



# STORIES TO ACTION

Amplifying voices for change

## Episode 5: Sex Work

**Kwem:** Welcome to today's episode on SRHR and sex workers. It has been quite a while and we missed you. If there's one thing that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to teach us is that sometimes things will not go according to plan, and when that happens, we embrace the change. Adrienne Maree Brown in her book, *Emergent Strategy*, reminds us that change happens. Change is definitely going to happen. No matter what we plan or expect or hope or set in place, we will adapt to that change or we will become irrelevant. In our embracing of change, we took time to slow down and honored our ability to create.

**Kwem:** We are mindful and cognizant that we are in the middle of a global health pandemic among other global crises, such as climate change, racial injustices, just to name but a few. Given that the production of this podcast is a collective effort, from the team at Stories to Action, to our amazing guests, we honor that the collective struggle that we are all facing around the world requires a collective response of rest and slowing down. We're thankful to our funder, [inaudible 00:01:12] Netherlands for being flexible and allowing us, the container, to slow down and re-energize, and here we are now. So, let's dive right in.

**Kwem:** The following well-crafted words are by and in honor of The Red Umbrella Fund. The Red Umbrella Fund is the first ever global grant-making collaborative guided by and for sex workers. Sex workers all over the world face widespread violations of their human rights. Criminalization and the severe stigma attached to sex work gives license to those who commit crimes of violence against sex workers and deny their humanity. It also makes it almost impossible for sex workers to access justice, healthcare, and social security systems. Sex workers would not be at such high risk of violence if they were respected as people and as workers and if they felt free to seek help and protection without fear of being stigmatized, jailed, abused, and disregarded. In other words, if their human rights were respected.

**Speaker 2:** Talking about things that make you uncomfortable and awkward is what we do. We break the ice so that you can freely talk about them. This is *Not Your Usual Subjects* podcast, with your host, Kwem.

**Kwem:** In today's episode, we have a conversation with two sex workers, Carlitos and Samantha, who, because of their safety, these are not their real names. We have an in depth talk about their work and their lived experiences. They both share from a place of belonging to sex worker communities within their localities. We also talk to Lisa, a sex worker ally and university graduate with a strong interest in gender and human sexuality, most specifically, sex work. Lisa shares with us about her findings following an exploratory research she did on Only Fans. So stay tuned.

**Kwem:** Also, at different moments in this episode, we'll be busting some myths and peeling some layers to get to facts on sex workers. Count Me In has developed a series of fact sheets, which is where we draw this knowledge. To access the fact sheet, simply in your browser type in Count Me In sex worker's fact sheet, or check out our social media. Count Me In, CMI! Consortium is a strategic partner of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. CMI! Consists of member organizations, that is Mama Cash, the Association for Women's Rights and Development, AWID, [inaudible 00:04:10], Just Associates, that is Jass, J-A double S, and the Sister Fans Urgent Action Fund UAF and Urgent Action Fund Africa, UAF-Africa, the sex worker led Red Umbrella Fund and the Dutch Gender Platform, women are strategic partners of the consortium.

**Kwem:** Myth: no one chooses to do sex work. Fact: choice is always limited, relative and contextual. Most people worldwide work for money to survive.



If you are poor, a person of color, a woman, transgender, or gender nonconforming, you likely have smaller range of choices. Whatever choice of work you make, your choice should be valued and your rights protected, promoted and fulfilled.

**Kwem:** Before we get into our chat with Samantha, she wishes to state that she is someone with a significant amount of privilege, both outside and inside sex work. She's financially been able to survive the pandemic easier than other colleagues, even though she's stopped working during the full lockdown. Her experiences of sex work during the pandemic are representative of all sex workers, especially those who work unlicensed and/or are trans, migrants, not experts and undocumented. Thank you for joining us today, Samantha. Please introduce yourself to us, how you identify, where in the world you are and about your work.

**Samantha:** Hey there. My name is Samantha, and I am based in Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Currently I'm working in The Windows and also doing some escorting. In the past, I've also webcammed and worked in a private house.

**Kwem:** Do you mind sharing with us what your experience has been as a sex worker during the pandemic, and if you could also from a community level, given that your plugged in the sex worker community?

**Samantha:** Sex work has been a struggle during the pandemic. I can say that I was fortunate in that I had some savings when the pandemic first started, and I was also studying at the time and therefore received some help from my family too. Currently, I am working a bit here and there, but mostly I am living off my savings because I find the work to be so difficult and stressful in this period. There are fewer tourists and clients, and many understandably do not want to get themselves sick or are trying not to spend much of their own money either.

**Samantha:** Luckily I was able to receive some income support for self-employed workers since I am registered with the Chamber of Commerce as a freelancer, but most sex workers in the Netherlands are not registered as freelancers or might not even work in the license sectors. These colleagues were left out of any COVID support packages from the government. Even if you could receive some income support, it was only for a thousand euros a month and that did not cover some people's rent, let alone their other living expenses.

**Samantha:** Some individual municipalities did try to remedy this, but the majority of sex workers were still left out. Many sex workers, therefore have continued working during lockdown, even if sex work was prohibited at the time, and it was actually made illegal for nine months during the lockdown. Well before the current one that we are in now. Unfortunately, I heard from many colleagues that either they or other sex workers they know have experienced increased violence from clients during the pandemic. The clients knew that sex work was not allowed and that sex workers were not likely to go to the police because the police would likely punish them instead of helping them. The police did contact sex workers during previous lockdowns, but it was to tell them that they would be fined if they caught working, not that they would protect them. Cities throughout the Netherlands have been cracking down on unlicensed prostitution, which has led to a lot of sex workers losing their housing.

