

# SEX WORK, COVID-19, AND MUTUAL AID IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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NATASHA ALPÍZAR LOBO

MEGAN RIVERS-MOORE

KATE HARDY

**Carleton**  
University



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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By the middle of 2020, Latin America had become the epicentre of the Covid-19 epidemic and it continues to be the most affected region in the world. Risk of contagion remains high and sex workers face elevated risks due to their inability to socially distance or use PPE in while performing their work. This report details the findings of research undertaken in twelve countries in Latin America between November 2020 and March 2021. It is based on 494 questionnaires with participants in twelve countries and in-depth interviews with the leaders of twelve national sex worker organisations, as well as with the Executive Secretary of Redtrasex (la Red de Mujeres Trabajadoras Sexuales de Latinoamérica y el Caribe, Network of Latin American and Caribbean Sex Workers). The main findings were:

- As informal workers, many sex workers have had to continue to work, whether or not this was sanctioned by quarantine rules. In doing so, they have faced increased harassment and repression from police and military forces.
- Although some workers have switched to online sex work, this was not possible for most sex workers in the region, due to unequal access to digital technology.
- For the majority of respondents, sex work was their main source of income, constituting 50% or more of household income.
- Ways of working have changed significantly for most sex workers in Latin America. The most important changes relate to a transformation in the spaces and types of sex work, the time spent doing sex work, and new safety protocols that have arisen as a result of the pandemic.
- Sex workers have experienced a significant reduction in numbers of clients and income level. The impact of these reductions has been dramatic: in many cases sex workers have not been able to cover basic bills (food, rent, and education costs).
- Sex workers already have existing tools and strategies at their disposal, due to their experience responding to the HIV pandemic. Despite this, Covid-19 has undermined their ability to manage HIV prevention to some degree, as it has limited access to existing sexual health resources.
- The situation for sex workers appeared to be worsening. Between the two phases of this research, the situation deteriorated both in Latin America in general and for sex workers in the region specifically.
- Sex workers' organizations have intensified their activities in order to offer mutual aid, with the aim of offering support to their colleagues and communities during the pandemic. These organizations have been able to respond rapidly and effectively to the challenges of the pandemic in order to offer much-needed support, goods, and services to sex workers.

On the right: Photo  
of street graffiti  
taken by  
Jon Tyson.





Above: Redtralsex  
leadership group.



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Thank you to the leaders of the sex workers' organizations that took part in the research; Santuzza Alves de Souza, Regina Barahona, Samantha Carrillo, Irina Ceballos, Carmen Costa, Lucy Esquivel, Herminda González, Miriam González, Nubia Ordóñez, María Consuelo Raymundo, Azucena Rodríguez, y Fidelia Suárez.

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# INTRODUCTION

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By the middle of 2020, Latin America had become epicentre of the Covid-19 pandemic. It represented a quarter of all confirmed cases of Covid-19 and almost a third of all of the deaths related to the virus, even though the region only constitutes 8% of the global population (Taylor 2020).

Quarantine lock downs in various countries of Latin America, including Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru were some of the longest and most strictly implemented in the world (Gideon 2020). Vaccine rollouts gathered pace across the region, though the percentage of vaccinated individuals varies significantly, from 33% in Guatemala up to 91% in Chile (Harrison 2022) at the time of writing. Pre-existing global inequalities in access to health services, including preventative health care, have been both exposed and worsened in the context of the pandemic.

The risk of contagion therefore remains high as sex workers face a specific risk due to their inability to socially distance or use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) while they work. Moreover, as a form of informal labour that operates largely outside existing systems of social security, sex workers have few alternatives other than to keep working. Many have had to return to work, whether or not quarantine rules allow it. In doing so, they have encountered severe hostility and repression at the hands of the police and military forces. In addition, client demand has reduced significantly. While a small number of women have shifted to working digitally and offering services online, this option is not available to most, due to inequalities in access to digital technologies and information.

Despite the difficulties of this context, sex workers' organizations have intensified their activities in order to offer mutual aid to support their peers and communities during the pandemic. These practices are not new, as sex workers have already been organizing in Latin America for almost three decades (Hardy and Rivers-Moore 2018). They have demanded and achieved legal and

labour rights, secured a range of support services and played a key role in the fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the region, obtaining international recognition for their efforts. Due to their pre-existing systems of organization, sex workers have been able to respond rapidly to the challenges of the pandemic in order to offer much needed help, support, and goods to their peers.

In order to better understand sex workers' experiences during these complex times, this report details the results of a research project undertaken in 12 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean between November 2020 and March 2021. It draws on 494 questionnaires with sex workers in the participating countries and in-depth interviews with the leaders of 12 national sex workers' organizations and with the General Secretary of Redtrasex (la Red de Mujeres Trabajadoras Sexuales de Latinoamérica y el Caribe – the Network of Latin American and Caribbean Sex Workers).

The main results of the report demonstrate that:

- Almost all of the respondents had to continue working despite the quarantine rules, due to the fact that the majority are heads of household and needed to generate income for their households.
- For the majority of those surveyed, sex work is the main source of income, covering between 50% and 100% of household expenses.
- The way work is organized and carried out has changed substantially for many of the sex workers in the region. Among the most significant aspects reported are changes in the spaces, times, and forms of sex work, and new health protocols established as a result of the pandemic.





Above: Giving out food in Costa Rica.

- Sex workers have suffered a major decrease in the number of clients and income. The impact of this decrease has been very significant and in many cases sex workers have not been able to cover basic expenses such as food, rent, and education.
- Sex workers have tools and strategies for responding to the pandemic, through their experience managing the HIV/AIDS pandemic. However, Covid-19 is undermining their ability to manage HIV prevention to some extent, as the pandemic has limited access to the sexual health resources which they are normally able to access.
- The situation for sex workers is worsening, and got markedly worse between the two phases of the research (late 2020 and early 2021).
- Sex workers' relationships with healthcare services and with military and police forces have deteriorated.
- Although some sex workers have been able to obtain some aid from the state, this has not been sufficient or consistent. In this sense, sex workers' organizations in each country have played a key role in providing basic food, hygiene products, and money, among others kinds of mutual aid.

In order to detail these findings, the report is divided into three sections. The first is a methodological section that describes in detail how the project was carried out. In the second section, general characteristics of the surveyed population are provided in terms of age, gender, ethnic origin, nationality, family status, and employment. Key findings are discussed, focusing on the changes and impact of the pandemic on sex work, access to healthcare, and experiences of military and police violence. The third section presents the impact of the pandemic on sex workers' organizations, and details their mutual aid practices, important allies, and plans for the future. Finally, the report outlines general conclusions.

# METHODOLOGY

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The main questions that motivated this study were the following:

- What are the experiences of sex workers in Latin America in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic and how are they responding?
- How have the mutual aid systems of sex workers' organizations developed and changed in the context of the pandemic?

The research process included three phases: 1) Planning; 2) Surveys and in-depth interviews; 3) Systematization and analysis of results. Each of these phases is described below:

## 1. PLANNING

The project was conceived during a series of meetings between the researchers and Redtrasex, during which we identified the need to better understand how sex workers were experiencing the Covid-19 pandemic. Through a collaborative process, we developed the survey and an in-depth interview guide. The goal was to reach a significant number of sex workers in the 12 participating countries, which included Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru. The leaders of the national organizations in each country identified two sex workers activists who were hired to carry out the surveys. These colleagues received training in qualitative research techniques through virtual meetings with Redtrasex. These activists carried out practice surveys which they submitted to Redtrasex and the research team, and then received feedback during additional meetings on how to improve their work.

## 2. SURVEYS AND INTERVIEWS

The activists hired to do the fieldwork carried out a first round of surveys (in 2020), recording the interviews with their

phones and then sending the audio files to the authors of this report. Strategies for locating and recruiting sex workers to be surveyed varied according to the context of each country. For example, in Honduras, the national organization donated food baskets to participants. In El Salvador, where there were very strict quarantine rules, the team worked on Sundays or at night. In some countries, sex workers conducted surveys in the streets and, according to some testimonies, the process was complicated at times by the arrival of the police. One activist told us:

“  
*When we were doing the surveys, the police arrived and told us “let me see, show me that document you have there” and we were going to be arrested. But in the end I just carried on as if nothing had happened. There are compañeras who when the police arrive, well, we have condoms, we start flirting! So while some of us were doing the survey, the other compañeras were...we had to flirt to be able to continue with the surveys*  
(Interview, December 1, 2020).

After the first round of surveys, the authors of this document generated a preliminary report to share with the participating organizations as part of a feedback process. We met online to reflect on the project up to that point, to talk about the experiences doing the surveys, review some initial results, and



**FIGURE 1**

Sex workers meeting with the police while they carry out the survey.

plan the second phase of the research. In the break between the two survey rounds, the authors of this report conducted in-depth interviews with each leader of the twelve national organizations. After the second round of surveys had been submitted, final questions were sent to each national leader to ensure that the data on was as up-to-date as possible. We also interviewed the executive secretary of Redtralsex -Elena Reynaga- about the role of the Network and its support to national organizations during the pandemic.

### **3. SYSTEMATIZATION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS**

At the end of the period of information gathering, we began the process of systematizing the 494 surveys (264 in the first phase and 230 in the second phase) and 13 in-depth interviews. We listened to and transcribed the surveys. Then, using Office Microsoft Excel, a database was created that made it possible to determine quantitative trends. The interviews with the leaders were also transcribed. The team of researchers therefore managed to identify the most important themes that emerged from the collected data. Although all the sex workers who carried out the surveys used the same question guide, the actual application was somewhat uneven. The analysis that follows focuses on detailing the most general and comparable data between countries as possible. We submitted a draft to Redtralsex for feedback. Feedback was provided both in writing

and during an online meeting and was then incorporated into this final draft.

