

Sex Workers In Chile Continue To Face The Consequences Of COVID-19 Without Government Assistance



A little [over a year](#) ago, WHO declared the end of the COVID-19 health emergency. The pandemic had disastrous consequences for workers, especially those in the informal sector. According to a World Bank [report](#), the last five years will reflect the lowest figures for economic growth in the last 30 years: 40 percent of low-income countries will remain poorer than they were before the pandemic.

In Chile, 2 million jobs were lost during the pandemic. [A report by the Economics Institute of the Catholic University of Chile](#) indicates that the employment rate could only recover to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2026.

In this context, informal sector workers face an unaccounted crisis: the non-recognition of their work leaves them outside the ambit of adequate public policies for their recovery. As part of this sector, sex workers face the great limbo of the legal status of sex work in Chile: it is not prohibited, but it is not recognized as work either. Persecution is concentrated in the places where it is practiced. Herminda González, president of [Fundación Margen](#), tells me that this option leaves only one option for the workers: the streets. From that place, the Fundación provides the assistance that the State does not provide.

The Solidarity Fund

During the quarantine, Herminda and Nancy Gutierrez (Margen's spokesperson) took advantage of the early morning darkness to sneak into the Foundation's headquarters, where they distributed boxes of food for the sex workers. "We did it because we knew the girls were waiting," says Herminda. "And if it wasn't us, who was going to do it? Only the people help the people."

As the pandemic progressed, they decided to design protocols for safe sex. "Along

with condoms, we distributed masks and latex gloves,” because, despite the restrictions, the work did not stop. “There were colleagues who earned a lot of money during the pandemic,” because obviously, the risk increased the value of the services. However, in any situation that meant not being able to work, the girls were completely unprotected, as they were not covered by any of the government schemes designed to protect workers recognized as such.

“Many of the sex workers support their families; they are mothers, daughters,” Gonzalez tells me. In the absence of the state—which only donated food to the foundation during the entire pandemic—“the aunts,” as the younger workers affectionately call the foundation’s leaders, decided to create a solidarity fund for sex workers, where allies and close clients made donations that allowed them to survive the pandemic crisis.

The Solidarity Fund is still active and is used to support sex workers during the hardest times of the year, including when it is time to buy school supplies, for example.

The Irruption of the Virtual

One of the strategies to continue working during the pandemic was the leap to virtuality. “As everything evolves, so does sex work,” Herminda tells me. The new generations play a fundamental role in this evolution. The range of women in sex work has expanded to include, for example, university students.

“Here in Chile, there are only the poor and the rich,” says Herminda, the president of Margen “But people disguise themselves as middle class just because they can send their children to school or pay a rent.” So, when in a poor household there are children who study and also someone who starts studying at a high school or university, that someone looks for the job that best suits him or her.

Sex work allows young women to manage their time in a way that other jobs do not, but because of the clandestine situation, it does not allow them access to mortgages, loans, or retirement. The foundation believes that the legalization of sex work would allow all of this and, in addition, would put an end to the guilt that sex workers carry with them.

“Sex work is not like in the old days when it was limited to intercourse and the brothel,” Herminda tells me. Today it is very diverse: it also includes work via

webcams and the telephone, as well as selling photos. “All the exchange of your body for money is sex work, but we find it hard to recognize it because of the stigma.”

Sex Exchange for Convenience In the early 1990s, Monsignor Alfonso Baeza, a human rights priest, was a parish priest in downtown Santiago. He would park near the church, and sex workers would come there to be blessed. The priest offered them a room in the parish to meet, urging them to organize. There, sitting at a large table while drinking tea, Herminda González heard for the first time the voices of other sex workers, talking about their children, their problems at home, at work, their happiness, and their sorrows. At that time, she also met Eliana Deltone, the first sex worker union leader in Chile.

In 1995 they held the first national meeting of sex workers and began to hold workshops, to which women came who were not sex workers, but who were interested “even in sexuality advice,” Herminda tells me. Then they organized the first “sex for convenience exchange workshop.” Amid the economic precariousness of the 1990s, “there were women who slept with the greengrocer, the butcher, the bus driver,” but they did not recognize this as sex work. “It took us years to recognize ourselves,” says González, “as dancers, we couldn’t realize that we were doing the same thing as other sex workers. It wasn’t until they began to take workshops and learn about the subject that we realized that we were doing the same thing, that maybe we weren’t trading sex for coitus but we were showing our bodies for others.” Herminda is convinced that this is a process. “It is not easy to say, ‘I am a sex worker’ because discrimination begins [there].” That’s why girls today prefer to say they are “escorts,” as if that were a university degree.

Potential Customers

Herminda says that hypocrisy is one of the main obstacles to the legalization of sex work in Chile. “Everyone is a potential client,” she says. But there is a backlash, “because they speak and decide for us. Who decides that sex workers can’t be sex workers because that’s what a woman who is more educated or has more money thinks?”

The Margen Foundation and the Angela Lina Union made great progress and were even [received by the former president of Chile](#), Michelle Bachelet.

However, this link with the state ended after the pandemic. Herminda comments that the stigma extends to feminism. When sex workers attended the Women's Day march wearing their dance costumes, they were singled out by other women for "promoting the objectification of the body," says Herminda. However, she says, when the women gathered to chant "The Violator is You," and when they did this bare-chested, then they were not accused of objectification. This moral hypocrisy creates its own discrimination.

The "aunts" of the Margen Foundation confront discrimination with actions. In the middle of the cold Santiago winter, they hand out condoms and lubricants as well as hot chocolate and tea to the workers, who are forced to be on the streets by the restrictions of the law. Although the pain and fear of having been so close to death "never goes away," says Herminda, "the pandemic also left us with good things: the girls' confidence in us."

By Taroa Zúñiga Silva

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