**Samantha:** Four colleagues of mine also have killed themselves this past year because of all of this. Currently, even though sex workers are technically still allowed to work, it is still very much a struggle because, again, we see fewer good clients, fewer tourists and licensed indoor workplaces must all close at 5:00 PM. This is a problem because many clients either work during the day or do not want to visit during the day because they don't want to be seen, and in The Windows you always have to pay room rent for the work. But if you don't have many clients or clients who don't pay well, it's really easy to lose money, and unlike the previous lockdown, there's no longer any income support for self-employed workers or even just temporary



support for necessary cost to apply for. This is super shitty, especially since there have again been recent reports of sex workers being robbed.

Samantha: Since the government hasn't really been doing anything for us this past year, sex workers in the Netherlands have started their own initiatives. I know Save, S-A-V-E, small sex worker led group I am a part of, have started a phone and for emotional support for sex workers. Save also organized some bingo fundraising events to save and raise money for the community. [inaudible 00:10:27], working closely with Trans United Nederland, also created the Dutch Emergency Fund where she works with local sex workers to distribute donation money. Sex [inaudible 00:10:38] is a sex worker led group in the south of Netherlands, and they've also been keeping in touch with community members in that region and just helping them however they can.

Kwem: Is sex work criminalized or decriminalized where you are, and with the added layer of navigating the pandemic, what has that been like?

Samantha: So yes, sex work is legalized here, but it really hasn't helped a lot of sex workers during this period. Of course, it is better than full out criminalization, but only sex workers who are registered as freelancers have been entitled to COVID government support. So the community at large would have greater access to government support money if sex work in the Netherlands was fully decriminalized in all municipalities.

Kwem: What are some of the ways in which sex workers have adapted their work given physical distancing measures as a way of curbing the spread of COVID 19?

Samantha: Many sex workers just didn't see the option to physically distance and still earn enough money to survive throughout the pandemic. Some sex workers, like escorts, might only see one client per day and could more easily take distance than others. Myself, I see multiple clients a day in The Window or in normal times, at least I do, but I've also been instructed to ask clients if they have any COVID symptoms before they enter. Regardless of the number of clients seen, it is impossible to keep distance once we are in the room together with clients, unless the client only wants to be whipped or talk to at a distance.

Samantha: But I do know that some sex workers limited themselves to seeing one client per day or max three clients per week, for example. I also know some sex workers who have incorporated masks into their work, especially if they see a client who has not been vaccinated, but it is tricky because wearing a mask can really kill the mood in sex work, and of course, make some services impossible to provide.

Samantha: Some sex workers have also used certain positions during sex, such as doggy style, where there is less face to face contact. Sometimes I also take a self-test before work and try to limit my contact with people outside of work. If I do this, I'm sure that there are others doing such things too. In general, I would say sex workers were already very familiar with good hygiene practices. So things like washing hands and disinfecting surfaces was already part of the norm and didn't change much for us.

Kwem: How has it been accessing sexual reproductive health information and services during this time? How has that changed with COVID-19?

Samantha: Though it was definitely more difficult for some sex workers to access sexual reproductive health information and services during the lockdowns, because many places throughout the public health departments were closed or required appointments, it depended on the location though, and bigger cities are just better in that regard.

Kwem: Do you have anything else that you'd like to share with us that I haven't asked?



Samantha: [inaudible 00:13:55] actually just published a report about sex work during the times of corona. So if any of the listeners really want to know more about this specific topic, I would recommend checking out that report for sure. Ultimately, sex workers are still struggling right now, and we do not want to put ourselves or others at risk of COVID, but it is difficult to do so when we aren't given proper support, and when the government and law enforcement punishes, instead of helps us.

Samantha: I would like to add that the Dutch Emergency Fund is still open and taking donations and public support and sympathy would also go a long way for us. Right now, there are even some municipalities that are actively encouraging residents to snitch on unlicensed, prostitution that is taking place in sex workers homes. Instead of calling the police on a suspected sex worker, I hope the people stop and realize that by doing so, they could very well get that person evicted and they are not helping supposed victims of human trafficking either. We are just regular people trying to survive this awful time like everyone else.

Kwem: Myth: criminalization of buyers and managers is the most appropriate feminist response to sex work. Fact: this is also called the Nordic or Swedish or end model. Evidence show that sex workers working in this context are less safe. Criminalization of any aspect of sex work drives the industry background and beyond the reach of health, social, and justice services. Such a joy to have you join us today, Carlitos. Would you please introduce yourself to us, how you identify and where in the world you're joining us from today?

Carlitos: Hi, it's a pleasure to be here with you guys. I'm in Norway right now in Oslo. I work for NGO here and also been a sex worker for many years and yeah, we're ready to answer any other questions that you have.

Kwem: Sure. Thank you so much. So do you mind sharing with us what your experience has been as a sex worker in the years that you have been, and in terms of the challenges that you have faced specifically in relation to accessing sexual and reproductive health information and services, and also from a community level, given that you're plugged in the sex worker community in the NGO that you work in, I imagine that you are in community with other sex workers. What are some of the challenges in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights, accessing information, accessing those services, and also just general challenges that come to mind?

Carlitos: Yes, Kwem. As you say yourself, the community I am with here in Norway, I have a lot of friends and colleagues that works and has been working for long times and short times, mostly men, heterosexual men, bisexual men, homosexual men. Well in Norway is a little bit complicated because of the laws that we have here, like the Swedish model, and that makes that nobody here can actually work together, and this is very bad because of the security that we could have as a whole team in one place. The law makes us work separately in our own places, exposed to, well, any danger that can be related to this work. Also it's not allowed to work from one rented place here. So for example, if you rent an apartment and work from there, the person renting to you can be charged as a pimp.

