



Exploitation 'as usual'

Emerging evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on Ireland's sex trade

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About SERP

The Sexual Exploitation Research Programme (SERP) was established in 2017 under the School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice at University College Dublin. SERP is part of UCD's Geary Institute for Public Policy, which is a centre of excellence for policy-relevant, theoretically informed, empirically grounded research.



SERP conducts independent feminist research on all forms of commercial sexual exploitation that creates useful knowledge for law and policy makers, practitioners, survivors, supporters and activists. SERP aims to strengthen the evidence base on current and emerging issues of sexual exploitation in Ireland, and beyond. SERP's work is designed to enhance understanding of the commercial sex trade, its impact on women and girls who are sexually exploited, on communities and on society at large. In addition to strong links with international partners and allies, SERP also works collaboratively with support services for victims and survivors of prostitution and sex trafficking on the ground, seeking to bridge the gap between academia and frontline practice in generating new knowledge, insights and solutions on these issues.

Acknowledgements

SERP is extremely grateful to the Community Foundation for Ireland, and in particular Tina Roche, whose timely support for this study enabled us to mobilise quickly to investigate Ireland's sex trade during Covid-19, and in doing so to highlight the sexual exploitation of women in prostitution in the context of a constantly evolving global health crisis.

We would also like to thank all of the frontline support services who participated in this study and shared their significant insights and expertise with us through both interviews and a dedicated public webinar. Particular thanks in this context go to Barbara Condon, CEO of Ruhama, Sheila Crowley, Ruhama's Service Manager, Linda Latham, Service Manager and RGN of the HSE's Women's Health Service and Anti Human Trafficking Team, Dr Nusha Yonkova, Gender and Anti-trafficking Expert, Catherine Cosgrave, Managing Solicitor and Mary Henderson, Solicitor at the Immigrant Council of Ireland.

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The author would like to give special thanks to her brilliant SERP colleagues in UCD for their unwavering support and guidance, especially Dr Monica O'Connor, Associate Professor Ursula Barry, Dr Maureen Lyons and Dr Marie Keenan. We also warmly thank all our committed SERP Advisory Committee members. Sincere thanks also to Professor Philip O'Connell, Director of the Geary Institute for Public Policy, for his ongoing support of SERP's work.

We pay tribute to all of the women in prostitution in Ireland whose experiences are reflected in this study. When Covid-19 hit our shores and we were all advised to stay safe at home, so many of these women were far from home and very far from safety, yet their capacity for resilience and survival is remarkable.

Key findings

The aim of this study is to formally and rigorously document the impact that Covid-19 is having on the Irish sex trade at this unprecedented time in our history. The trade attempted to respond to the pandemic with a 'business as usual' approach as far as was possible, but it was clear that this crisis had a devastating impact on the lives and wellbeing of many women in prostitution right across Ireland.

- When the pandemic hit, the numbers advertised online for prostitution by Escort Ireland (EI) slipped below 300, less than half the norm, but steadily increased again to pre-Covid-19 levels, with almost 700 advertised at the end of July. Those who continued to be advertised were women in the most precarious situations
- In an effort to protect their profits, EI speedily adapted, incentivising women to remain in prostitution. This included providing options for women to go 'virtual' by interacting with sex buyers via smartphone, webcam and other online means
- Despite this, over 94% of women advertised on the website had no option but to continue to see buyers in person, such were the severe financial and other coercive pressures they were under during the pandemic
- The pandemic also led the website to hasten the development of a new platform to 'connect' women and buyers, modelled on OnlyFans. This is despite serious concerns about the role of such platforms in the proliferation of image-based sexual abuse in Ireland and globally
- When lockdown arrived many migrant women in prostitution became trapped in brothels around the country. They were extremely isolated, and some were facing destitution, unable to access any form of State supports
- Many women remained in prostitution because of significant pressures to send money to their families in their country of origin so that their loved ones could access healthcare during the pandemic. In other cases, women under the control of pimps and traffickers had no choice but to acquiesce to their demands for money, regardless of the global health crisis
- In addition to the risks of exposure to Covid-19 through prostitution, women's sexual and mental health were negatively affected, with buyers demanding risky practices at this time
- Physical and sexual violence against women in prostitution increased during the pandemic, with a number of different perpetrators responsible, including buyers, pimps and partners
- The pandemic led specialist support services for women in prostitution to innovate by adapting their services and developing new supports and ways of reaching women during lockdown, to provide vital assistance at a time when they were extremely isolated
- Many buyers continued to purchase in-person sexual access to women in prostitution throughout the pandemic and subsequent lockdown, sometimes travelling cross-county or even further to do so. They saw this as something they needed, but also deserved, to relieve the boredom and stress of lockdown. Many demanded risky acts that heightened exposure to both coronavirus and STIs
- Motivated by a strong sense of sexual entitlement, sex buyers prioritised their sexual desires over the health of the women to whom they purchased sexual access, their own health, the health of their close contacts and public health in general.

