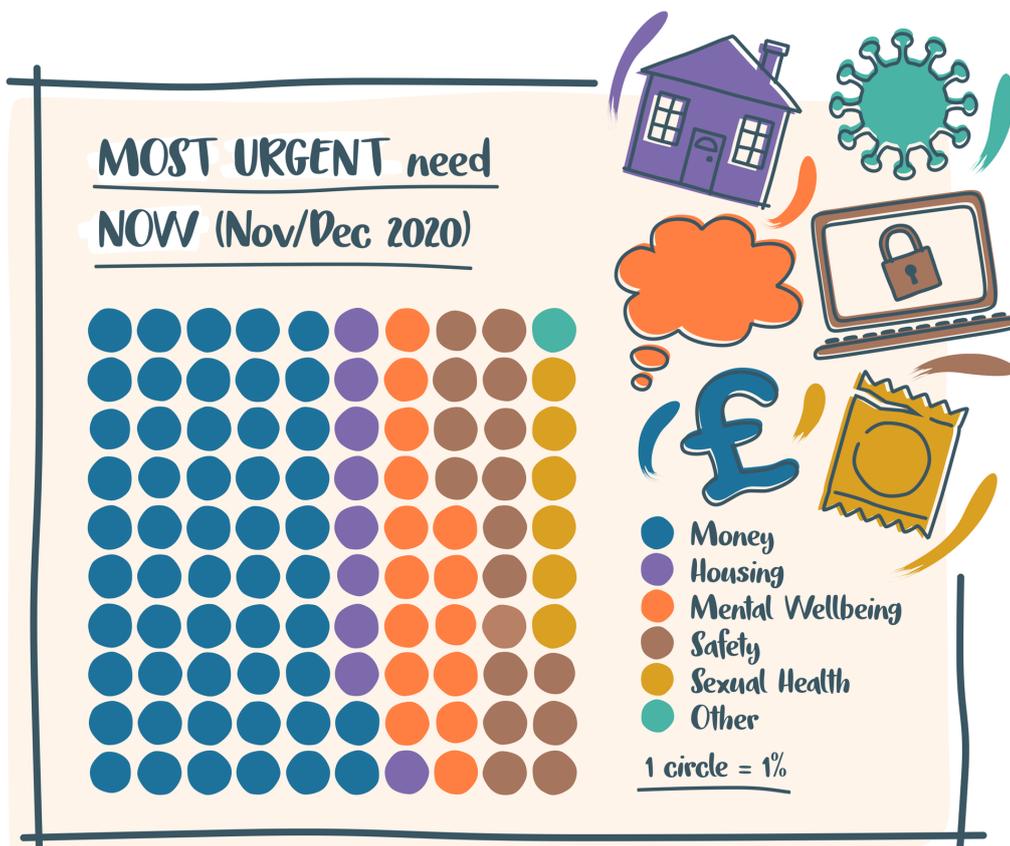
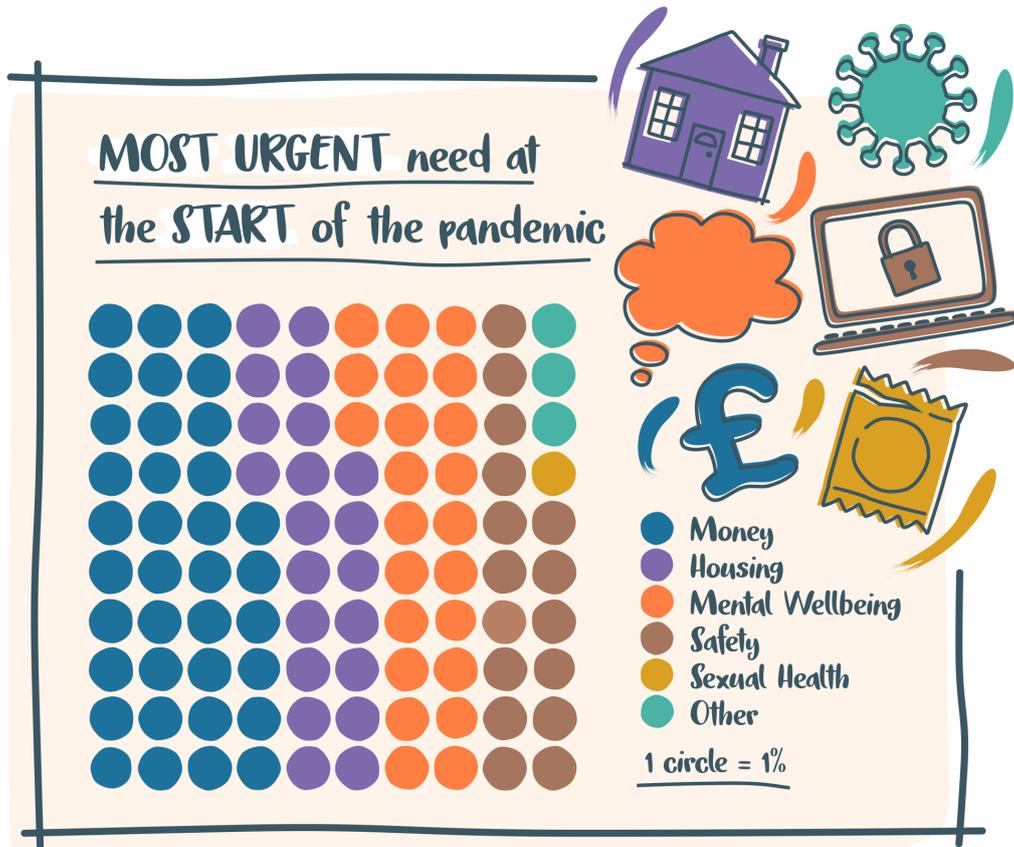
money**2%**