#### **REFLECTIONS ON TRANSNATIONAL COLLABORATION AND PEER SURVEYING**

The process of doing a collaborative and transnational research project during a pandemic involved significant challenges, but it was also very enriching. The three researchers listed in this report are located in Canada, Costa Rica, and England, and Redtralsex is based in Argentina. As a result, the coordination of schedules across multiple time zones represented a challenge. In addition, the quality and speed of internet services in the twelve participating countries varies considerably and the interviews with national leaders sometimes required several calls in a row to try to achieve a stable connection. The compañeras who carried out the surveys in each country also reported some difficulties in the process, especially at the beginning. Some told us that they were nervous, but that as they conducted the surveys, it became easier. One activist mentions that besides her own learning process, the mistrust of her peers was a key factor that had to be overcome.

She states:

“  
*There were some shy compañeras and so we had to learn along the way, to keep improving our techniques. It was a tough experience. There were compañeras who did not want to participate, because they say that in the past they have been surveyed and then the next day, they end up in the media. We had to explain the whole project to them, that our organization is for sex workers. It was a great experience. A nerve-wracking experience, but a great one.*”

(Interview, December 1, 2020).

In the end, most of the sex workers who participated in the project by surveying their peers told us that it had been a positive and enriching experience. They acquired new knowledge and new skills, and they said they liked being able to support the project and their fellow sex workers. Many also mentioned feeling empowered by the process, since they were able to better understand the needs of their peers and help them in a more targeted way.

#### **THE SURVEYS AND THE COUNTRIES**

Before describing and analyzing the information from the surveys, it should be noted that the number of surveys applied in each of the countries varies, and that the surveys were applied at different moments during the pandemic, and in very different contexts. That is, it should be taken into consideration that the data in 2020 and in 2021 are quite different, given the range of continuities and changes in the realities of the respondents. Similarly, the results of carrying out the survey in private spaces, on the streets, or electronically are quite different, and the interaction between the interviewer and the respondents is very heterogeneous within and across the 12 countries.

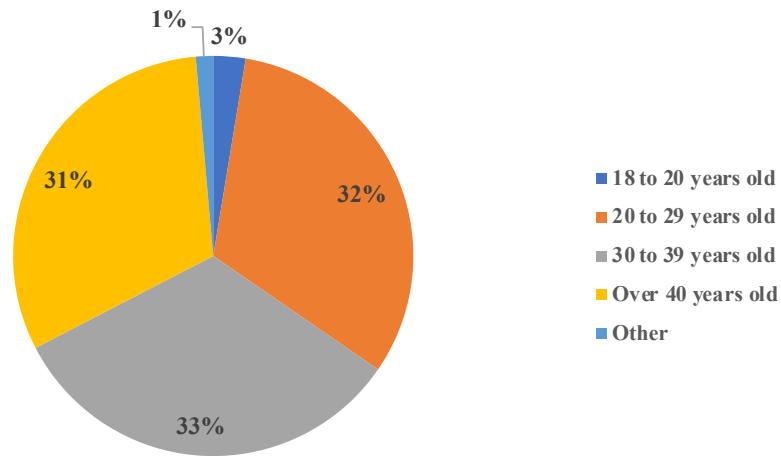
On the right: photo  
of street graffiti  
taken by “Umanoide”



# DEMOGRAPHICS

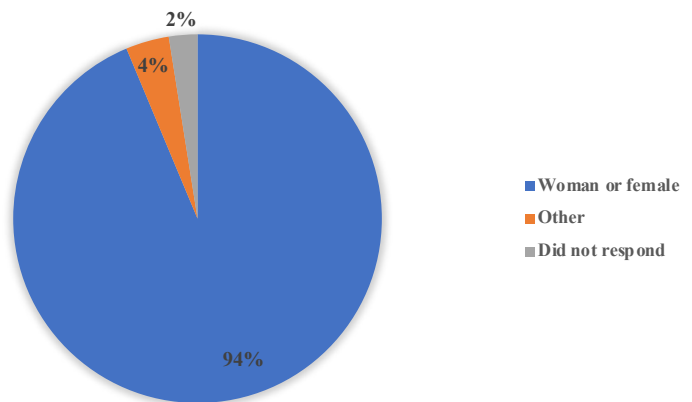
This section presents an overview of the most important characteristics of the sex worker population that was surveyed. In terms of age, workers were divided almost evenly between age categories: 32% were between 20 and 29 years old, 33% between 30 and 39 years old and 31% are 40 and over (see in Figure 2).

**FIGURE 2**  
Percentage of sex workers surveyed by age.



<b>TABLE 1</b> Number of sex workers surveyed by ethnic origin		
Race/Ethnicity	Total	Percentage
Brown	131	28,6%
Mixed (mestiza)	108	23,6%
White	98	21,4%
Black	33	7,2%
Ladina	25	5,5%
Other	63	13,8%

**FIGURE 3**  
Percentage of sex workers surveyed by gender



Almost all respondents (94%) identify as “woman” or “female” (Figure 3). In terms of their ethnic origin, 28.6% identify as “brown” (morena), 23.6% as “mixed” (mestiza) and 21.4% as “white” (Table 1). Those who identified as being “ladinas”, were all from Guatemala where this is a commonly used term for mixed race people (like “mestiza” in the rest of the region). Those who identified as “black” are located in a range of countries, including Honduras, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and Panama. Other countries included few black participants, for example the case of Chile where only people who listed their nationality was Ecuadorian or Haitian also identified as black.

Finally, in table 2 we present the most relevant data regarding nationality. However, it should be noted that the figures in Table 2 depend on the number of surveys applied in each country. Some countries included more foreign sex workers in their surveys, who represented 13.8% of the total in the region, as can be seen in Table 3.

The countries where the most foreign sex workers were surveyed are Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Panama. Undoubtedly there are many migrant sex workers across the region, and we suspect that more were surveyed in these countries due simply to a matter of sampling strategy.

**TABLE 3**  
Number of sex workers surveyed according to immigration status

Migration Status	Total	Percentage
National	410	83,0%
Migrant	68	13,8%
Other	2	0,4%

**TABLE 2**  
Number of sex workers surveyed by nationality

NATIONALITY	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE
Honduran	61	12,7%
Nicaraguan	54	11,3%
Brazilian	46	9,6%
Paraguayan	46	9,6%
Salvadoran	47	9,8%
Dominican	44	9,2%
Colombian	37	7,7%
Peruvian	35	7,3%
Guatemalan	29	6,0%
Costa Rican	24	5,0%
Panamanian	22	4,6%
Other	35	7,3%

# FAMILY, EMPLOYMENT, AND EVERYDAY LIFE

The following section highlights the general trends identified in the region related to family, work and the conditions of everyday life, including the contributions of sex work to family incomes.

## 1. FAMILY

In both phases of research, family forms appeared consistent. As indicated in Table 4, 43.3% of the respondents live alone, and 40.9% live with their children. It should be noted that on some occasions sex workers described living alone, but continue to contribute to taking care of their children financially, either in the same country or abroad. 10.7% of those surveyed mentioned living with a parent, and 9.9% said they lived with a partner.

## 2. FAMILY EMPLOYMENT AND EXPENSES COVERED BY SEX WORK

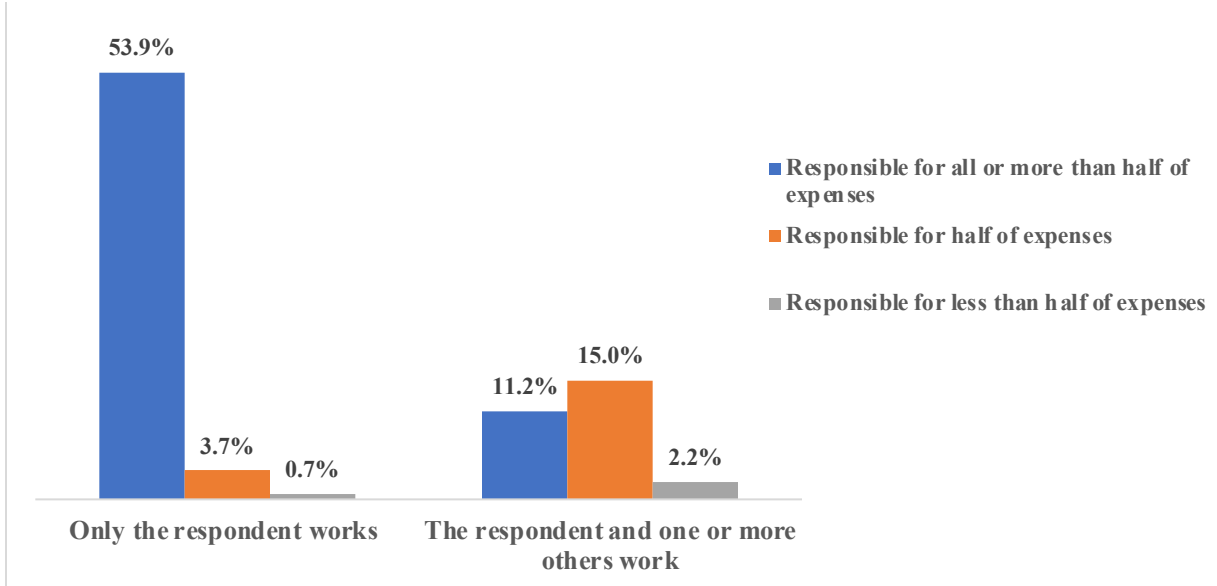
34% of the women interviewed affirm that they are the only ones who work within their family unit, while 17.4% report that other people within their family also work. Within this context, it is notable that in household where only the interviewee works, 62.1% of the interviewees cover the between 50% and 100% of household expenses. Similarly, in the cases where both the interviewee and one or more family members in the household work, 12.9% of the interviewees still cover all or more than half of the household expenses and 17.2% of the interviewees cover half of family expenses (see Figure 4). Sex workers clearly play a crucial role in covering household expenses through sex work, regardless of whether they live alone or with someone else.