Carlitos: Even this person don't know what you're doing, but only because they are facilitating you, the place where you work from, then they are seen here by law as a pimp. Any other person helping you getting clients, it can be a friend that wanted to introduce you to a client, then this friend will become automatically a pimp. Also, a person that pays for you, your ad on internet, on escort sites will also be your pimp because they're also facilitating your prostitution. So this is the main things that are a little bit complicated here, according to the pimping paragraphs that we have here. So I cannot really work with another person in my flat because then, since I'm the owner on my own flat, which is allowed, I can work from my own place that I have bought, but if I have another person here, then I will be this person's pimp. Even I don't take any money, just facilitating the place is enough to be charged as a pimp.

Carlitos: This is one thing. The other thing is that here in Norway and lately, many places in Europe also now, are eradicating what is the cash, the money, the physical money, so that they control better where the money's coming from, where it's going to, everything. This has during the corona times, been, I think, a very big problem for many, many escorts here, stranded in Norway. Persons that live in other places, but because of lockdown and the first wave, they was locked in Norway and they could not get out, they didn't have any Norwegian bank account to receive money from clients because clients here like very much to transfer money on applications that go with the transfers in a second. Persons that don't live here have not access to this, only cash.

Carlitos: This has been one of the biggest problems here in Norway that has made also escorts going from work independent to go to work to another person that takes 50% of their income only because they can facilitate accounts where clients can pay money instead of using cash. Also, during the pandemic, the other big thing was that many escorts that were here more than the time that they can be here, normally it's 90 days, they were afraid to report anything to the police because they could get deported and have after problems to get inside the European Union. So many persons during pandemics that had problems with violent clients didn't report that.

Carlitos: In the NGO I work for, we had a lot of contact with people stranded in Norway and escorts that wanted help all across Norway to know from time to time what the new restrictions are, what it meant for them, what to do in case the police came up on their door to make an immigration control. So yes, it has been a very difficult time for anyone working here, but it's a very big difference between migrants that come here and work without have any residence here and us that live here in Norway, because us living here in Norway have another type of help that we can receive from the government, while immigrants that came here and don't have any residents didn't have access to.

Carlitos: So, as I tell you, it was very difficult for many persons also since there were less clients after the first wave to rent apartments, because all the apartment services was also locked down because of there were no tourists here. So that also forced many women that I know of to go and work for pimps that could facilitate a free place for work, but they had to pay 50% of their income and make them very vulnerable for these pimps to take advantage of them both sexually and also monetary.

Kwem: Thank you so much for sharing that, Carlitos. What I'm getting is that the Nordic model criminalizes bias of sex work, but also, although it decriminalizes sex workers, it takes a notion that strips away self-determination and agency of sex workers as folks who have made dispositions for themselves, and seeing how that actually opens up, as you've said, financial and also just exploitation of sex workers in terms of just running their business. I wonder what have been some of the ways in which sex workers in Norway have navigated around this particular model, how has it been? What have been some of the innovations that sex workers have taken in terms of just navigating and going around the Nordic model. In addition, you also mentioned that this becomes a problem for migrant sex workers. Are there ways in which your NGO, for example, is working to support this? How is the resilience of the sex workers having been built during this period? Yeah, so I'd be curious to know how that is.

Carlitos: I forgot to tell you that during the pandemic, it was very important for places that helped sex workers in Norway to be open. We are a very small NGO. We have a very small office, and we don't have very much money, but all the work we do is mostly on telephone, online. We have also juries that can help people in case of violent episodes, or if they have problems with criminal persons, but there is a place in Norway that has existed for 35 years. The name is [Peru 00:25:21] center, which is abbreviation for the prostitution center.



This is financed by the government of Norway and the municipality of Oslo. This is a free of charge service for sex workers, healthcare, which is tests and medicine. Also, if you need PrEP or retrovirals for people with HIV, free condoms, lubricants. They started during the pandemic because they never closed.

Carlitos: They never closed. They could not receive so many people, but I know that they were not closed. They were actually helping people, as we did, answering the WhatsApp, for example, and [inaudible 00:26:15] flats where escorts were to announce all the time the new restrictions that was applicable for them. They also started to deliver some basic food, like a food package with different kind of things that people needed. In my organization, in my NGO, PION, we received donations of money, which we were giving away for escorts here, like a gift card with 100 euros that we was giving away to sex workers that really need the money. I think that we had a donation of almost 10,000 Euro that we were giving away, and this was the things that we could do during the pandemic to help, but actually we missed any type of help from the government because it didn't came.

Carlitos: You can see it as like the government facilitated the center not to close, but also there were no clear message from the government as in the first wave, if prostitution were to be stopped at the time or if it was allowed. So I think after a couple of months, after they started the pandemic, they announced that it will be like short period of time where it will be illegal because normally it's legal to sell sex in Norway, but not to buy, but because of the pandemic and the risk of getting COVID, then also for sex workers, as also for normal masseurs and physical therapists, it was not allowed to have open for business.

Carlitos: So also it's very hard when you work in an organization for sex workers to not have a clear message from the government and and also don't have any kind of support from them, like we see in other countries. In Europe, gave support to sex workers. We have lots of communication with NGOs in Spain, for example, and they did something like PION did in Norway. They get donations, sex workers that somehow were doing it better than others donated money so that this can be given away to other escorts that had a very bad time.

Carlitos: Well, I can also say that I think the whole pandemic was, or is still here in Norway, has been very devastating for many escorts that has no other option but to work in this business. For example, immigrants, and those I think are the most hit by the pandemic because, as I tell you, I talk every week with at least 40 people on our help line on the telephone or WhatsApp, and many women from Latin America, selling sex in Europe, say to me all the time that these times are very bad, and this is the only thing that they can do because of the language. They cannot speak English. They cannot go to other countries to try to apply for work.