of women stated

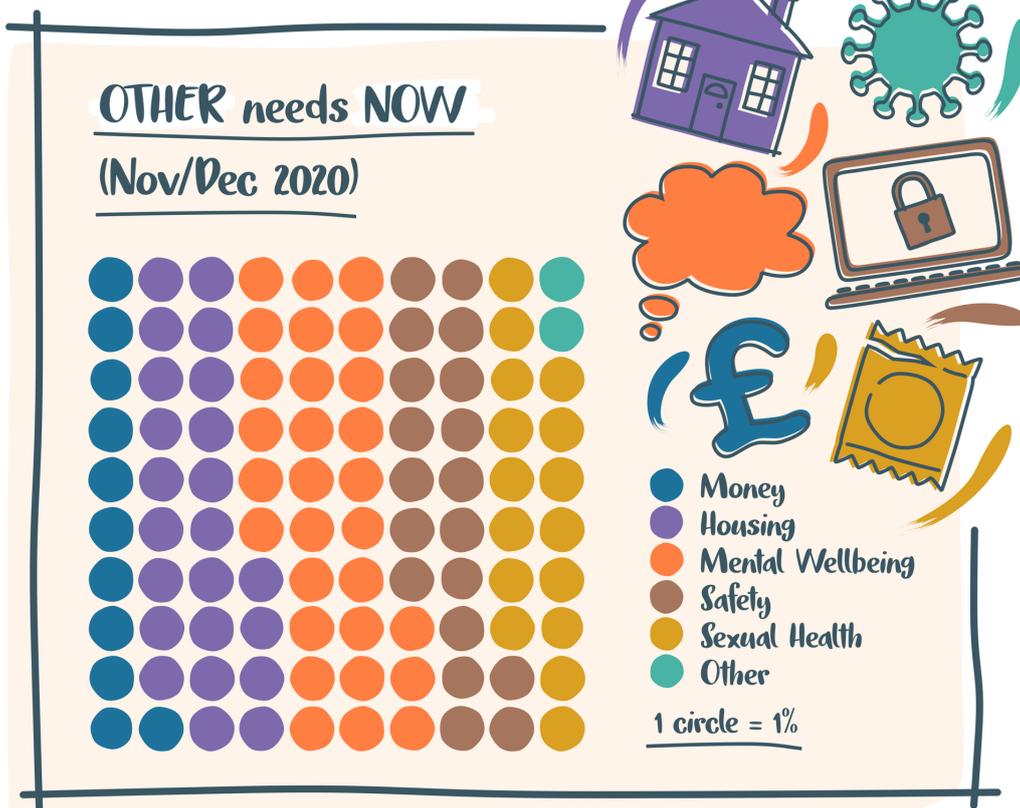
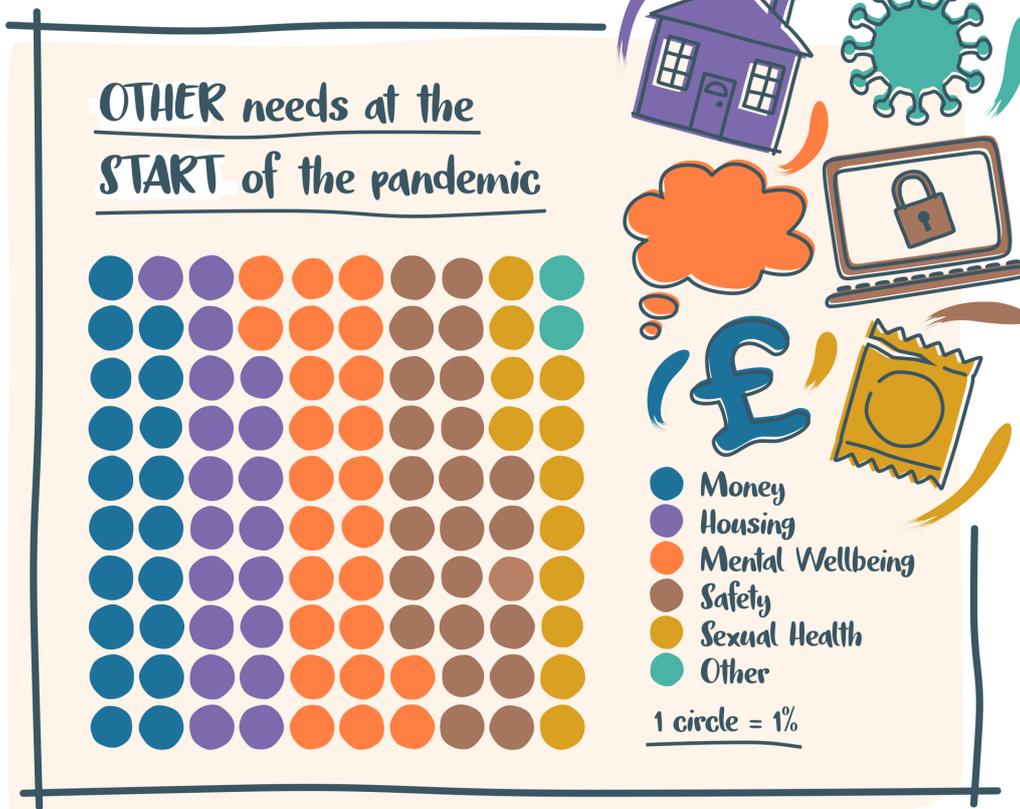
other

(including needing support with
drug use)

URGENT NEEDS



OTHER NEEDS



ACCESSING SERVICES AND CRISIS FUNDS

Women were asked if they had accessed any services for support around their needs during the pandemic (e.g., women's services, sex worker led networks, money advice services, sexual health services). 48% of women reported accessing services for support.

Women were also asked whether they had accessed any crisis funds during the pandemic and where they had accessed these funds.

67% of respondents reported accessing some form of crisis fund. 50% of respondents accessed funds via women's services (e.g. **CLiCK, Encompass Network**), 32% accessed funds via **Government or Local Authority Funds**, and 18% accessed funds via sex worker led networks like **Umbrella Lane** who established their own emergency fund during the pandemic. When asked, 'How was your overall experience of receiving support from services?' women said:

Click have been brilliant. I got the help I needed with regard to benefits advice, I got some money to tide me over until I got UC [universal credit], they helped me get counselling too. They check up on me to ask how I'm doing. I'm really grateful for all the help they have given me.

I had a very positive experience. It's nice to know there are folks out there who truly care about our wellbeing and that we have some financial and emotional support.

The support is more like a lifeline the workers are excellent.

QUALITATIVE

Women were asked a series of open-ended questions relating to how they were feeling in November 2020/December 2020, what kind of support they would like to be available to women, and what they think decision makers and services should be doing to meet women's needs.