## 3. WORK LOCATION BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic substantially changed the working conditions of many sex workers. This is reflected by comparing the responses to questions about work location before the pandemic and the impact workers have experienced. Table 5 shows the main workplaces, with an almost even split between indoor locations (such as bars, hotels, spas, night clubs, and massage parlours), with 35.6%, and outdoor public spaces, such as streets, parks, or squares (34.6%). Sex workers who work mainly by telephone and online are a small minority of those surveyed.

Family Form	Total	Percentage
Lives alone	214	43,3%
Lives with children	202	40,9%
Lives with a parent or parents	53	10,7%
Lives with a partner	49	9,9%
Other	72	14,6%





**FIGURE 4**  
Percentage of sex workers surveyed according to employment and household expenses.

Work location	Total	Percentage
Indoor business	176	35,6%
Street, park, or plaza	171	34,6%
Private home or apartment	57	11,5%
Telephone or internet	35	7,1%
Other	50	10,1%
Didn't work previously	1	0,2%

# IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC



This section presents the main changes and impacts that sex workers have experienced as a result of the pandemic. It should be noted that the survey question about the impact of the pandemic was open ended. As a result, we received a wide variety of answers. Table 6 summarizes the main changes and impacts most often indicated by the respondents.

Table 6 demonstrates three important patterns. The first is that a decrease in income and decrease in the time dedicated to sex work considerably affected the respondents across both phases of the research. This was the case in general terms, across the region, regardless of the specific moment of the pandemic or the different countries. Such declines were a result of the public health protocols implemented by each state in Latin America and the Caribbean to try to control the spread of the pandemic. In this regard, a respondent from Paraguay explains that

“  
*The truth is that I stopped working for a while. The first time, I stopped working because I was afraid and I respected the rules*

Changes and Impacts	First phase	Second phase
Reduction in income	42,0%	54,8%
Reduction in work hours or employment	38,3%	40,0%
Reduction in number of clients	28,4%	30,0%
Inability to pay for basic services, food, rent, or other expenses	25,4%	30,9%
Change in location or type of work	22,0%	31,3%
Fear of contagion and stigma	9,5%	8,7%
Incursion of loans, debts, or spending of savings	7,2%	5,2%
New pandemic-related safety protocols	2,7%	6,1%
No changes or impacts	1,1%	1,7%
Other	3,8%	2,6%

*that government enacted. But then I had to go back because I needed the job, I had to work in one way or another [...] whatever I had saved, up I had spent by then and had to start over, so [the impact] was huge*”  
(Respondent from Paraguay).

The second element to highlight is that, as a direct result of the decrease in the number of clients, income, and time dedicated to sex work, large numbers of sex workers found themselves unable to pay for basic services, food, and rent. This is undoubtedly related to high unemployment rates across Latin America and the Caribbean, and the broad impact that pandemic control measures had on people's ability to work and make ends meet.

As such, a number of workers had to find new ways to work. The shift in sex work online and the search for alternative jobs are situations that Santuzza Alves de Souza, a Brazilian leader, and Azucena Rodríguez, union leader in Peru, explain:

“  
*The number of women who started working on the internet grew a lot, selling photos and everything else. But to do this kind of work, you have to have the Internet, right? With high speed. You have to have a space in the house, a private space so you can work. And with the pandemic, many couldn't even afford the internet. Older women are always the most affected. In addition to the decrease in work, the number of people dependent on them also increased.*”

(Santuzza Alves de Souza, interview, December 21, 2020).

“  
*Many [sex workers] have taken to the streets to sell masks, to sell hand sanitizer, to sell face masks. Many have done that because that is what sells at that moment.*”

(Azucena Rodríguez, interview, December 7, 2020).

In addition to the above, the testimonies gathered through the surveys also indicate that the difficult conditions experienced in sex work during pandemic have in fact been going on for a long time through the region, due to high levels of unemployment and the complex economic and political situations of some Latin American and Caribbean countries. In the case of Brazil, Santuzza states that:

“  
*There were already fewer clients since before the pandemic, thanks to the political and economic situation in Brazil. We had a lot of*

*unemployment and with the pandemic, it is worse. Many sex work businesses had already closed before the pandemic, but sex work continues. Many sex workers moved into the street.*”

(Santuzza Alves de Souza, interview, December 21 2020).

Finally, the third most important element in Table 6 is that there are some changes and impacts that demonstrate how the pandemic has marked and transformed people's everyday lives. Having to create strategies to deal with the fear of contagion, having to pay attention to shifting health protocols, while also managing increasing levels of debt and dwindling savings further complicated the already difficult panorama that sex workers in the region face. The testimony of one of the respondents in the Dominican Republic encapsulates the difficulties sex workers face and their deep desire for the pandemic to end:

“  
*I hope that this pandemic ends now because we sex workers live off our bodies, and it is very difficult for us to work because men are afraid of us, they are afraid even more than of HIV. So they do not want to expose themselves. You have to be locked in your house or stay in the place where you do sex work, although many sex work businesses are closed. So you have to put your life at risk, you end up taking a lot of risks. And that is why I want this pandemic to end.*”

(Respondent 7, Dominican Republic).

# PREVENTING TWO PANDEMICS: COVID-19 AND HIV

The pandemic's restrictions on mobility have had an impact on sex workers' ability to work and, consequently, on their income. This included a full suspension of public transportation in El Salvador, a travel ban in Guatemala (which was a problem for women who work in municipalities where they do not live, and therefore could not return to their families), and business closures in almost all countries. This meant that more women began to seek out clients on the street.

Compliance with the health protocols required to prevent the spread of Covid-19 became a central focus for many sex workers. Although sex workers had already developed strategies for HIV prevention, including negotiating condom use with clients, in the context of this new pandemic, there were many additional measures that were required. This meant having to purchase more supplies in order to be able to work, including masks, alcohol sanitizer, soap, etc. As one of the respondents in Panama highlights:

“*Clients know. They know that they can't remove their masks. We get them to wash their hands, we get them to use hand sanitizer, it's very clear to them.*”  
(Respondent 11, Panama).



Above: Sex workers receiving donations.

Some sex workers' organizations also produced materials to share with their colleagues and provide information about Covid-19 prevention. As demonstrated in Figure 5, sex workers produced a flyer recommending “doggy style” sex as the safest option during the pandemic.

FIGURE 5

Covid-19 Prevention Flyer. Source: UNES, 2020.



In the following examples from people surveyed in Guatemala, Paraguay and El Salvador, we can see how sex workers dealt with the need to pay attention to preventing two different pandemics:

“  
*Now I'm less anxious about getting infected with HIV, but  
instead I'm worrying about getting infected with Covid.*”  
(Respondent 15, Guatemala).

“  
*Wash yourself, bathe first, disinfect your entire body with  
alcohol.*”  
(Respondent 13, Paraguay).

“  
*Well, so far I have not gotten sick [from Covid], four months  
have passed, thank God. It means that [prevention measures]  
have worked. Or maybe just that I haven't had any clients who  
were infected. Haha, one or the other, right?*”  
(Respondent 4, El Salvador).

A respondent from Panama sums up her relationship with her clients simply as:

“  
*He takes care of himself and I take care of myself.*”  
(Respondent 3, Panama).

As will be seen later in this report, given the new safety requirements related to the pandemic, Redtrasex and the national sex workers' organizations have mobilized to provide prevention information, but also to provide condoms, lubricants and sexual and reproductive healthcare. Likewise, they have provided masks, alcohol and soap for the prevention of Covid-19.

On the right:  
street graffiti  
photo taken by  
"Mana5280"



# VIOLENCE AND HEALTH

In this section, we present our main findings in relation to violence from armed forces and police. We also discuss the lack of access to healthcare services for sex workers during the pandemic.

## 1. VIOLENCE FROM ARMED FORCES AND POLICE

Sex workers in Latin America have experienced violence of all kinds for decades, as demonstrated in several studies authored by Redtrasex (2018, 2016, 2015). Some of the respondents stated that they had not suffered any violence from state agents during the pandemic, mainly because they have not been out on the streets due to the strict public health protocols. However, for sex workers who have had to find a way to continue to work, violence on the part of the armed forces and police has worsened due to the strict controls that have been put in place. This pandemic has provided new motives or justifications for the abuse of power and mistreatment of sex workers, whether they are on the streets or working indoors. Women surveyed in Paraguay and Panama told us about their experiences in relation to police violence:

“  
[The police] usually come to bother us a little...At the beginning of the quarantine, yes, they used brute force and they entered my workplace without authorization, without any permission. [They said] that quarantine made it forbidden to open up, they asked what we were doing, why are we opening the business. They pushed us and forced their way in to check if we had people inside, without any permission.”

(Respondent 6, Paraguay).

“  
The only problem I have had with the police is the time I leave work [after the pandemic-related curfew]. That is, they want to detain you, they want to give you a fine of \$500 or \$1000 dollars. But luckily I might have \$30, \$20 dollars I can give them at that moment.”

(Respondent 3, Panama).

Chile, Colombia, and Honduras reported the most intensive levels of police violence. In Chile, the leader of the sex workers' organization, Herminda González, explained:

“  
In Chile, we have seen a lot of repression, including police raids on sex work businesses, police actions that are then shown on television, along with direct persecution by the police against sex workers who work in the streets. Migrant sex workers of colour suffer special discrimination, intersecting discrimination against sex workers with discrimination based on racism and xenophobia. From December 2020 to now, the situation has worsened both with respect to the police repression of sex workers and especially in terms of the lack of work and lack of income. There is no work, there are no clients, there is no income.”

(Herminda González, interview, December 9, 2020).

A respondent who is a Dominican migrant described her experience of police violence in Chile.

She told us:

“  
They took me into custody, the [police] took me, a colleague of mine too. They took me out of my home, they entered my apartment, they took me to jail. My friend said they hit her husband a lot because he

told them they couldn't enter without a warrant and since we said that, well they hit him a lot and her too and they took us into custody [...] My papers are damaged and the lawyer who got them for me falsified them, and now I'm afraid they're going to send me out of here, deport me.”