It is clear that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought into very sharp relief the harmful and abusive nature of the Irish sex trade and the detrimental impacts it has on those who are exploited within it. There is much evidence to suggest that the existing issues that women must face in the trade were exacerbated by the pandemic. Whilst those who profit from prostitution demonstrated their agility in the face of a global health crisis, making a series of adaptations to ensure that it was 'business as usual' as far as that was possible, for very many women in the trade their experience was of 'exploitation as usual', and in many cases exploitation heightened to almost unbearable levels.

Introduction and context

All across the globe, the Covid-19 pandemic has hit the most marginalised members of our societies the hardest. Inequalities of many kinds – gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, income, access to housing to name but a few – have been thrown into sharp relief by coronavirus. Being able to fully comply with public health advice and protect oneself from this virus requires a number of basics, such as a safe place to stay, some regular source of income to purchase food and other essentials, and access to decent healthcare. But many do not have access to these basics and, as a result, their ability to protect themselves is severely diminished. This is certainly the case for vulnerable women¹ in the commercial sex trade in Ireland.

Recent research has demonstrated that Ireland continues to have an indoor sex trade populated by largely vulnerable, often young, migrant women, including women pimped and trafficked for sexual exploitation, alongside a continued presence of smaller numbers of drug dependent and also very vulnerable Irish women on the streets.² Several hundred women access the two largest support services for women in prostitution in Ireland each year,³ representing over 40 nationalities, primarily from Africa, Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe. Over one third of women accessing Ruhama's services each year has been trafficked for sexual exploitation.

More than 650 women are typically advertised for prostitution online every day, in addition to the likely presence of more hidden subgroups and private markets of coerced and trafficked women within the Irish sex trade.⁴ The vast majority of those involved in prostitution are women – this is clearly borne out in the advertising of prostitution – with less than one percent of profiles advertised online as 'male'.⁵

A wide range of vulnerabilities and risk factors precipitate entry into prostitution, including poverty, lone parenthood, struggles with gender identity, experiences of child sexual abuse and mental health issues, with some women first entering as minors. These vulnerabilities create the context in which people are actively targeted, recruited, coerced and trafficked into the Irish sex trade. Whilst coercion and deception are prevalent, some women make the difficult decision to enter prostitution, but this is typically a choice made in highly constrained circumstances.

Once involved, women continue to face a series of significant adversities. Multiple pressures in their lives to pay rent, support family in their country of origin, manage debt and poverty and regularise their status, often serve to entrap and entrench them further within prostitution.⁶

1 Throughout this report the terms 'women in the sex trade' or 'women in/involved in prostitution' are used. The term 'prostitute' is avoided; whilst it is the term used in law, it has very negative connotations for women. Nor is the term 'sex worker' widely used, as only a minority of women in the sex trade self-identify as such. Furthermore, the terms 'sex work'/'sex worker', in attempting to frame prostitution as a form of regular work, are regarded by survivors of the sex trade as serving to obscure and obviate the profound harms and sexual exploitation they have endured. The focus of this study is women and girls, who represent the vast majority of those in prostitution, both in Ireland and globally. Throughout the report this includes transgender people in prostitution who self-identify as women.

2 O'Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020. *Shifting the Burden of Criminality: An Analysis of the Irish Sex Trade in the Context of Prostitution Law Reform*. Dublin: SERP.

3 The NGO Ruhama and the Irish Health Service Executive's (HSE) Women's Health Service and Anti Human Trafficking Team.

4 Whilst few women from Africa and Asia are advertised online for the purposes of prostitution in Ireland in comparison to those from other regions of origin, these women are presenting to frontline services having experienced sexual exploitation. This suggests the existence of hidden subgroups and private markets within the Irish sex trade that are not advertised in this typical way.