HOW ARE YOU FEELING IN GENERAL RIGHT NOW?

Although mental wellbeing was not reported as the most urgent need at the start of the pandemic or in November 2020/December 2020 by the majority of respondents, women's responses to this question highlight the profound mental health impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Women report feeling low, isolated, frustrated, and stressed with some women reporting suicidal ideation as well as suicide attempt:

After going through every stage of "grief" I'm now in the acceptance stage. Coping as best I can and try to keep positive.

I'm sleeping a lot, not going out much this last week. Not washing, I think I'm getting a bit depressed and anxious tbh [to be honest].

I am really frustrated, mental health has had a dramatic plunge, felt suicidal and did take matters in my own hands and woke up in hospital. I feel like a failure to my family as they don't know what I do.

My mental health started to become up and down and then became extremely low where was only leaving the house to collect medication. I wasn't even going out for a walk to clear my head.

Some women explicitly mentioned how the financial effects of coronavirus, the drop in demand, and safety concerns are impacting their mental wellbeing. Some women have had no choice but to sell sex on street during the pandemic to provide food for their families. Other women noted that the drop in demand has meant that they are now relying on food banks and benefits. It is important to note that the benefits system is one reason why some women were initially pushed into the sex industry as payments were insufficient to provide basic essentials for themselves and their families:

Very low, finding things difficult, no money for food for me, my partner or our dog. Having to work on the street to get money. Trying to get support for my drug use. It's a scary time.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE CHANGE?

We asked women for their recommendations on how decision makers and support services should be responding to their needs.

MONEY

Many women explicitly called for increased financial support from the Government due to being unable to see clients. Some women noted a need for recognition of the difficulties of navigating the benefits system whilst other women called for decision makers to provide the same level of financial support to women who sell sex as other sectors receive:

Funding for being off work.

More financial support to help as a lot of us can't work.

More understanding of how stressful dependant we are on money from benefits etc at the moment. This should be made so much easier to get what you are entitled to.

First of all people in power need to admit the trade exists & stop brushing the whole industry under the carpet. Then they should provide the same levels of support as they do for any other line of work. Which is increasingly becoming a joke anyway with the growing divide between the security of jobs of public & private sector.

SAFETY

Women called for government action and changes to legislation relating to safety. Some women called for decriminalisation whilst others noted the need for greater protections online:

Decriminalisation and safety checks

Profiles being stolen from Adultwork etc - this should not be allowed to happen and this should be made illegal and prosecuted when reported. This needs to stop. Creates anxiety about where my profile is and any of my images, especially when they may be on underage sites which I think is disgusting.

HOLISTIC SUPPORT AND REPRESENTATION

Overwhelmingly, women's calls to action demonstrate women's multiple and intersecting needs and highlight the urgency for holistic support services. Women called for better resourced and accessible mental health support as well as financial help, sexual health care, housing support, and support for drug use. Women also noted a need for a greater understanding and action on poverty as a driver for entering the sex industry and for increased representation of women's voices at the strategic level:

Counselling, somewhere to speak to and get help. To look at root causes of sex work which are poverty, lack of economic opportunities, high costs of housing and education etc... Prostitution is not driven by 'demand' but by the economic needs of people. Benefits checks, as a single parent this is one of the reasons I work as an escort, to be able to give my children the basics (good, clothes, warmth, safety). Benefits don't stretch. I do it because I'm poor. I can't live off of benefits. I also have a chronic illness which effects me going for a proper job. Even then the minimum wage doesn't even cover living costs. This being the other reason I do what I am doing, to get by. The government need to ensure escorts safety.

Emotional peer support to enable consistency as grants often only allow certain number of therapy sessions. Financial support with long term strategy of enabling financial equality and open choices to women. Housing advocacy/benefits/social care etc advocacy services sex work specific. [...] Include them in policy. Represent them in advocacy, collective orgs and NGO funding.

Accessible public support to free therapy/CBT sessions should they need it, access to a support team primarily for sex workers for financial and mental health advice, ample financial help towards bills/rent.