Carlitos: There's over-demand in washing work or house health work. So there are not works for them to find. So this is the only option that they have and are not making any money now because all the restrictions, all the first, second, third waves that was, all the lockdown, the clients are scared. Here in Norway, in the second way, they start to deport escorts here, which were working and that were from other countries that was not Norway, there was deported. Even if they were here legally within the 90 days, they can be here, and even if they have anything for work here, they was deported because the Health Department here saw them a threat because they could con- I don't know that word in English, but they could spread COVID to their clients and their clients mostly married with women and children. So it will be like a huge problem.

Carlitos: The government didn't say this clear. One day in December, last year on Christmas time, the first case came in with a girl from Columbia that had just arrived in Norway, and the police came to do the immigration control, and they humiliated her and told her that she has to leave, that she was not welcome here now, that it was a pandemic. She could not work as an escort. The government never came out

to announce that now we are going to restrict on sex workers because of the pandemic, but she was the first one deported.

Carlitos: Her case came in the newspaper, after she was deported, they started to deport many other girls. So this was the immigration police hand in hand with the immigration authorities and the Health Department here. So this continued for, I think, three months, and we were in contact with like 60 girls and boys that got deported from Norway only because they were selling sex here, many of them European citizens, but at the time they were told by the police that they could not be here because they were spreading COVID to all their clients.

Carlitos: So that stopped in March this year after we and other organizations here write a letter to the Ministry of Justice, which is a woman, and I think we also mentioned this in media many times, and then the police stop suddenly, and we didn't hear about any case now. Now that the borders opened as a month ago, the police start to do their routine control on immigration, but they only asked for the certificate of vaccination and which date they enter in Norway, and then they leave.

Carlitos: So now it's like before the pandemics, we have not heard about anyone being deported. So I think things are a bit better now, but still, the whole pandemic and the situation with the police here has made that sex workers don't have any trust in the police. If they from before were skeptic, now they're like no trust at all. This is very sad because if anything happened related to a bad client, a violent client or a criminal activity, then they will not go to the police, and I think this is a main issue with many other countries where the sex workers don't have any trust in the police and are afraid to go to the police.

Kwem: One of the things that you mentioned that your organization supported sex workers with is money. You said a hundred euros for sex workers who had lost their livelihood during this time, and I know that according to research that was done by Mama Cash, Red Umbrella Fund and open society foundations titled funding for sex worker rights, that although there has been an increased amount of funding since 2006, the investments remain small. Now from your sharing today, is that there has been and different ways in which your organization, for example, has had to support sex workers during the pandemic for their survival. Are there any demands or any sharing that you'd like to make in relation to funding sex worker rights and funding sex worker movements?

Carlitos: Here, the money that we received in my organization were like public donations mainly. As I tell from other sex workers, maybe from clients, we don't know who this person were, but we ask for money or for help, and specific to help sex workers that were having bad times. I would very much like the government here to take more part and include all the population, nevertheless, you are here legally or not because the pandemic is like a very big thing. It's not like that you come here and you don't have work, and then you try to manage to find some way to survive. It was not planned at all, and many persons also that had stopped selling sex, started to sell sex again, because they lose their work. They lose their jobs.

Carlitos: The situation was very hard for many persons. So from the big organizations in Europe, yes, they give maybe more money, but I feel, and I sense somehow that the money are maybe not being distributed very good because, for example, we saw that 100 Euro was not enough, and totally, we have many persons, not only one time with 100 euros, like up to three times, I think that we were giving away and trying to use all the money that we had on them, on the people that were struggling. Of course, 100 euros is nothing compared to what it cost to buy food here in Norway and pay rent.

Carlitos: So yes. I would also like propose to other sex workers that are in ... how can I say? In a better position, no? That they are in a better position that has anything on order. Maybe this is just like a side work, but to also incorporate and be more empathic and donate also, maybe, to organizations that they know are helping escorts.



Because I think that even if you call yourself VIP escort, or if you work in the streets, we are all doing the same work. So it's like sometimes people see, no, I'm not like this. I'm in this privileged group, so it's me and them and not us together.

Carlitos: I see escorts or sex workers, how you call it? To be whole as one, if you know what I mean. Only for people to be more empathic, if you are in a better position, to could help others. Of course, we miss a lot of activists worldwide. I know there are many persons with very good strategies and that knows very good about politics that are sex workers and work maybe in some key organizations or entities, world around, but they don't want to spoke out. I comprehend why, but I think we need much more activism in sex work.

Kwem: That's quite a lot. I think that conversations like this bring us to a place of noticing and being very aware of the violence that has taken place during COVID 19 and the excuse that different governments and different institutions like the police have taken advantage to perpetrate violence against sex workers. As you said, this is something that has been taking place globally, and I just want to uphold the work that you do within your organization in supporting sex workers and supporting sex worker rights, especially during this time and beyond, and even before.

Kwem: One of the things you mentioned is that you get a lot of confused messaging from the government, right? Because even from your sharing with us today, there have been conflicting situations in terms of what the government is saying and what the government is doing, but I'm most interested in what your messaging is, what your messaging as a sex worker, what your messaging is as a community based movement within Norway. What is the messaging that you'd like to put forward in our conversations today so that we can uphold that?

Carlitos: Well, for the first, in many years now that I have worked on this NGO, I have requested from time to time that we go in some kind of deal with the police here. I, myself and others would demand that a special police group working towards sex workers, get to know us, get to know sex workers, get to know how they can encounter sex workers in a positive way so that we can have a good cooperation because prostitution is never going to disappear. As long as the police worldwide don't know how to behave in front of sex workers, it will never stop, this this feeling against the police. Actually in Norway, the police are very nice here, but when they encounter a sex worker, I think many times they don't know how to handle, how to talk, and also they need persons that can go and teach them how to refer to and how to talk to when they're encounter sex workers and sex worker activists.

