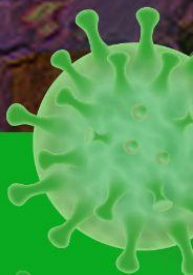




**ADDIS ZEYBE**

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# LIVED EXPERIENCE OF COMMERCIAL SEX WORKERS DURING COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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# Lived Experience of Commercial Sex Workers during COVID-19 Pandemic

## A REPORT BY ADDIS ZEYBE

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the long-standing disparity between nations around the globe. These inequalities disproportionately affect impoverished and marginalized groups in society, sex workers being the most disadvantaged ones. COVID-19 has unfolded several conditions and magnified existing inequalities, especially on the hidden, marginalized, and vulnerable members of society. Thus, the study aims to understand the untold experiences and challenges of commercial sex workers.

**Methodology:** A qualitative research method is used to address the objective of the study. We selected 7 female sex workers with a Snowballing sampling technique. Face-to-face interviews were conducted according to the agreed-upon timetable. Thematic qualitative data analysis is used to analyze the data collected from the participants.

**Findings:** Our research revealed that commercial sex workers are suffering from financial difficulties as a result of the current pandemic. Despite the pandemic, most sex workers returned to work after the restrictions are relaxed, but at very low wages, since they have no other source of income. Our respondents reported that they are feeling anxious about their health and safety, as they are unable to follow preventive measures due to the nature of their work. The pandemic, coupled with the lack of support from the government and the stigma from society has put commercial sex workers in a dire situation.

**Conclusion:** Our study concluded that sex workers have faced several challenges associated with COVID-19 pandemic. Multi-sectoral collaboration is required to effectively respond to the impact of pandemic without compromising the lives of the most vulnerable populations.

## INTRODUCTION

The SARS-CoV-2 virus has quickly spread over the world after its first identification in China in December 2019. It had been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11th, 2020 (Staff, 2021). As a result, various countries throughout the world implemented lockdowns to restrict people's movement and defend national borders from foreign agents who help the disease spread (Onyeaka et al., 2021). However, despite slowing down the spread of the pandemic, the lockdown has had a range of far-reaching consequences, such as altering people's lifestyles through mobility limitations, working remotely, and outlawing mass meetings (Onyeaka et al., 2021). The pandemic has brought to light long-standing disparities in nations around the globe. These inequalities disproportionately affect impoverished and marginalized groups in society, sex workers being most disadvantaged ones.

Physical separation and lockdown procedures, put in place to stop the spread of COVID-19, have largely halted most direct sex work around the world, potentially putting a typically marginalized and economically insecure group at risk (Platt et al., 2020). Sex workers all across the world are suffering because of the COVID-19 pandemic, with entire loss of income, increased discrimination, harassment, and violence (NSWP, 2020). With each rise in Coronavirus cases, the COVID-19 pandemic has left sex workers' struggling with substantial financial concerns and their livelihood has been adversely disrupted (Ghosh, 2021).

The first verified case in Ethiopia was reported on March 13, 2020 (WHO, 2020). Since then, COVID-19 cases have shown a significant rise. The socio-economic implications now being felt across Ethiopia are wide-ranging and substantial, with the potential to worsen depending on the pandemic's trajectory, countermeasures results, and underlying and structural issues (United Nations Ethiopia, 2020). Sex workers have been unable to use government relief programs in nations where sex work is criminalized because it is not recognized as a "legitimate" vocation (Manuel, 2020). The government in Ethiopia has yet to take the steps to protect sex workers from the impacts of

Coronavirus. Sex workers in Ethiopia do not receive government assistance and must rely on their resources to live (Belete, 2020).

The ability of sex workers to protect themselves against COVID-19 depends on their individual and interpersonal behavior, their work environment, community support, access to health and social services, and broader aspects of the legal and economic environment, as it is with all aspects of health (Platt et al., 2020). This population tends to be neglected, outcasted, overlooked due to various reasons. This research sheds light on the untold experiences and challenges of commercial sex workers. COVID-19 has unfolded several conditions and magnified existing inequalities, especially on the hidden, marginalized, and vulnerable members of society. A coordinated and inclusive response is a must to achieve healthy communities and control COVID-19 (Platt et al., 2020). To the best of our knowledge, there are only few studies conducted on sex workers in relation COVID-19 pandemic in Ethiopia and none has been done in Debre Berhan. Thus, our study aims to understand the lived experience of commercial sex workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Study design**

A qualitative method is used to address the objective of the study. This design is selected due to its appropriateness to meet the research objective.