(Respondent 4, Chile).

In addition to this, another significant story in Chile points to the breach of protocols in the detention processes and to the discrimination and violence that sex workers, from both men and women police officers. In the words of this respondent:

“The treatment is super humiliating, both from the police and from the military, it's super humiliating, and unfortunately, you know the men police officers are not as bad, the women police officers, their treatment is super humiliating. 90% of the vocabulary that a woman police officer uses towards you is super disrespectful. She's just scribbling, scribbling, scribbling and you're trying to explain what you were doing, the needs you have and why you were doing it. But no, no, there is no consideration [...] You know, we're always taken to one police station and at the entrance there is a cage, and they leave you in the cage to keep you out of the station. But it's a 3x5 space and there were 20 of us in there. Because when they detained me, there were five police officers and ten of us were detained, so we had fifteen people inside a small van. That's what I explained to the police officer, that because of the Covid protocols, we shouldn't have been more than five people in an enclosed space. And her response was “well then how were you working? You're afraid of exposing yourself to the virus in here, but you are not afraid to expose yourself on the street.” But on the street it's different, because the street is an open place, we were talking about an enclosed space. So they aren't maintaining the correct protocols either.”

(Respondent 11, Chile).

In Colombia, the union leader Fidelia Suárez also points to the violence suffered by sex workers in that country, both in public and private places. She indicated that:

“We have faced a lot of very severe persecutions, because they don't want to see us standing in the streets, they don't want to see us in the parks, well, they just don't want to see us. There are indoor sex work

businesses where women have had to stay, because they aren't able to get back to their communities or their families in other areas in Colombia.”

(Fidelia Suárez, interview, December 8, 2020).

What Fidelia describes in Colombia also applies to other countries such as Honduras. The two testimonies below shed light on the daily reality that some sex workers face, in terms of their strategies of hiding during curfews that restrict schedules for work and movement. The abuse of authority by the police is also clear in these examples:

“Well, we have to hide a lot. If we lose track of time and a police officer comes by we have to hide so we won't be seen. Because if they catch us they detain us, just for walking on the street because you can't be out after five o'clock, and at eight o'clock at night they don't let you walk in the street. So at that time of night, if we were walking in the street or didn't notice the time... Sometimes I would stay later just out of necessity, but then we had to hide to be able to bring some money home.”

(Respondent 8, Honduras).

“There has been violence at times from the police because, look, when we are working and they are planning to do something there in the plaza... then the police always come and they don't let us work. When they do a survey or something, if the president is going to speak, then from the morning they start to bother us, they don't let us work. Sometimes we even argue with them. I say “get out of here, you are killing us! The street is free!” And they will say “you want us to get rid of you?” That's how they speak to us.”

(Respondent 2).

For the Executive Secretary of Redtrasex, Elena Reynaga, sex work becoming secret or clandestine is a breeding ground for abuse of authority by police forces. According to Elena, this exacerbates violence in the current context of pandemic

“We can see how having to work clandestinely exposes us completely, it leaves us outside of every system, of every policy. We could see it before, but with the pandemic it has become so much clearer. It's very clear how the police took advantage of the situation.

*We had achieved many changes by doing workshops with the police, but the laws that were passed to keep people out of the streets, well, the police have returned. What the police have done in the last year and a half, two years of pandemic...look, sometimes we look at Afghanistan... but here in Latin America, the police rape women, the police strip them, institutional violence has been exacerbated during the pandemic.*

(Elena Reynaga, interview, August 18, 2021).

## 2. HEALTH

In terms of health, most of the sex workers surveyed for this research stated that during the pandemic they have not accessed any healthcare services (public or private). If we differentiate between the first and second phases of the research, the percentages do not change substantially: during the first phase of research, the respondents who did access healthcare services was 34% and in the second phase it was 37%. Respondents who did not access healthcare services was 62% in the first phase and 58% in the second. In addition to what can be seen in Figure 6, many respondents reported that the healthcare system in

their country is focused on addressing the Covid-19 emergency, leaving aside many other health related issues. Respondents described medication shortages and long waits for care:

“*We are not seen right away, we have to wait. There are no medicines, you have to buy them yourself and our income is not enough to be buying medicine.*”

(Respondent 20, Paraguay).

“*Our compañeras have wanted to go [to access healthcare], but no, they don't go because they say that there are no medications. So why are people going to go, if they are not going to give them medicine?*”

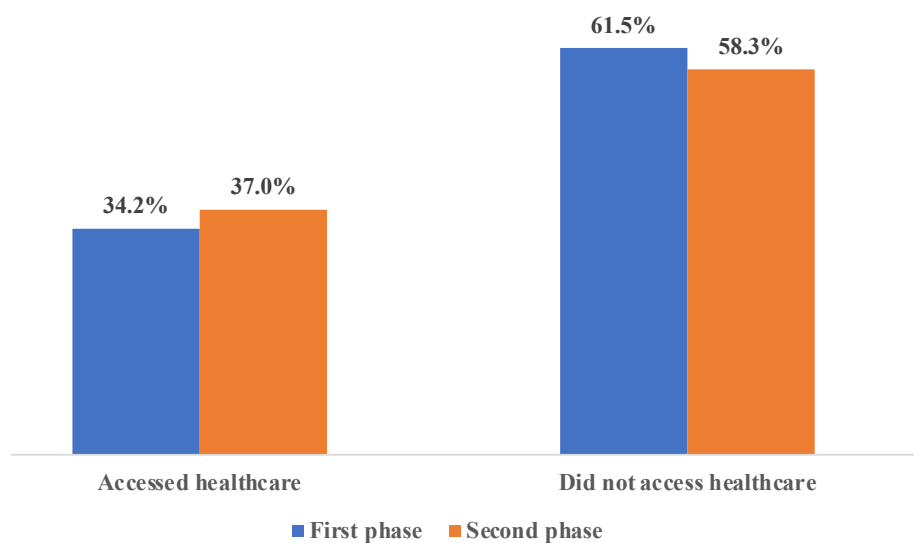
(Respondent 12).

“*Well, at first there were really strict rules, you had to stay outside, you had to wait outside for hours and hours, even in an emergency, to be seen in a clinic. Now things are a little easier because community orientation about Covid is happening, people are more informed.*”

(Respondent 7, Dominican Republic).

**FIGURE 6**

Access to healthcare services during the pandemic.





“  
*I have heard from some colleagues that they have gotten sick from this virus, from Covid, yes. Well, they've called me but lately we have not had any communication. But they have been treated. But they haven't gone to a hospital, they have been treated with medication at home [...] Because of this, there are no ICU beds, it's terrible here in Peru. Covid is truly terrible.*”

(Respondent 3, Peru).

Elena Reynaga and the union leader Samantha Carrillo, point out the impact on healthcare. Prior to the pandemic, sex workers' organizations had carried out important work related to healthcare access, although there was still significant work to be done. In the context of the pandemic, this work has been stalled and even reversed in many cases. Elena and Samantha explained that:

“  
*They closed all the health centers, there was no distribution of condoms, you understand? There was no primary care, there was no care because everything was focused on Covid. So as a result, our compañeras stopped going, and even levels of domestic violence increased.*”

(Elena Reynaga, interview, August 18, 2021).

“  
*It has had a major impact on healthcare. Before, we had health care that was not very warm or caring, it was not great, but now it's worse. The sexual health clinics are closed, we do not have access to condoms, we do not have access to lubricants from the healthcare system. There is no access to HIV tests, all the healthcare centers stopped offering them.*”

(Samantha Carrillo, interview, November 30, 2020).

The deficiencies and limitations of the healthcare system are also present in many other contexts. Leaders expressed concerns about the particular situations of their countries, but also sought out solutions and worked toward improving the well-being of their sex workers peers as much as possible.

“  
*We are doing a lot of advocacy work with our compañeras who are HIV positive, because they reorganized the hospitals to be able to attend to the Covid cases. They moved the HIV positive patients to a health clinic, but when our compañeras went to be get their HIV medication, the clinic could not find their records and so they wouldn't treat them. It was like that for nine months. Some of our compañeras relapsed, some got sick, and they didn't go to the clinic because they were afraid. Much less the hospital. In February, I went to a meeting with the Ministry of Health and we dealt with the situation. They assigned us to a doctor who treats us here in the capital. Now they are already giving them their medications, they are being treated, but through a coordinated agreement between our organization and one clinic.*”

(Union leader, interview, December 1, 2020).

“

*Every time I have condoms, I also go to give them out because the health centres where sex workers used to have a monthly medical check-up, every month they gave them a box of condoms, but right now those centres are closed. If there are no check-ups, then there are no condoms, and the girls have figure out how to buy them at the pharmacy, but if there is no money, how are they going to buy a condom? So any condoms we have, must be distributed, right? We figure out ways to support our compañeras. I go out and distribute condoms, masks, food, all those things.*”

(Azucena Rodríguez, interview, December 7, 2020).

Finally, it is essential to recognize that, similar to sex workers' relationships with the police and armed forces, sex workers face significant discrimination in the healthcare system. Two testimonies offer key examples of the discrimination that takes place in two ways: the first uses Covid-19 as an excuse for not having contact with sex workers and thus refusing them services, the second is a class-based argument that associated sex workers with a lack of hygiene. These respondents told us:

“

*“[The health service] is pretty bad. I wanted to be checked because I felt that I had a small infection and they did not want to touch me because of Covid. They told me that they could not touch me because “you know we're in a pandemic right now, so we can't touch you, just tell us what you feel.” That's what the doctor said. So I directly told him “I feel like I have an infection on my parts.” And he didn't give me... all he gave me was acetaminophen, he didn't give me the treatment for an infection.*”

(Respondent 8, Honduras).