Carlitos: Because this is a free free country where you can speak yourself out from the bottom of your heart, and I think Norway is very good in many, many ways, and it's very, very sad that the immigrants coming here, as well as us living here are scared of calling the police if something happens. If it's not safe in Norway as one of the best countries in the world to live with good quality of life, if we cannot feel secure with the police beside us, where in the world with this happen?

Carlitos: So I think we need to meet the police, the police need to meet us in a positive way, and they should get help from places like us or [inaudible 00:44:12] that has existed for 35 years, as I tell you, and that is financial by the government of Norway to learn and have like some studying with the police and teach them really some manners with sex workers. The second thing is, which I didn't mention in the first part where we spoke that is also very important and also very difficult, now more than ever, is that we also want to talk to the tax authorities, because now it's very complicated, the situation for sex workers here with this new money laundering loss that European Union have, so that here, when you put your cash inside the bank, they will automatically ask where this money come from.

Carlitos: If you don't give a good reason and can also prove where it comes from, they can ban you from using that bank and other banks. So without a bank, what will you do? This is some of the new cases this year that my organization



and others in Oslo had. I think we were in contact with six women and men that got contacted by their bank where the bank was actually asking where their money came from, and if they could not prove that it come from legal activity, they will block the bank account and ban them from using that bank. All because you can work as sex workers here legally, but the money that you earn must you pay tax of. This is a paradox because the paradox of the pimping law here is that anyone that take advantage of your body to get money, take advantage of your prostitution and get your money is by law a pimp. In this case, the state.

Carlitos: The state will become your pimp because they're taking money from sex workers, from sex work to pay taxes. You will have no goods for it back. So it's very complicated for a immigrant that comes here to get a green card to work when you don't have any normal work contract, that you can pay tax. So what immigrants need to do when they come to Norway to could pay tax is to open like a self-employed company, where they can register as a masseuse or like erotic dancer, or like a sex worker, but the registers here are open so everyone can see it. So it's not very popular. Then you have to pay a very high amount of tax. So if you're a sex worker that only do this sometimes in the month, it will not be good for you to pay tax because you will end up without no money at all.

Carlitos: So these are the most complicated things. We are following up the tax authorities here, and we have for many years without getting a clear answer from them because the tax authorities want the financial department of Norway to make it more smooth, to could pay taxes as immigrant and as sex worker, but they too are in a fight and they don't, they don't agree because that means also that you have to change the pimping paragraph in order for sex workers to pay taxes, as I see it. Because it says very clear, if you have a pimp to take some of your money or a person, they will become a pimp. In this case, the state. So like I said, it's very complicated, all this issue here in Norway. Of course, that ends that sex workers will be more excluded, they'll go more into a low key position where persons like me, that wants to speak out are very afraid to do it because of the consequences that it can have.

Kwem: So Carlitos, one of the things that you mentioned is that during the pandemic there was, or there has been a lot of arbitrary arrests by the police of sex workers in a bid to curb the control of COVID-19, but we know that instead of doing that, supporting sex workers and to access the rest of the COVID-19 measures that folks had would have been the best step towards curbing COVID-19 over ... and I'm speaking in relation to the migrant sex workers, instead of supporting and caring as a human rights issue of this migrant sex workers, instead, what was done was violence really. Whilst you're in that conversation of not being able to do sex work during the period because of physical distancing, I know that digital intimacy and digital ways of selling sex was some of the ways in each sex workers around the world were innovating how to go about their work. I wonder how that has been in Norway and in your experience.

Carlitos: Well, of course, during the pandemic and because of the social distancing, many escorts had to reinvent themselves being more creative in how they got in contact with their clients and how they sold their services. For example, I know that during the pandemic, the use of Only Fans exploded, exploded so much. Suddenly every escort I was talking to had an area Fan account. Also, what exploded also was a private cell of pornographic material from escorts to clients, and you could suddenly see many escorts in Oslo, Norway writing in their profiles that I don't meet anyone physically right now, but I can entertain you over the cam, over telegram, over signal, over WhatsApp, over Snapchat, or you can only follow me on Only Fans.

Carlitos: This, I think, has been something that has been very ... that you can notice, that you could notice during the pandemic. Some of the first changes I saw was this, and suddenly also I saw many escorts from Southern Europe, for example, advertising on Norwegian platforms to get Norwegian clients, because this opened a new kind of services that you didn't need to be physically Norway to meet a client face to face,



but you can sit down in Spain and talk to a client here and just doing cam. This was also very accepted by many clients that started to pay for videos, started to pay for online services, cam shows, these kind of things.

Carlitos: Another thing that I can think of is that here in Norway, in the first wave, clients were not very thoughtful about the consequences of getting COVID because in the first wave, it was not very ... people were not so much scared here in Norway. It was in the second wave that it was worse because then we have seen people dying in the first wave, and the consequences of had COVID before, people didn't smell or sense any taste at all many months after. Even some people have not recovered from that yet. Also, people have a problem with their eyes, with seeing, with hearing, muscular problems. So the clients got really afraid, I think more afraid on the second wave, and that was a very bad time for sex workers here. You can see literally that escorts didn't have any clients at all.

Carlitos: So yet at that second wave, we also missed the helping package from the government. If I have to mention anything positive that happened, we, as an organization, sadly saw that persons that never took contact with us persons, that never, when we send some information about our organization, they read, but they never take contact. They suddenly start to take contact with us and tell us about their situation, how frustrating it was. They didn't have anyone to talk about with the troubles they were in or the situation they were in because many persons in this business cannot come out loud and say to their family or friends, so they're quite isolated and living a double life. So, and suddenly we start receive contacted messages from different escorts, living in Norway, ethnic Norwegian, for example, women and men was very frustrated and very scared about the situation and also many immigrants.