5 O'Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020; *op cit*.

6 *ibid*.

Many of the migrant women in prostitution in Ireland are effectively homeless or of 'no fixed abode' – with no safe place to stay, living in very precarious circumstances and often having nowhere else to sleep but in the same place they see buyers. Many are quite new to Ireland, have insecure immigration status and limited English. They are also highly mobile – moving or being moved constantly around Ireland and, in some cases, across Western Europe for prostitution, leaving them isolated and without support networks.

Women are also facing threats, stalking, robbery, harassment and physical and sexual violence in the context of prostitution and at the hands of multiple perpetrators. The violence is often severe, and in some cases life-threatening.⁷ Unsurprisingly, women experience significant harms to their physical, sexual, reproductive and mental health as a result of prostitution and some use alcohol or drugs to numb or cope.⁸ For the last nine months these women have been living, and trying to survive, through a global pandemic.

In the early weeks of the Covid-19 crisis and associated public health restrictions, SERP observed that women continued to be advertised online for the purposes of prostitution. Sex trade organisers and profiteers were attempting to operate as far as possible with a 'business as usual' approach, despite the very stringent restrictions in place and the serious risks posed to health in doing so. Buyers continued to purchase sexual access to women in prostitution across Ireland, despite the pandemic, and despite the fact that it is illegal to do so in Ireland.⁹ At the same time, the key frontline services working with women in prostitution began reporting very severe risks and hardships being faced by those they support, many of which were not new, but were being significantly exacerbated by the pandemic.

It became quickly evident that it was vital to effectively capture these emerging developments, which were clearly a cause for grave concern. A concise snapshot study was deemed to be the most appropriate method for the task. With the support of the Community Foundation for Ireland, the aim of this study is to formally and rigorously document the impact that Covid-19 was and is having on Ireland's sex trade at this unprecedented time in our history. It was designed to enhance understanding of how the sex trade responded to the pandemic, and examine the implications both of the crisis itself, and the way the trade adapted to it, for sex buyers, women in prostitution and the services that support them. The study also contributes to the wider evidence base on the continuing operation of the commercial sex trade in Ireland and highlights some of the measures required to tackle, overcome and prevent sexual exploitation in this context in the future.

As part of its commitment to bridging the gap between academia and frontline practice in generating new knowledge on issues of sexual exploitation, SERP also hosted a public webinar on the subject of Covid-19 in May 2020, with a focus on the experiences of those providing direct support to women during the pandemic.¹⁰ The content of this webinar helped to shape and inform this research.

7 SERP's recent research (*ibid.*) demonstrates that violence against women is endemic to the sex trade; and documents a number of significant recent cases where Gardai (the Irish police) have taken such crimes very seriously and have prosecuted cases to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.

8 Breslin, R., Latham, L., and O'Connor, M., (forthcoming, 2021). *Confronting the Harm: Documenting the Prostitution Experiences and Impacts on Health and Wellbeing of Women Accessing the Women's Health Service*. Dublin: SERP.

9 The *Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act, 2017* criminalised those who purchase sex in Ireland whilst decriminalising the seller of sex.

10 SERP webinar, May 2020: *Sexual Exploitation in the Shadow of Covid-19: Experiences From the Frontline*: <https://www.facebook.com/SERP/IRL/videos/vb.101986618192960/285378042510417/?type=2&theater>

Methods

The speed at which Covid-19 radically altered so many formal and informal structures of society meant that to study any aspect of this phenomenon required researchers to mobilise quickly and prepare to be flexible. A snapshot study was indicated in this context as the best approach to capturing concrete data in a constantly changing environment.

Clearly the pandemic, and the restrictions that accompany it, represent a current and continually evolving situation, whose full impact on individuals and society may not be completely apparent until many months or even years have passed. This study does not claim to have documented all impacts of this global crisis on Ireland's sex trade, but rather to take a timely and well-evidenced snapshot of what was happening as the crisis developed. This was understood to be particularly important given the extent to which an already very marginalised group in Irish society – women in the Irish sex trade – were facing very significant and heightened risks as a result of the pandemic.