“

*Well, I have gone, I don't know about my other compañeras, but I have gone and the last time I went they did not take good care of me.*

*One co-worker told me “you see that nurse? She was telling the other nurse that my parts were all black, that I was all hairy, she said I was dirtiest woman, that's what one nurse was saying to the other.” And at the health clinic in my neighborhood, the other day some nurses were saying “it must be those women who walk the streets, who don't wash themselves.” They were talking about us like that, but she's a woman and she doesn't know if maybe tomorrow she, or her daughters [...] It doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman, no one should never talk about a woman that way, women shouldn't talk about each other because we are all women and each of us knows what kinds of needs we have.*”

(Respondent 8, Honduras).

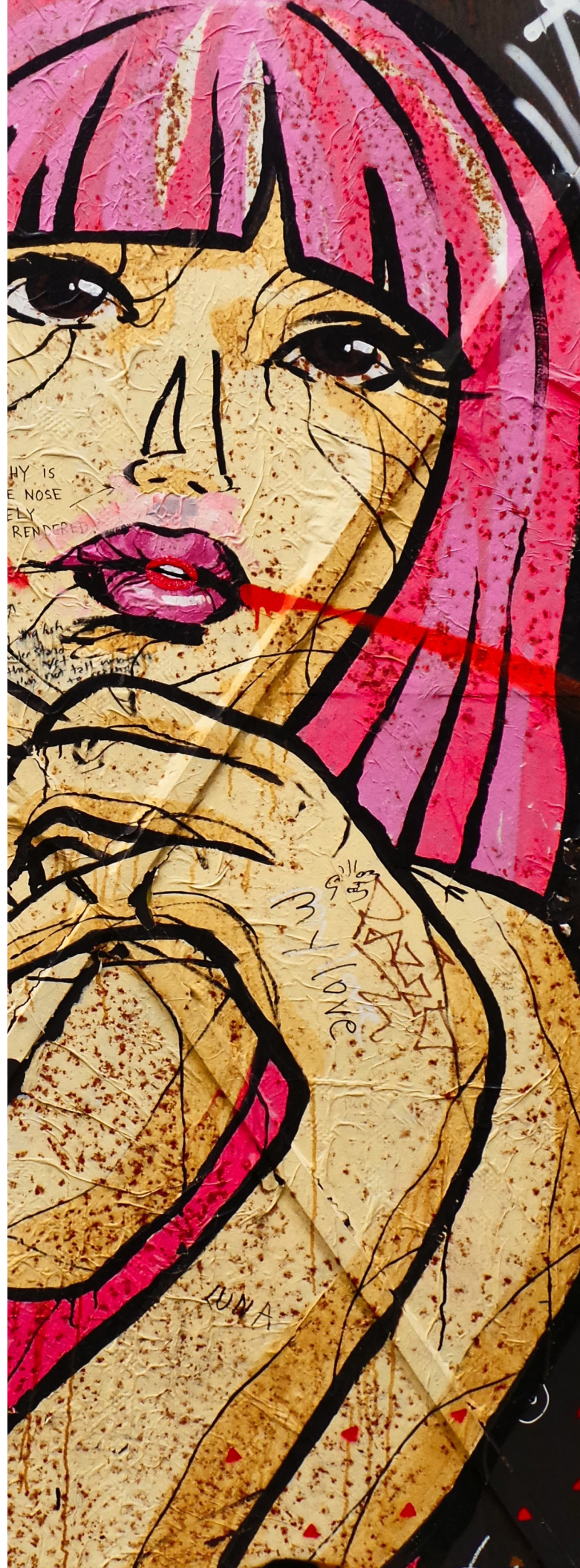
The weight of discrimination and stigma is an issue that is always very present for sex workers, who often create strategies to be able to access healthcare services without being rejected by employees. In Costa Rica, for example, one of the respondents mentions that she does not reveal that she is a sex worker:

“

*Yes, of course, I have gone to the clinic for check-ups and all that, and they've seen me. Well, I don't say I'm a sex worker, I say I'm just another patient covered under the public healthcare system.*”

(Respondent 17, Costa Rica).

In all of these cases, we can trace some continuities as well as some changes in the forms of discrimination against sex workers that operate in the healthcare system. It is worth paying attention to these shifts in order to strategize and work toward immediate and long-term changes in the relationship between sex workers and healthcare workers and the police.



On the right: Photo  
of street graffiti  
taken by Sean  
Robertson



Above: photo of street graffiti taken by Annie Spratt

# RELATIONSHIP WITH THE STATE

Throughout the research, we were especially interested to explore the relationship of sex workers and the state, including any assistance they received before and during the pandemic. In Table 7 it is clear that before the pandemic between 86.7% and 93.9% of those surveyed did not receive any kind of help or support from the state where they live. This situation changed substantially during the pandemic. As can be seen in the same Table 7, between 35.2% and 43% of sex workers received help from the state during the pandemic.

State supports that sex workers received were primarily in the form of baskets of basic goods, primarily food, and sometimes money. Most significant to note is that this support did not come to sex workers as sex workers, but rather sex worker were able to access baskets of basic goods when they were being distributed in their communities, or as heads of households. No government in the region developed a policy designed specifically to assist sex workers.

**TABLE 7**

Percentage of responses from sex workers in the first and second phases of research according to state aid received before and during the pandemic

STATE ASSISTANCE	FIRST PHASE		SECOND PHASE	
	YES	NO	YES	NO
Before the pandemic	8,0%	86,7%	3,5%	93,9%
During the pandemic	35,2%	53,0%	43,0%	50,4%

Although the respondents acknowledged the various kinds of state aid they received, on many occasions they also made clear that state assistance was scarce or unstable over time. That is, many sex workers explained that they had received baskets of goods or money one time only, or at the beginning of the pandemic, but later the support disappeared or became insufficient. In the Peruvian case, Azucena stated:

“  
*We thought that we were also going to be considered when they began to talk about payments to help during the pandemic, but the government turned its back on us, there was never a payment for us. No baskets of food, there was never anything. Nothing, nothing, nothing.*”

(Azucena Rodríguez, interview, December 7, 2020).

In Paraguay, leader Lucy Esquivel critically analyzed the Paraguayan state's relationship with sex workers, emphasizing the discriminatory and even paradoxical vision on the part of the state in terms of managing the pandemic and the needs of this population. In Lucy's words:

“  
*For the state, for the government, we don't exist. Our work is not a crime in my country, but we only exist for epidemiology, we exist when they want our vote, but other than that, no, we do not exist. And this made it much more difficult because the restrictions that came from the government were just “stay at home.” And for sex workers, staying at home means no rent, no food and no services you have in your home. So our compañeras had no real choice but to go out to work and this generated institutional violence, the police chasing them away. So even though we were afraid, we still went out into the streets and to help our compañeras*”

(Lucy Esquivel, interview, December 7, 2020).

The situation Lucy describes is similar for sex workers across Latin American and the Caribbean. On the one hand, government restrictions meant to stop the spread of Covid-19 included social distancing, “stay at home orders”, curfews, quarantines, closing of businesses or shops, and restrictions on the mobility of the population. On the other, it soon became clear that state aid or support in the context of these restrictions was unevenly

distributed. Sex workers were faced with a complex situation that included intense restrictions and increased state repression, but also the need to work in order to generate income.

Since sex work is not recognized as work in the region, sex workers were automatically excluded from any formal assistance from the state that was aimed at formal and informal sector workers. It is clear that in this context, the leaders of sex workers' organizations played a leading role, as they were able to identify problems and act very quickly to try to help sex workers meet their needs that the State was not contributing to. Santuzza mentioned that:

“  
*It was our organizations that provided supplies so that sex workers could carry out their work in the safest way possible. We gave out masks, alcohol gel, along with condoms and lubricant. These campaigns all came from sex workers' organizations. Not the state.*”

(Santuzza Alves de Souza, interview, December 21, 2020).

In some countries, the state did not provide any concrete information or public health restrictions for the care of the population. This undoubtedly represented a different kind of challenge for sex workers' organizations. One leader explained:

“  
*The situation here remains the same. There has been no truthful information that tells us how bad Covid is. We never receive guidance, information. We wash our hands, use hand sanitizer, wear masks ... But each of us is on their own. There was never any information that we received. Here in my country, each person just takes care of themselves as well as they can. And there are no credible statistics about what is happening. We know that the numbers have grown, because we hear comments from the hospitals. They say that there are many people who have died. But there are no real statistics. We just don't know what the situation is in our country.*”

(Interview, December 1, 2020).

# IMPACT ON THE ORGANIZATIONS



In general, sex workers' organizations in the region reacted quickly to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. With some variation between countries, all sex workers experienced a very acute crisis involving business closures, quarantines, curfews, and much more control over the movement of people on the streets. All of this had a severe impact on sex workers' ability to work, as detailed throughout this report. Not only did the organizations immediately see that the needs of their peers increased, but they also found that the strategies they normally used to support and politicize their population - face to face, among peers - were suddenly impossible. In relation to this, a respondent in Panama indicated that:

“  
*I was at home, I could not go out, it was difficult. We only had electronic communication, WhatsApp and things like that.*”

(Respondent 4, Panama).

In this context, sex workers were not considered a target population for support or prevention in any of the countries participating in this project. As we have seen, there were no special Covid-19 prevention programs for sex workers and no funds were created to support them during the pandemic. Nevertheless, the leaders of the organizations started to knock on doors and ask for help from their contacts in national and local governments, and in local and international non-governmental organizations. For example, in the case of Peru, Azucena told us:

“  
*I looked for the help. I knocked on doors for my girls.*”

“  
*The government turned its back on us, there was never any money for us, no baskets of food, there was never anything, nothing, nothing, nothing. But I have some contacts here at the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Labour, and and the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and I knocked on those doors. I showed up and yes, they gave me a good amount of baskets of basic goods for sex workers.*”

(Azucena Rodríguez, interview, December 7, 2020).