Carlitos: So I think this made the community more, that they come closer together, but other escorts start, at least here in Norway, start to help each other with place to stay, to accommodating them and to give each other a hand. We, as organization, we came in contact with many people that, as I told you before, were thinking about to go and start working for a pimp because they didn't have clients. They didn't have money. They were stranded in Norway. Their countries of origin were closed, so they could not leave Norway, also. The airport here was closed.

Carlitos: So they have no other option than to go and start working for a pimp only for a place to live and stay. Very dramatic. But we saw also that many escorts tried to help each other and tried to accommodate persons, but as I tell you, this is like a go against the law because you cannot receive any escort working in your place because you can be their pimp. You can go to jail for that, for this kind of help. So, yes, I think, and also the communication. WhatsApp during the pandemic exploded in our organizations. I was the first one applying WhatsApp for our users.

Carlitos: So we know that many persons, immigrants that come here don't have a SIM card from Norway, or they don't need to, because everything goes on the internet now, on the wifi. So WhatsApp was a very good platform to communicate with persons in the north part of Norway in the south or in other countries that we know from before people that we follow up, and they could suddenly contact me from Germany, from Belgium, from South Africa, from Colombia, and and start talking to us and tell us their stories and how frustrating it all was and how scared people were.

Carlitos: So we have like a international platform for help other escorts, anywhere in the world that has been in contact with us before or that they contact with us before. So, yes, and of course now we are on WhatsApp all the time, because WhatsApp is not really a very used platform in Norway, only for people that don't live here, but now everyone use it to contact us. We receive more WhatsApps than normally telephone calls or SMS. So it has come for us to stay, and this is a very good platform to communicate with other escorts across the world.



Kwem: Myth: sex work is inherently violence. Fact: sex work between two consenting adults is not violent. The criminalization of sex work, its discrimination and stigma is what gives rise to violence and other human rights violation. Lisa, a sex worker, ally, and now university graduate, for her thesis compared the social perception of sex workers on Only Fans to the social perceptions in other types of sex work away from the digital platform. Besides her academic research, she's also invested in changing perceptions on sex work through voluntary work at the Prostitution Information Center in Amsterdam and through contributions to projects such as the Anti-Discrimination in Sex Work Program, and Re-imagining Sex Work workshops. So glad you could join us today, Lisa. Welcome. Please introduce yourself to us and where you're joining in the world from and how you identify.

Lisa: Hi, Kwem, thank you so much for inviting me here. My name is Lisa. I use the pronouns she/her, and I'm currently speaking with you from Amsterdam, where I live.

Kwem: Now, we are going to just get right into it because I'm so excited for our conversation. Now you did a very interesting research for your Master's thesis. Please tell us about it.

Lisa: Yeah, thank you so much. So for my Master's thesis, actually, for my Bachelor's thesis it was, I researched the popularity of Only Fans, and I explored whether it had changed perspectives on sex work. So I did this through multiple perspectives. First, I tried to consider the place of sex work within a broad discourse, the place of Only Fans within the broader discourse of sex work and see how its situation and the weighted stigma are placed on people who are doing Only Fans may differ from the stigma that sex workers and all different type sex workers are facing and living with. After this, I also compared how Only Fans can be placed against different digital platforms, and then I looked at visual aesthetics, the reliance on other apps, and also the way that certain body types are valued more or less. Then just finally came to my conclusion where I tried to see why Only Fans had such a big peak of popularity during the first COVID lockdown, and I checked out how this changed our perspectives on sex work, on work itself and on digital intimacy as such.

Kwem: So in your exploration, on how only fans may have broadened the public perception of sex work, could you share what came out of that? What's some of the interesting things that came out of that?

Lisa: Yeah. Well, what was quite interesting is that initially my interest in Only Fans was sparked because I read so much about it in the news. I heard so much about it on other social media platforms. It sounded like everybody was on it. Celebrities were on it, big names in pop music were making reference to it. So it really sounded like it was everywhere and people were much more okay with it. It was much more [inaudible 01:02:39] that you could speak about in any social setting, than other types sex work. So for example, physical sex work or web camming or pornography. So I was really interested in how this could be different in Only Fans and where the difference came from. So my initial hypothesis was that the popularity of the platform really changed the perspective on sex work, and what I found is that it actually did not at all, even though doing Only Fans is still, in a way, more socially acceptable than, for example, web camming or doing physical sex work, either in the red light district or as an escort or in any other type of form that are possible.

Lisa: The stigma that these types of sex workers face is still very persistent and is still very real. Especially during the COVID period, sex workers and all other types of the work really face the stigma and disrespect, whereas it's quite different for people on Only Fans. So what my conclusion in that part was is that it did not change the perspective on sex work as much. It may have broadened the perspective on sex work, because speaking to people around me, I noticed that their initial idea of the work is very much like prostitution, red light district, these very almost cinematic ideas of Pretty Woman that people have of sex work. I feel like the popularity of Only Fans perhaps broadened their perspective and say, "Okay, well this is not

physical in a way that it is between a client and an escort or a sex worker, but it is still sex work." So it did broaden the perspective of the work, but it did not change the stigma as much as I thought it would.

**Kwem:** Maybe just to bring you back to something you'd mentioned that notably, and I think this is something that I also saw coming up, was that during the COVID 19 pandemic, well now, the use of Only Fans was definitely more publicized and also because of physical distancing and social distancing and all of that, more sex workers broadened their work into Only Fans. Now, what was it like in terms of whilst you were doing your studies pre-COVID, what was that looking like? The other thing that I think I found quite interesting in terms of sex workers notions around Only Fans is that well, given that there are other acceptable folks who are popular, for example, using Only Fans and ending up to take away sort of the spotlight from sex workers, the fact that that did not really take away the stigma, I think there was something around that.