### **Study Area & Period**

The study was conducted in Debre Berhan town from September 15 - 17, 2021. Debre Berhan town is the capital city of North Shewa Zone of the Amhara Regional State, 130 kilometers far from the nation's capital, Addis Ababa (Eshetu & Jinfessa, 2019). The town has 10 kebeles with a total population of 103,450 (Fikire, 2021).

## **Sampling Technique**

In this study, Purposive and Snowball sampling techniques were employed. We selected 7 female sex workers with our sampling techniques. Our study did not include participants who are under the age of 18. A work experience of at least two years was mandatory to be eligible to be included in the study.

## **Data Collection Technique and Procedure**

An in-depth interview guideline was prepared in the local language. Informed consent was issued before each interview. Face-to-face interviews were conducted according to the agreed-upon timetable. Each interview lasted approximately 30-40 minutes. The response of participants was recorded.

An incentive of **500 ETB** was provided to the volunteer study participants after the interview was completed. Ethical approval was obtained from Amhara N.R.S Health Bureau, Debre Berhan town Woreda Health Office.

## **Data analysis**

Thematic qualitative data analysis was used to analyze the data collected from the participants. To begin with, each interview was recorded and transcribed into text form. In addition, the transcribed data was translated and coded followed by data familiarization. The data was then organized into categories and themes. After that, each theme was given an interpretation and analysis.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Economic challenges**

Almost all of our respondents stressed the financial hardships they are experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions put on nightclubs and bars. Though the challenges were different when restrictions were in place in contrast to the current situation, the loosening of the previous restrictions is alarming as the disease is still a threat. We grouped the challenges into three categories.

### **Unable to earn enough money**

Almost every respondent stated that starting from the time the regulation of banning bars and nightclubs was enforced, they have lost their jobs and are trying to make ends meet. However, they also explained that because individuals are adjusting to the situation and restrictive regulations are no longer in place, they are returning back to work, albeit many challenges. One of the challenges is not being able to earn adequate money. Because COVID-19 is still a threat, the number of clients has dropped significantly shunned by the fear of contracting the disease.

*“Before COVID-19, I used to be able to cover my expenses with the money I earned. When COVID-19 emerged and the government declared a lockdown, my business dried up. Because I couldn’t manage to pay my rent, the landlords mistreated me and kicked me out. I even started begging for alms. Given my healthy stature, a person with no disability, people don’t tend to give me the due attention. .I was forced to go to my worker’s place and take refuge after sending my child to the village.”- Sex worker 1*

*“I used to have 20 customers per week, but I only had two at the beginning of the lockdown. The number is now increasing, although it is still insufficient. The money I earn from 4-5 customers currently added up to the money I used to earn from a single person before COVID-19. I am scared that if things keep going this way, I won't be able to afford my food. Since I am an HIV victim, I should eat properly, otherwise, life would be extremely tough” – Sex worker 2*

The above quotes explain how the response to COVID-19 pandemic has put a strain on the sex workers’ lives. Furthermore, the findings revealed that the money they earned during and after the restriction was insufficient to purchase food. The inability to continue working despite the pandemic and the fear of getting the disease results in a loss of income.



### **Working at a reduced price**

Because of the pandemic and related restrictions, sex workers had lost their power to bargain. The demand for sex workers has been reduced due to the pandemic. Customers were more likely than in the past to demand low prices, according to our survey respondents.

*"People who used to beg for us previously know we don't have a choice, so they push us to work for a low price and insult us"- Sex worker 3*

*"Now the customers behave rudely. They insult us, and they also know we don't have any choice, so they lower the amount they pay. Overall it is very difficult"- Sex worker 6*

From the explanation, it can be understood that most sex workers are working at lower prices compared to pre-pandemic time. Thus, to put food on the table, they are compelled to work for lower pay rates.

### **Stress-related to COVID-19**

#### **Fear of getting COVID-19**

Due to the nature of their employment, sex workers are afraid of contracting COVID-19, yet almost all respondents said they are continuing to work because they have no other choice.

*"I'm terrified of catching COVID-19. I often wonder if I would develop the sickness if the number of my customers was the same as it was before Covid-19. In any case, I won't quit working because it's the only way I can make money."- Sex worker 4*

This statement reaffirms that, despite sex workers' fears of becoming infected with COVID-19, they are unable to cease working.