All the organizations reported similar stories: the governments of the region did not include sex workers as a population in their prevention or aid programs. But as grassroots organizations with many years of work and many hard-won connections, they could all turn to their existing networks for in-kind support. Given the regulations in place to prevent the spread of Covid-19, many of the organizations had to close their offices for at least a time. Some continued to work from their offices a few days a week, as was the case in Chile and Peru. Sex workers would go to their offices to collect food baskets and hygiene kits. In other countries, sex work activists took to the streets to distribute baskets, or to visit the workplaces that were still open, as was the case in El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and Paraguay. Cony, leader of the organization in El Salvador, tells us about the importance of seeking out sex workers, but in a safe way:

“  
*We go. We go out to the streets, to the businesses, to the nightclubs, we visit them. Of course, we do this while following all the necessary safety protocol.*”

(Cony Raymundo, entrevista, 1 de diciembre del 2020).

It is worth noting that even during the pandemic, the usual challenges for organizations remain. Not having access to regular funds to pay for daily expenses (office rent, telephones, electricity, etc.) was a persistent problem. Sex workers' organizations are always in search of the next set of funding in order to carry out their day to day work. Some leaders, such as Irina Ceballos in Panama, expressed frustration with the limitations of the current context

“  
Before the pandemic, we did always manage to have our activities: workshops on violence, HIV, on anything that had something to do with us. And right now, we can't do any of those things, we can't do outreach right now, so we are on hiatus.”  
(Irina Ceballos, interview, December 2, 2020).

Many of the grassroots organizations in the region have focused their work on the politicization of sex workers in recent years. Through projects with Redtrasex, they have fought for unionization, to change laws that harm sex workers, and to carry out consciousness training of public sector employees (in particular, healthcare workers and the police and military). All of these actions are aimed at combatting stigma. In this sense, the organizations that already had funding and projects in place at the beginning of the pandemic have been able to sustain their work more easily. However, with the arrival of the pandemic several organizations have had to change their approach for the time being and have shifted their attention to meeting the basic needs of sex workers in this time of crisis. Santuzza explained:

“  
Before the pandemic, our work had another focus, which was on the politicization of sex workers. And then we had to change that focus, right? We began to provide assistance to female workers, we provide food, we provide supplies so they can work more safely. Now it is a monthly basic food basket. We work in the field every week, we go out to where our compañeras work and we give them masks, condoms, alcohol gel.”  
(Santuzza Alves de Souza, interview, December 21, 2020).

The words of one leader sum up the circumstances of all sex workers' organizations in the region:

“  
Nothing has changed. The people looking for solutions are our organizations. But from the authorities, from the government, we have not received any help, no guidance. Nothing. We ourselves are providing self-help and self-care.”  
(Interview, December 1, 2020).

In sum, the impact of the pandemic on sex workers' organizations in Latin America has been significant, but not devastating, thanks to years of accumulated work and strategic relationships already established with key allies.



Above: Sex worker receiving aid.



Above: Redtrasex leadership group.

## MUTUAL AID AND ALLIANCES

Sex workers' organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean are an excellent model of mutual aid. Through interviews with the leaders of each national organization and the surveys with sex workers in each country, we can see how they practice solidarity rather than charity. Their actions are collective and involve the direct participation of the target population itself. They approach their compañeras with respect and empathy, as workers.

All the organizations in the twelve countries included in this project distributed baskets of goods to sex workers. Those baskets included basic food and hygiene items, including masks and alcohol gel. An important skill that sex work leaders have developed over many years is the ability to organize quickly. Elena Reynaga mentions that for the Robert Carr Fund was providing support for Redtrasex in 2020. The funding relationship preceded the pandemic, but in this case the Robert Carr Fund became a key donor for sex workers during the crisis. In Elena's words:

“ We will not have enough money to save everyone's lives. ”

“ We gave part of the money [from the donor] so that each of the organizations could buy food to give away, but we also automatically said “we will not have enough money to save everyone's lives, to feed everyone because that's not possible, and it's not our role.” If you do that, then your compañeras, your members will start to confuse the role of the organization. We always say we are not a welfare organization, a service organization, we are a political organization [...] So based on that, our second proposal was the organizations urgently needed someone who was an expert in communication or a technical consultant... a sociologist, anthropologist, a communications expert who could help determine the needs, how to help the organization. So what did we do? We distribute the funding equally and we put together the terms of reference [...] The people who were hired put together campaigns. Through social media, they taught our compañeras to manage social media. ”

(Elena Reynaga, interview, August 18, 2021).



On the same theme, in Guatemala, the leader Samantha Carrillo told us:

“ We did an internal collection and then just started moving. We started sending emails, we looked to see who had donated to us before, and we just started moving in every direction. We reached about 800 compañeras. We delivered what we called dignity kits, which had sanitary napkins, soap, a washcloth, shampoo, toothbrushes. With our own funds, we were able to give two pounds of rice, two pounds of beans, a pound of noodles, soup, juice, or those instant packs to make two litres of fruit drink. We gave them coffee and a little bottle of oil. All this was so that our compañeras could have at least something basic to give to their children.”

(Samantha Carrillo, interview, November 30, 2020).

The organizations participating in this research have delivered food to thousands of sex workers across Latin America and the Caribbean. Given that they were not considered a “high risk” population, but they were also not considered a group that had to keep working, sex workers’ organizations played a key role in ensuring the survival of sex workers and their families. Santuzza emphasizes the importance of helping her compañeras to satisfy their most basic needs.

“ We had to start a campaign to support women. We started receiving food donations. For women who had children, we donated disposable diapers. Milk ... things like that. We were trying to meet basic needs. I think the most important thing, and the most desperate thing for a mother is the lack of food. Hunger”

(Santuzza Alves de Souza, interview, December 21, 2020).

The interviews with the leaders of the organizations largely coincide with the survey responses. For example, as seen in Figure 7 about 83.4% of respondents in first phase of research said they received help from sex workers’ organizations, while in the second research phase, it was 77.9%. This demonstrates that a significant number of sex workers have benefited from the assistance offered from sex work organization, but it also speaks to the fact that the help has been sustained over time. While some respondents reported not having received help (16.6% and 22.1%), it should be noted that these tended to be sex workers who did not know about or had not participated in the organizations previously or who were distanced from the organizations because of the pandemic, making contact difficult.

**FIGURE 7**  
Assistance from Sex Workers’ Organizations

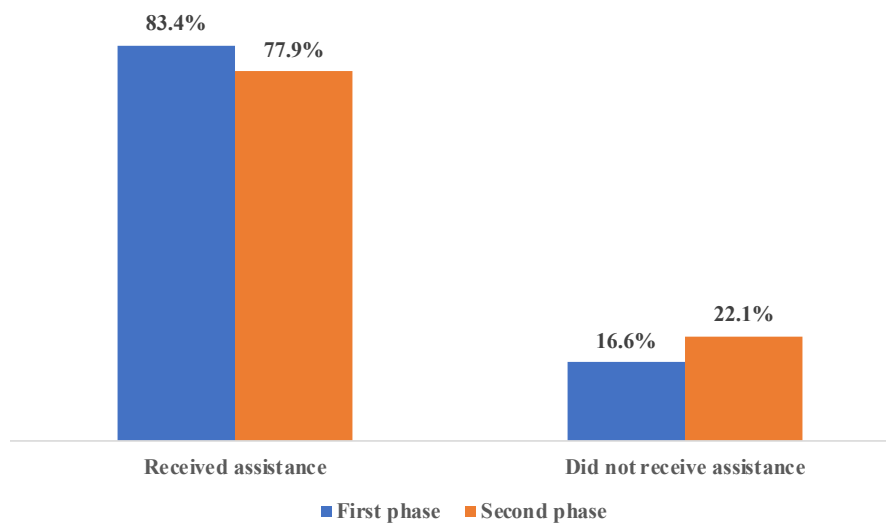


Table 8 demonstrates the type of help received by survey respondents. If this Table is compared with Table 7, we can see that sex workers' organizations have attended to the changes and impacts sex workers have suffered during the pandemic. For example, given the decrease in income, the difficulties covered basic expenses including food and Covid-19 prevention supplies, the organizations have mainly helped to provide food (61.7%), hygiene products (21.9%), condoms and lubricants (7.7%) and money (7.1%). This shows the targeted and accurate response to the pandemic and the needs of sex workers that the organizations quickly put in place.

“*That was the focus of the work for us, help them to implement the provisions that came from the Ministry, in this case it was the requirements for hand washing, using hand sanitizer, wearing gloves and things like that. So the work that UNES did to empower our compañeras was very important so that they could maintain all the prevention measures and continue working. For four, five months we did the workshops, we went to so many places, and that is how we managed to ensure that our compañeras have all those measures clear and in place, just in case the police arrived, in case a municipal inspector arrived.*”

(Lucy Esquivel, interview, December 7, 2020).

**TABLA 8**  
Type of Assistance Received from Sex Workers' Organizations

Type of Assistance	Total	Percentage
Food or baskets of basic goods	305	61,7%
Masks, hand sanitizer, soap, and gloves	108	2,9%
Condoms and lubricant	38	7,7%
Money	35	7,1%
Workshops, training, meetings, support	21	4,3%
Medical exams or testing	8	1,6%
Other	43	8,7%

The rapid and effective response of sex workers' organizations to the Covid-19 pandemic helped thousands of people in the region. But in addition to providing basic survival goods, they also played an important role in preventing the spread of Covid-19. In many countries, sex workers began to distribute not only condoms, but also masks, alcohol gel, and flyers on how to engage in sex work as safely as possible during the pandemic. In Paraguay, a sex worker who also has a degree in nursing guided the process of putting together Covid-19 prevention workshops. Lucy tells us that the goal of the workshops was to prevent contagion, but also to help the compañeras to continue working.