**Kwem:** I know that I am struggling a bit to just share what that might be, but I wonder what notions might have come up whilst you are having conversations with sex workers around who are the users, or rather who are the users of Only Fans and the notions of class, the notions of privilege and social acceptability still went on to destigmatize sex workers on there. So yeah, what are some of the things that came up around that?

**Lisa:** Yeah, you put it really beautifully. So what I noticed that even though Only Fans really distinguishes itself as a platform from other platforms for digital intimacy, for example, pornography channels like Porn Hub or web cam channels, it's very different in a way that it's not categorized and there's no search function. So usually you could search for particular types of people that you want to see or types of sex that you want to seem and that's very often fetishized. It diminishes certain body types that are not seen as typically sexy. It diminishes people that are not socially accepted in the same form. Initially, Only Fans was celebrated for the fact that it did not have that function. People could only really be found by typing in their exact username, which kind of gave everybody an equal playground. So an Instagram model would have the same playing field as somebody who's a newcomer to Only Fans and who's doing sex work for the first time or somebody who has been doing physical sex work all their lives, and then is coming to the platform.

**Lisa:** So that's how the first celebration of the platform came to start. Then it appeared quite soon that this way of finding people through the search function actually only emphasized the differences in the social differences in class and in aesthetics, because it's only really possible to have many people find your username on Only Fans if you already have an Instagram account or a Twitter account with a lot of followers because Instagram and Twitter use these very particular ... I'm sorry, these very particular ways of distinguishing which bodies do you want to see and which bodies do you not want to see on Instagram? The more typically aesthetically pleasing bodies will always be put up more [inaudible 01:08:39] to the top of your Instagram page. You will see these bodies more, these people will get more views, whereas other bodies or people who are more seen like sex workers in their idea, will get shadow banned or diminished.

**Lisa:** So you see that people who are, yeah, wealthier or have more access to have more Instagram followers will also get more Only Fans followers if they want to. For people who have body types do not match this aesthetic ideal, it's much more difficult to gain the same kind amount of money, and as you said earlier, this is especially emphasized by the enormous popularity of the platform, which saw celebrities join the platform. For example, like Bella Thorne, and then if it's even more people with even more followers, they're not really, keeping an open field for all sex workers and all people of different body types who may want to join the party, because it's already so flooded people with a lot of Instagram followers with these idealistic body types.

Kwem: Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing that exploration with us. Now, at some point this year Only Fans announced that they will be banning porn online, on Only Fans rather. Of course, they have since rescinded their decision to not do it anymore, but I just wonder, what are some of the interlinking notions with what you found in your study in terms of Only Fans having broadened the public perceptions of sex work and then leading up to the point of the almost ban of porn and then the rescinding of their decision, because for me, I think what ... and it's also something I saw folks talking about, sex workers talking about regarding How Only fans, whilst it was created really for different creators to share their content, the pay-per-view content to users, porn and sex work really is what built and moved Only Fans to where it is today.

Kwem: The ban was, Only Fans cited that their banking institutions or financial institutions brought up this issue around payment and all of that, but even within that, I sensed, and again, the notions, rather the narratives that I saw from sex workers online also just upheld this, that the bodies and the labor of sex workers were used to get Only Fans to where it was, and then for such a decision to be put on the table, I mean, it speaks to really the perceptions that the public and, in this sense, financial institutions, and we also know that this was backed up by fundamentalists, Christian fundamentalists, religious fundamentalists, and conservatives. So what are some of the things that came up for you when this happened, and yeah, I'd be curious to know about that?

Lisa: Yeah. You explained it really well. This change in their policy happened right after I published my thesis, and it was really interesting for me to hear because it was especially something that I kind of already thought would happen, and I already proposed it in the end, in the conclusion of my thesis, because I noticed this paradigm and this pattern where sex workers were slowly getting kicked off the platform and they were getting more and more notifications of that, and they were putting it on the Twitter saying, "We're getting pushed off of the platform for no reason. They gave us no explanation other than content that is not following their guidelines," while they still were, still pay-per-view platform, and then what happens within these guidelines was still possible. So there were more and more alarming signals of the platform kicking off sex workers and solely focusing to the celebrities that were slowly joining the platform, as I already mentioned.

Lisa: Like you said, they joined the platform because it had gotten so big to sex workers. They really helped it get so big and helped it get its popularity, and after Only Fans saw the popularity isn't enough, they chose for a different target group, which is now very much influencers, famous people, so singers, sporters, musicians, and other types of people who can sell their content in a pay-per-view way. Yeah, it's incredibly sad. I really expected that this would happen, and I'm really glad that they overruled the decision in the end, but this only happened because there was so much outcry about it, and there were so many people actively combating their decision. So this is still partially a platform for sex workers, but it's not really comparable to the way it was when they started it.

Kwem: Yeah. I think something else that remains really is that sex workers no longer feel safe anymore being on the platform because if this decision came up and went away, there is a sense of fear of the possibility of it coming up again for very many different reasons. Yeah. So away from your research, Lisa, did you find, or really just still rooted in your research really, did you find any opportunities that lay within access to sexual and reproductive health services and information to sex workers on Only Fans? So really just were there any interlinkings between SRHR and how digital intimacy is taking place right now? What are some of the opportunities that, for example, you might have found within Only Fans?

Kwem: Even before you answer that question, I think for me, what continually came out, given the role that sex workers played in building Only Fans, what I would imagine, what I would hope to happen is that actually this is really an opportunity for advocacy for sex workers.



I feel that Only Fans does have a social responsibility to explore ways of making Only Fans safe for sex workers, ensuring that there is information that would be supportive of sex workers, available to sex workers on Only Fans, given that the pandemic was happening, finding ways of supporting sex workers with resources, right?