Women should be able to work in a safe environment whether that is in a strip club, brothel or online without the stigma or laws that limit the safety of these women. The government should bailout these women like they have done for others in the hospitality area [...] Considering there is no genuine support from the government or a solid plan to open sex work venues like they have done for other businesses. Women and their families need housing, food, clothing, condoms and other birth control/protective measures, feminine products, sexual health checkups, safe place to work with preventive ppe measures. They deserve the same help and support like anyone else during this time.

Help with mental health, drug use, money, housing and someone to talk to about how I feel.

Someone to safe-guard us women. Someone you can speak to, as this is hard times, since this lockdown. These services are vital.

I feel the government need to help us more to be safe. Therapy counselling for all sex-workers.

I think counselling and somewhere where we can meet up and be able to help each other through a rough time.

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

REFLECTIONS

Our needs assessment starkly highlights that women involved in selling or exchanging sex or sexual images in Scotland have experienced multiple and intersecting needs over the course of the coronavirus pandemic with some needs becoming more urgent as the pandemic has progressed. Money was women's most urgent need in March 2020 (36%) and had become even more pressing in November 2020 / December 2020 (56%).

These findings are in line with internal data from **CLiCK** which highlights that poverty was the issue discussed the most with women during support. A recent breakdown of **CLiCK's Encompass Fund** spend also demonstrates that women are needing financial support to cover the cost of basic essentials such as food, gas and electricity, and clothing for themselves and their children[5]. Mainland Scotland again entered lockdown on 26 December 2020, with restrictions still ongoing at the time of writing. At the same time, emergency funds are rapidly dwindling whilst women's needs become increasingly urgent and complex. As a result, although emergency funds delivered by

charities have been a vital support to women in crisis, they are not an effective long-term solution to women's financial needs.

Women are also experiencing increasing need in areas which were less urgent at the beginning of the pandemic (e.g., sexual health), which suggests women's needs have evolved and changed over the course of the pandemic. Importantly, women noted mental wellbeing as a key other need in both March 2020 and November 2020 / December 2020 which is in line with **CLiCK's** internal data which highlights mental wellbeing as being the second most discussed concern during supports with women. Women's quotes also highlight the profound mental health impact of the pandemic and the intersections between money, mental wellbeing, and safety. This continued high level and wide variety of need demonstrates the urgent need for investment in longer-term financial support, harm reduction and long-term exiting support services, and a clear strategy and commitment from Scottish Government to deliver clear outcomes for women.

Women's calls for change also demonstrate the need for services and decision makers to develop appropriate channels to support all women to make their voices heard. Services and decision makers should be endeavouring to hear from a range of women with lived experience of selling or exchanging sex or sexual images – from women who wish to remain involved, to women who would like to exit, and those who have exited – to develop effective harm-reduction services and policies that are fit to support women within an increasingly digital sex industry. Services and decision makers should also actively collaborate with women with a range of opinions and experiences to establish a model for exit services in Scotland that can support women into tangible, realistic opportunities at a pace that suits them. Without actively listening to voices from the whole spectrum of experience within Scotland's sex industry, and ensuring there are adequate resources and investment, Scotland's support landscape will not be fit to meet the rights and needs of all women who sell or exchange sex or sexual images.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We provide the following recommendations for work which must begin urgently to better meet the rights and needs of women who sell or exchange sex or sexual images in Scotland:

- A clear strategy from the **Scottish Government** and partners in Equally Safe to support a shared cross-departmental understanding and connectedness between the strategic level and local level partnerships, forums, and networks
- Appropriate funding and resourcing to ensure the provision of holistic support at the local level which makes effective use of multi-agency partnerships between mainstream and specialist services to provide women with accessible, wrap around support including comprehensive harm reduction and exit services
- Investment in, and commitment to, establishing long-term solutions to supporting women's financial wellbeing – such as a gender-sensitive universal basic income and realistic, flexible work opportunities – to ensure women are not economically pressured into the sex industry and that women who are currently involved are not forced to remain in the industry due to financial necessity
- A wide range of lived experience voices must be involved in research, policy making, and service delivery to ensure Scotland's support landscape meets the rights and needs of all women who sell or exchange sex or sexual images. Our findings only present a snapshot of women's experiences during the coronavirus pandemic and so future work should endeavour to construct appropriate channels for women to continue to inform academic research, consultations, and service development and delivery

CONTACT US

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