As the primary earners for their families, stopping work was not a viable option for most sex workers. Organizations in the region recognized this fact and focused their efforts on ensuring sex workers' basic survival, and on the development of Covid-19 prevention strategies relevant to sex work. Sex workers' organizations played an important role not only in sustaining sex workers and their families, but also in the prevention of Covid-19 amongst sex workers and their clients.

Given the difficulties faced by many people in Latin America during the pandemic, sex workers' organizations sometimes faced the dilemma of what to do when other populations asked for their help.

FIGURE 9

Covid-19 Prevention Flyer. UNES, 2020.



FIGURE 10

Covid-19 Prevention Flyer. UNES, 2020.



In this regard, Carmen told us:

“ We tend to say, “we only work with sex workers.” But how to deny help to a mother who works as a day laborer and is unemployed with four or five children? I think we have to help those in need. Respect and love must be for everyone. We try to help as we can. We give priority to sex workers, but that does not mean that we are not going

to help that child who asked for help, that person who is a drug addict, the travesti, the trans woman, the lesbian, everyone”  
 (Carmen Costa, interview, December 21, 2020).

Along the same lines, Samantha in Guatemala took the opportunity to combat stigma at the same time:

“ Many women who needed help showed up, they came with their children, they came running when we were distributing aid. And so we also gave them things to them, we gave them a small bag and we said to them “this is from sex workers”. One said “sex workers are prostitutes, right?”, So I said “we are called that sometimes in order to belittle a woman or to mark her, right? We are all compañeras, you are our compañera as a woman. We do a different job than yours, what work do you do?” She said “I was going to sell coconuts, but right now I can’t.” And I said “you see? You are also a worker in the informal economy.” And she said “ah, ok, so you are also from the informal economy.”

(Samantha Carrillo, interview, November 30, 2020).

This is one example of many when Samantha and her compañeras distributed aid to people who were not sex workers, because they saw the difficulties being faced by the wider community. However, they always insisted on being very clear that the help came from sex workers, ensuring the aid distribution was also about combatting stigma and advocating for the recognition of sex workers as workers.

What is worth underlining here is that sex workers’ organizations were helping their compañeras, but also often demonstrating significant solidarity with the wider community. In the context of a partial or total abandonment by the state, sex workers offer an important example of collective action, solidarity, and mutual aid.

As mentioned earlier, sex workers’ organizations have developed effective strategies due to many years of accumulated experience when it comes to knocking on doors and requesting support from existing contacts or networks. During the pandemic, they were able to call on support from many important allies. In Costa Rica, La Sala received a donation of hygiene kits from a trans women’s organization, and food and clothing from a group of university students who have collaborated with the organization in previously.

“  
A friend of mine in Pérez Zeledón, suddenly she calls me and tells me that if I still work with La Sala and if I still help women. I say “yes, still, we’re still here.” Then she tells me “I want to help them with something, but not giving them money or giving them clothes or anything.” She says “what if I pay the electricity bill for three months?” And I say “of course, that would be a great help”[...] So she helped us, for three months she helped us by paying the electricity bill for some of girls. Not many, right, but at least a few compañeras.”  
(Nubia Ordóñez, interview, December 2, 2020).

In El Salvador, Orquídeas del Mar was able to deliver food baskets and cash vouchers to sex workers, thanks to relationships already established with international organizations and various municipalities. They have been able to support more than 1,300 women to date. According to Cony:

“  
Orquídeas del Mar made arrangements with donors, one of the American organizations from the United States. They support us, they supported us at that time with 300 baskets, \$200 dollars for each woman. We got cash payments from another international organization for \$100, some for \$300, some for \$50. We got food baskets by negotiating with municipal mayors [...] Other civil society groups donated baskets. So we managed to get a lot, a lot of food baskets for our compañeras. We wanted more, but well, there was nowhere else to turn.”  
(Cony Raymundo, interview, December 1, 2020).

In Paraguay and Chile, organizations received support in the form of goods and cash stipends from new and unexpected sources: sex workers who work online. The leaders Herminda and Lucy emphasized that:

“  
Our compañeras who are younger, who work online, demonstrated their solidarity by supporting other compañeras who could not work virtually, to help them sustain their families. The sex workers who work online, autonomously, supported the other more precarious sex workers and have become our collaborators. They come to the office to help us to make up the boxes to give out. We get together and one day they buy the goods, another day they pack the boxes, and on the weekend we give them out. So we’re all together here like that, each one has a role to play.”  
(Herminda González, interview, December 9, 2020).

“  
We made a call asking for solidarity from many people, like-minded organizations, allies, allies that we had from the feminist movement. Even our compañeras who offer services on the Internet and who are a little more VIP, they donated goods for their compañeras.”  
(Lucy Esquivel, interview, December 7, 2020).

Elena Reynaga confirms what other leaders had described:

“  
What also happened is that the sex workers who work virtually, who did manage to benefit from the pandemic [...] they collaborate by giving money for their compañeras who did not benefit. It was really nice, I was very moved that those who can help were giving to those who needed help. We also allied with the OTRAS union in Spain, they have many members who work online so we asked them to teach us about how to work online. What tricks do you have to do? Where do you work? Who is going to pay? How are you going to be paid? Because for many of our compañeras, this is completely foreign [...] So they gave us a couple of workshops to teach sex workers how to work online, which are the more reliable platforms for being able to collect the money, where you can publish your videos. We did all that over Zoom.”  
(Elena Reynaga, interview, August 18, 2021).

Also in Chile, sex workers asked for help from their clients and as a result, Fundación Margen has also received donations from clients (both men and women). Sex workers' organizations have mobilized their allies and created new alliances in order to support their populations. These partnerships, if they can be sustained over the long term, have the potential to further transform social relationships between sex workers and society at large. In addition, the huge commitment shown on the part of sex work organization that participated in this project was very meaningful for sex workers. A Chilean respondent told us about the importance of having the support of Fundación Margen:

“  
*It's great. I feel safe, despite the conditions that sex workers face in terms of the stigmatization of sex work. I feel that their support is fundamental not only for me, but for all of our compañeras who receive help from the foundation.*”

(Respondent 7, Chile).

Similarly, in Figure 11 we see that sex workers' organizations have been by far the most important source of assistance to sex workers during the pandemic. Of those surveyed, only 9.2% (in the first phase) and 14.5% (in the second phase) had received help from other organizations, foundations or social assistance

programs. The vast majority, 90.8% (in the first phase) and 85.5% (in the second phase) reported that they have not received support from other organizations.

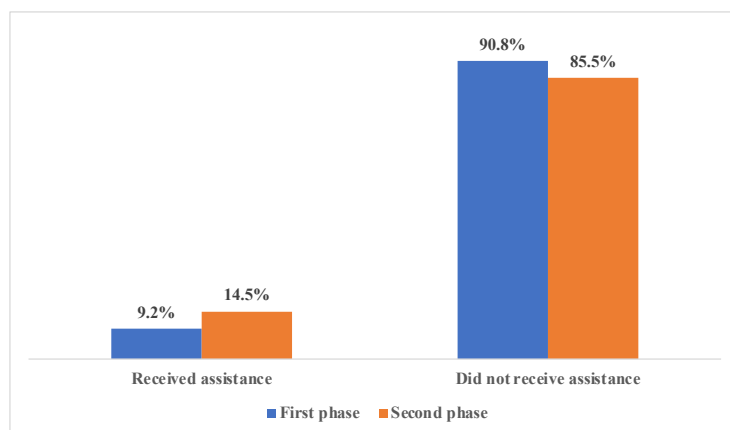
The support from sex workers' organizations has been key to the survival of many sex workers, and the support has been very meaningful to them. One of the respondents in Panama told us that:

“  
*It means a lot because it makes us feel like we are important. Because you supported me, you supported my children, which the government has never done.*”

(Respondent 3, Panama).

These collective actions during the pandemic are an important example of how to face a crisis, but they also demonstrate the already existing capacities and abilities of sex workers' organizations: their solidarity, their networks and alliances (including the creation of our collaborations as researchers), and their commitment to fighting for a better and fairer world for sex workers.

**FIGURE 11**  
 Assistance From Other Organizations





Above: photo of street graffiti taken by John Angel

#### FORMS OF CONTACT AND POSSIBILITIES FOR CONTINUITY

To close this section, we provide some brief information meant to facilitate the ongoing field work carried out by sex workers' organizations in each country. For example, in Table 9 we can see that 14.6% of respondents have known about their local organization for between one and five years, and 14.4% have known about the organization for more than five years, which in general terms speaks to the long-standing relationships that have been built with sex workers in each country. The fact that 3.4% of those surveyed have known about their local organization of less than one year old and 5.9% had their first contact on same day they participated in the survey, demonstrates that despite the adverse conditions of the pandemic, these organizations have done an admirable job of maintaining their work, and continuing to make contacts with more and more sex worker compañeras in the field.

Table 10 shows that 48.4% learned about their local organization through a sex work colleague or friend and 23.7% through workplace visits, workshops, or information provided by members of the organization. Similar to the previous table, this demonstrates the ability of these organizations to sustain close and regular contacts with peers.

Finally, Table 11 shows that, in both the first and second phases of this research, the respondents had the opportunity to participate in the activities of organizations to some degree during the pandemic. Although we have seen that the organizations have faced significant challenges, they have found ways to continue carrying out their work and to continue strengthening their connections with sex workers on the ground.