Kwem: Because what would solidarity look like for such a platform that has been largely built by sex workers, going back to sex workers at a time when they need it the most? So for me, it was such a big disappointment in terms of what happened, but really those are some of the things, those are some of the evils that we see within a patriarchal and a capitalistic society, but really, again, back to my question. Were there any relationships, or were there any opportunities that you see that Only Fans can play or does play in terms of accessibility to sexual and reproductive health and rights to sex workers?

Lisa: Yeah, that's a good question. I'm not really sure if these opportunities are there. Now, they might be, but I feel like Only Fans has made it pretty clear that they don't want to be the platform certainly enabling sex workers and it's especially pertinent in light of the [inaudible 01:16:53] regulations that were left in the U.S., I think in 2017, and they make it illegal or they put the blame off the platform, they put the blame of sexual acts and if sexual service are being sold, and if this eventually causes harm, all that blame is usually for the person enacting the harm, and these legislations put all this blame on the platform enabling this harm.

Lisa: So this made massive changes. Also, partially why the regulations on sexuality on Instagram are much stricter, and on Twitter and on Tumblr. We see that these legislations created an entire sweep of sexuality off of the internet, kind of. It's quite difficult now to be sexual on the internet and to have an open conversation about this, and even to spread resources on sexual health and on good ways of having sex and especially for sex workers. There were a lot of resources online where they could spread information to each other and chat and help each other out when sex work was still primarily, or when sex workers were still working live in physical sex work.

Lisa: There were tips being thrown out. There were certain blacklists of clients that they didn't want to speak to, and all of this was exchanged. This all was banned off the internet, and there's not really a place right now online where sex workers can speak about their profession in an honest way, or where sexuality can be discussed in light of sex work. Only very strictly in light of education, it is sometimes possible, but still on Instagram, we see that Instagram accounts that are providing sexual health education are getting bans and are getting shadow banned, or getting thrown off of their accounts.

Lisa: So it's really not a good place for digital sexual health. I feel like Only Fans has made their decision in that case very clear. They want to stay out of that option of blame. Instead of distinguishing the difference between sexual exploitation and sex work, which is a very important difference, a very important distinction, they try to make it look as if they're not a platform enabling sex work. I really don't see them putting any changes in that perspective until this legislation's changed. But as you said, this is very much being pushed by very strict Catholic organizations that sadly are more powerful than the sex work organization right now.

Kwem: Hmm. Thank you for sharing that, Lisa. Now, is there anything else that you'd like to share with us that I haven't asked that you feel you must before we say goodbye?

Lisa: Wow. Support sex workers. Sign the petitions. Follow somebody on Only Fans that you really like that doesn't necessarily have a lot of followers. Make sure you pay for porn. Find a nice website that produces content that you love and share it. Make sure that you find sex workers on Instagram that you can follow and like, and just be there for the community. If there's something that I can live behind, please do that. Thank you so much for this conversation. It's been really fun.



- Kwem: Thank you, Lisa. And yes, pay for porn, people. Pay for porn. This was such a wonderful conversation. Thank you so much, Lisa, for sharing with us your time, your research and your work, and we thank you for your work of continuously supporting and being an ally to sex workers. Thank you.
- Kwem: Myth: sex workers sell themselves. Fact: sex workers sell a service. Sex work is a feminist issue. We end this episode by upholding a call to action by EMPOWER Foundation, an English collective of prostitutes. This is their statement. "Sex workers strike against interference in their bodily autonomy in mutual solidarity with all other women, disabled, transgender, lesbian, mothers, including single mothers, queer, women of color, women incarcerated, pregnant women, young and old who fight similar battles we do in order to claim their own bodily autonomy. We strike in solidarity with women of color, women incarcerated, begging women, women who use drugs, transgender women, asylum seekers, Muslim women, and all women who, like sex workers, are stigmatized, discriminated against and persecuted by the law and law enforcement. In that breath, we add that we stand in solidarity with male gay, queer, and transgender men sex workers. In all the ways possible and accessible to you, dear listener, support sex workers and show solidarity for the decriminalization of sex work."
- Kwem: As demonstrated in stepping up to the evidence on HIV and sex work, Decriminalize Sex Work Now, the sex workers at AIDS 2014 report, which includes outcomes from the sex workers pre-conference, decriminalization is essential to improving the health, safety and human rights of sex workers. Evidence from places where sex work is decriminalized, such as New Zealand and New South Wales, Australia, reveals that labor rights for sex workers increases access to HIV and sexual health services.
- Kwem: Well, there you have it folks. I imagine that following today's episode, you probably have learned something new. You feel affirmed in your politics as an intersectional feminist and/or you have some questions, comments, and follow-ups. Whatever that might be, we invite you to connect with us on social media so we can stay engaged. Our next and final episode of this series is on sexual and reproductive health and rights in humanitarian settings. Until then, take good care.
- Kwem: The support of Not Your Usual Subjects podcast comes from staff and volunteers at Stories to Action, who are conjuring alongside young people, situated across borders all around the world. Together, we envision a world where every young person's voice is heard on their sexual health and reproductive rights, even in times of public health emergencies, like COVID-19. We would like to honor, thank and acknowledge all our contributors and guests for sharing their stories to action. Share-Net International Netherlands, who we are so deeply grateful for funding and resourcing this podcast, reminds us of the role that philanthropy in working with youth and that diversity should and can play in raising collective consciousness.
- Kwem: Please head on over to [Share-NetInternational.org](https://Share-NetInternational.org) to find your regional hub. Please commune with us on social media to find out about our next episode and share your feedback, thoughts and reflections with us. This is on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, at Stories to Action. Links are available on the show notes at the podcasting platform of your choice that you listen to us from. Please share this episode with someone or someones you know should have a listen.
- Kwem: Goodbye.