#### **Unable to follow preventive measures**

As most COVID-19 preventive measures are devised considering the general population, commercial sex workers are facing difficulties following the guidelines due to the nature of their work.

*"I only use a face mask when going out, but I guess it's no use once I get my customers. I could not protect myself from COVID-19 I don't even know if the person has COVID-19 or not. At the end of the day, am always stressed about how to stay safe from COVID-19 and still do my work"- Sex worker 5*

## **Social challenges**

### **Stigma from the society**

Sex workers have been linked to a variety of diseases throughout history, including HIV. Similarly, they are being discriminated against and denied support in the current pandemic.

*"Most people blame us for the pandemic, believing it is due to our faults. My landlord evicted me, even though I had enough money to pay the rent from my savings, but he evicted me anyway. My friends are in the same boat. People are unconcerned about us."- Sex worker 7*

### **Lack of support from the government**

Almost all of our respondents mentioned that they haven't got any support from the government or other civic organizations. Commercial sex workers have been left out from the COVID-19 response, although they are the most vulnerable group of the society to get the virus and suffer its economic consequences.

*"We haven't got any support from the government or any other institution. Even during the lockdown, when everything was terrifying, no one came to our aid. Even the "Maed magarat initiative" was only intended for the elderly, disabled, and others, but it was not for us."-Sex worker 1*

## DISCUSSION

Our research revealed that commercial sex workers are suffering from financial constraints as a result of the current pandemic. The demand for sex workers has been drastically diminished due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the related restrictions, putting their livelihoods in jeopardy. Thus, sex workers are unable to earn enough money and are forced to work at lower prices. Peninah Mwangi, Executive Director of the Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme (BHESP) mentioned that Payments for sex work have decreased by 75% since the beginning of the crisis (“Sex Workers in Africa Are More Vulnerable During COVID-19 - World,” 2020). Similarly, a study conducted in Bahir Dar reported that Due to the pandemic, sex workers have fewer or no clients, resulting in a complete loss of income and a struggle to meet basic needs (Belete, 2020).

Furthermore, our study showed that the inability to earn enough money has led sex workers to compromise their basic needs such as food. This devastating economic consequence is more magnified among those who are HIV positive. According to the evidence reviewed, antiretroviral therapy utilization is already lower among HIV-positive sex workers in both high- and low-income countries (Platt et al., 2020). Food insecurity has been demonstrated in studies to be a barrier to taking the medications on a daily basis and can reduce their efficacy (Associated Press, 2020). Therefore, the financial hardship added to the existing low uptake of antiretroviral drugs might disturb the achievement to be attained in HIV controlling & prevention interventions.

Our results indicate that commercial sex workers have been facing stress in fear of contracting COVID-19. Our respondents reported that they are feeling stressed about their health and safety, as they are unable to follow preventive measures due to the nature of their work. Similarly, according to a commentary by Rana from the School of Humanities and Social Sciences; In addition to existing health risks, serious mental health disorders have evolved as a result of the fear of infection as well as concerns about income, shelter, and food.

According to our findings, the government has not provided support to sex workers. Similarly, according to a research conducted in Bahir Dar, sex workers receive no financial or any support from the government (Belete, 2020). In addition, our research findings showed sex workers have experienced stigma from society. Similarly, UNAIDS chief Winnie Byanyima also mentioned, "Some are being shamed and run out of their homes and called the source of Corona." (Associated Press, 2020).

Our study highlighted the challenges faced by commercial sex workers in Debre Berhan town. The pandemic has created major worldwide health concerns that necessitate considerable behavioral changes with its resultant psychological and social costs to individuals and their livelihoods (Bavel et al., 2020). Sex workers in Africa are one of the most vulnerable groups on the continent, with the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affecting those (Adebisi et al., 2020). To avoid unintended consequences of public health policies, a context-tailored approach is required for this specific population. A coordinated and inclusive response is required to achieve healthy communities and control COVID-19 (Platt et al., 2020).

## **CONCLUSION**

Our study concluded that sex workers have faced several challenges associated with COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges include financial difficulties, stress related to the pandemic, stigma, and lack of support from the government. To effectively respond to the pandemic without compromising the lives of the most vulnerable populations, multi-sectoral collaboration is required.

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