**TABLE 9**

Length of Time Sex Workers Have Known About the Sex Workers' Organization

Lenght of Time	Percentage
Did not know about the organization/survey is first contact	5,9%
Less than one year	3,4%
Between one and five years	14,6%
More than five years	14,4%
Other or unclear	9,1%

**TABLE 10**

Form of Initial Contact

Form of Contact	Percentage
Through a friend or colleague	48,4%
Through visits, workshops, or information provided by activists	23,7%
Other	3,4%

**TABLE 11**

Participation in the Sex Workers' Organization During the Pandemic

Participation	First phase	Second phase
Participated in activities	46,2%	48,7%
Did not participate in activities	41,3%	39,1%

# FUTURE PLANS

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a very difficult time for sex workers in Latin America and the Caribbean, but they have very clearly demonstrated their capacity for organization, solidarity, and collective action. There are no vaccination programs specifically aimed at sex workers in any country in the region. The countries that have access to vaccines are vaccinating their populations according to age and other risk factor such as chronic illnesses, but they do not recognize that sex work is a form of work that requires close and intimate contact, and is therefore an especially risky occupation. Several countries have experienced political and institutional crises at the same time as the pandemic crisis, including Chile, Peru, and Colombia. This has meant that the authorities, including public health authorities, are less trusted. Despite these significant challenges, sex workers' organizations continue to move forward, as Samantha explains:

“  
*Our activity in the context of vaccination is to create a program that allows women sex workers to register for a vaccine since, if you do not have access to the Internet or a smartphone, you will not be able to register. So we want a program that can support people in that sense. In general, as sex workers we are concerned with the disadvantages we face in the context of Covid-19 and the country's response.*”

(Samantha Carrillo, interview, November 30, 2020).

Organizations continue to support their compañeras during the pandemic, but they also have dreams and important plans for the future. Many are focused on unionization and have the formation of a trade union as a specific goal, even with the limitations of the pandemic. Hermina explains:

“  
*We want to form a union school for our compañeras nationwide via Zoom, and created a union of street sex workers. It is very important to be recognized trade unionists, as members of the working class. And we need to keep reaching new compañeras, keep adding more compañeras, and one day be able to work together with the one who work online, the ones who are autonomous, all of them. In other words, that we unite everyone who practices sex work in one way or another.*”

(Hermina González, interview, December 9, 2020).

The countries that already have recognized sex worker trade unions recognize the significance of their achievement and the importance

of defending and expanding the terrain they have won, thanks to the union. Fidelia in Colombia explains it this way:

“  
*We have as a goal to continue to reinforce the union, to continue to expand our coverage, to start to include compañeras with different profiles in political spaces, because we have to be inside the spaces where decisions are made, and to start speaking out politically. The pandemic is ongoing, but we have to be firm and move forward.*”

(Fidelia Suárez, interview, December 8, 2020).

For the sex workers' organizations that do not currently have funded projects to sustain their work and therefore lack even minimal office space, the main goal is simply to keep going. The leaders of Panama and Costa Rica, Irina Ceballos and Nubia Ordóñez explain:

“  
*We're just trying not to give up, because this year has been very, very difficult for us here in the organization in Panama. But the idea is not to give up and to keep trying, to keep looking for a project that allows us to maintain an office, to keep going out to the streets to talk to our compañeras, to strengthen the organization with more compañeras.*”

(Irina Ceballos, interview, December 2, 2020).

“  
*The priorities for me would be to try to continue meeting, not to waver, so that La Sala doesn't die. Because the truth is that without funds, it's very difficult to sustain the organization, it's so hard and we want to do so many things. So my goal for next year is to see if we start looking for projects. We have to keep fighting because we deserve rights.*”

(Nubia Ordóñez, interview, December 2, 2020).

Another priority identified during this research is the creation of laws that recognize and regulate sex work. As we can see in Figure 12, 83.7% in the first phase and 86.1% in the second phase of research mention being in favor of a law regulating sex work. This reflects the work done on a project on sex work laws that several countries have already carried out with Redtrases. The “other” response (10.5% in the first phase and 9.2% in the second) refers to the respondents who were indecisive, skeptical, or said they did not have sufficient knowledge to be in favor of a law about sex work. In general, these responses came from sex workers who do not know about or have previous contact with sex workers' organizations. Many sex workers surveyed described a law regulating sex work as an opportunity to improve their working conditions:



“  
*We would work peacefully, without pressure from the police, without discrimination, because there are many people who discriminate against us here.*”  
 (Respondent 2, Chile).

The most important goal of a law that regulates the sex industry is that it would recognize it as work. In the words of one of the respondents in Brazil:

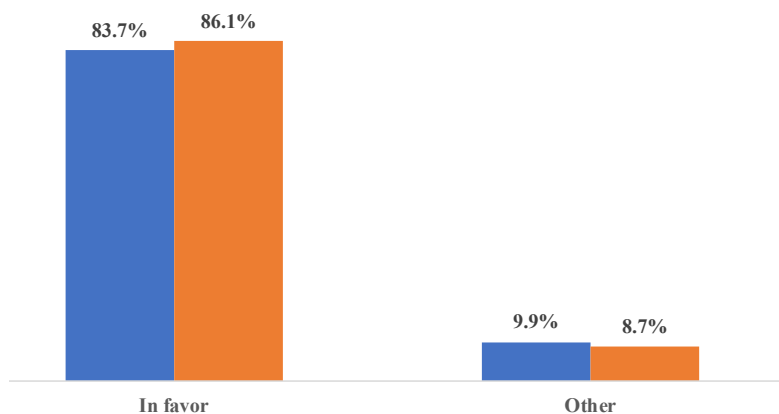
“  
*We would be like normal workers, right? This is not a job for many people, but for us it is a job.*”  
 (Respondent 13, Brazil).

Mutual aid implies solidarity and collective action in a moment of crisis, as sex workers in Latin America and the Caribbean have clearly demonstrated. It is not just a matter of ensuring that their peers can meet their basic needs. The women interviewed for this project are activists and movement leaders, not directors of charity programs. Their broad focus remains on combatting stigma and improving the living and working conditions of sex workers, during but also after the pandemic. The Covid-19 crisis is a moment we are all trying to survive, but the crisis helps to underscore the fact that sex workers are not seen as workers by their governments, and they are not recognized as the leaders that they are. This demonstrates that this crisis is part of a larger system that requires major change, which is something that the national sex workers’ organizations and Redtrasex have very clear: they are fighting to win. This is simply one moment of crisis that forms part of a much larger, long-term project of transformation.

Elena Reynaga, in relation to this, acknowledges that the work of each of the sex workers’ organizations that form part of Redtrasex as invaluable and that the Red has been widely recognized internationally. She is proud of her compañeras, but adds that the issue of mental health will be important moving forward:

“  
*There is no organization, at least that I know of, in the region that has done the work that we have done. There just isn't, and that is why we are taken into consideration by all the United Nations agencies, even some governments [...] But I think we have to work a lot on the issue of mental health now. Because, you see, being faced with listening to someone else, if your peer is talking about something that you also experienced. You come from there too, from the same place, so if you're listening to someone else talk about what you already know, you relive the pain, it opens up your wounds again, you know? [...] So that's why I would like to work on finding funding to address the issue of supporting them [emotionally] And that's why it is doubly valuable that the compañeras do what they do [...] So how could I not be proud of them, of what they do? Deeply. I always say you really have to have ovaries to do what we do, you really have to have ovaries, you know?*”  
 (Elena Reynaga, August 18, 2021).

**FIGURE 12**  
 Support For a Sex Work Law



# CONCLUSIONS

“  
*I like it, I like it, I love what I do. If I were to born again, I would be a sex worker again and I would be a leader again. I really would, I would go back and do my job again with a lot of love*  
”  
(Herminda González, interview, December 9, 2020).

No government in Latin America and the Caribbean has recognized that sex workers are a high-risk group during the pandemic due to the nature of their work. No government in the region provided any type of aid in terms of prevention or subsistence, specifically for sex workers. And because there is no widespread recognition in the region of sex work as work, sex workers' organizations had to take the initiative to develop their own mutual aid programs. Sex workers in Latin America and the Caribbean have been practicing mutual aid for many decades. As a result, they were able to draw on skills, networks of contacts, and existing practices in order to provide support to their sex working compañeras during the pandemic.

The pandemic has been a very difficult time for marginalized populations, and sex workers have been no exception. With their work, they support their families and, in the context of the pandemic, they experienced a significant decrease in their number of clients and in their income. Many were unable to work for a significant amount of time, and those who were able to work had fewer clients and many difficulties in meeting their basic needs. Some have had to take out loans, go into significant debt, or spend their savings in order to survive.

The context of each country has meant that the impact of the pandemic has varied somewhat. In some places where sex workers' organizations were already working without physical office space or regular funds, such as in Panama and Costa Rica, activists have faced greater challenges in terms of being about to reach their peers. In other countries that found themselves in the midst of political crisis, the possibilities of organizing were severely restricted. Despite the specific hardships of different countries, what this project clearly highlights is the

“  
*If I were born again, I would be a sex worker again and I would be a leader again...*  
”

enviable capacity for organization, perseverance, resilience, and leadership on the part of sex workers. A great example of that comes from a leader who said:

“  
*We are very, very committed to the cause. We are militants, we are the voice of all sex workers in my country. We know that we are going to carry on, because more pandemics may come, after all. But what's most important is to trust that the struggle continues.*  
”  
(Interview, December 1, 2020).

Thanks to their decades of leadership in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Latin America and the Caribbean, sex workers' organizations are experts in harm reduction and infection prevention. They played a crucial leadership role during the pandemic with their peers and colleagues, but also often with their communities in general. Although the impact of the pandemic in the region has been devastating, Carmen speaks of solidarity as an unexpected effect:

“  
*I think there has never been so much solidarity among sex workers as there is now. For sex workers, one of the things that remained, that Covid did right, was that it taught sex workers to value our lives, and to value the lives of others*  
”  
(Carmen Costa, interview, December 21, 2020).

Despite the absence of significant state support, sex workers in Latin America and the Caribbean responded quickly and efficiently to the new and challenging circumstances of the pandemic. Their methods for practicing collective care offer an exemplary perspective on how socially marginalized groups can respond to complex social problems with ingenuity and creativity. Their mutual aid practices, their solidarity in a time of crisis, are an example of hope for the world.

DES SEQUENCES PRINTemps



Photo of street graffiti taken by "Umanoide".



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