This concise and time-limited study was undertaken over 14 weeks from April 2020 to July 2020 and incorporated a number of data capture mechanisms:

- Regular, consistent monitoring of Escort Ireland (EI),¹¹ the largest sex trade advertising website in Ireland, to gather data on the numbers being advertised and how this changed during the pandemic, including locations, ages and nationalities of those advertised
- An examination of the public statements issued by the site to explain their business and operational responses to the pandemic
- An assessment of the numbers of women being advertised on EI during this period who were seeing buyers in-person versus those who were seeing them 'virtually' (for example by smartphone, webcam or other online means)
- A review of the public health advice on sexual contact during the pandemic alongside the advice provided by 'sex work' advocates to those engaged in prostitution at this time
- An examination of sex buyer reviews on EI (reviews posted by buyers of the women to whom they have purchased sexual access) to capture data on buyer motivations, attitudes and behaviours in the context of the pandemic
- Qualitative semi-structured interviews with representatives of the major services in Ireland (NGO and State) who provide direct support to women in prostitution, including victims of trafficking, to gather evidence from the frontline on the needs of their service users and how they responded and adapted during Covid-19 to meet these needs¹²
- A webinar hosted by SERP to highlight and support the documentation of the experiences of those providing direct frontline assistance to women during the pandemic.¹³

11 <https://www.escort-ireland.com/>

12 Note that SERP is committed to bridging the gap between academia and frontline practice in this field and already has strong working relationships and an established track record of undertaking research in collaboration with frontline support agencies.

13 SERP webinar, May 2020: *Sexual Exploitation in the Shadow of Covid-19: Experiences From the Frontline*: <https://www.facebook.com/SERP/IRL/videos/vb.101986618192960/285378042510417/?type=2&theater>

Website data monitoring

This study attempted to capture a snapshot of Ireland's sex trade during the pandemic by gathering primarily quantitative data on the advertising of prostitution from EI. The main focus was the number of profiles advertised on the site. The site is readily searchable and contains search functions that were used to also capture and quantify a number of different characteristics of the women advertised that are contained within their advertising profiles, such as their age, location and nationality. Data were captured on these variables from EI on a weekly basis, at the same time each week for a period of 14 weeks in total, beginning on 20/04/20 and ending on 27/07/20. A number of caveats need to be borne in mind in this regard:

- Each profile on the site usually relates to a single individual, but there are instances where someone may advertise or be advertised under more than one profile, whilst conversely a single advertising profile may 'front' more than one individual
- While those advertised on EI represent a large proportion of women in the Irish sex trade, they do not reflect the entirety of those in the trade – as previously indicated there are women located in more hidden or private sectors of the trade, and/or those who may use other means of advertising
- Women are sometimes advertised under more than one search category – for example they may be identified on the site as Brazilian and also 'South American'
- Women are often advertised according to what is deemed to be 'attractive' to buyers, so for example they may be advertised as being younger than they actually are or of a different nationality than their own
- Some women may have paid to keep their advertising profiles active on EI during the early stages of the lockdown, even though they had stopped seeing buyers, in order to maintain their presence on the site. However, women are unlikely to have done this for very long as this would have quickly become very expensive.

Notwithstanding these qualifications, the data gleaned from EI during the data monitoring period provides a useful overview of the sex trade in operation as the pandemic unfolded. The findings from the quantitative analysis of these data are set out in Sections 1 and 3.

It was possible, whilst undertaking this study, to also gain some insights into sex buyers' motivations and behaviours through EI's review system. Any buyer who has signed up to the website (using a screenname or pseudonym) can review the women they have purchased sexual access to, rating them out of five stars on measures including 'accuracy of photos', 'location', 'value for money', 'appearance', 'satisfaction' and 'overall experience'. Buyers record whether they would 'recommend' a woman and whether they would return to see her again. Some also record how much they paid and for how long. Additionally, buyers can leave further comments and details about the woman and their 'encounter'.

It should be noted that not all buyers submit reviews, so it was only possible to capture data on the motivations and behaviours of those who do. It would appear however, that many buyers rely heavily on the review system in helping them to select the woman they want. It is also worth noting that reviews tend to be very important to the women who are advertised on the site as a negative review can have a swift and direct impact on the number of buyers who 'book' them, at least in the short term.

As above, data were captured from buyer reviews on EI on a weekly basis at the same time each week for the same period of 14 weeks. Over 1,300 buyer reviews were read and analysed during

the data capture period.¹⁴ A thematic analysis of these reviews was undertaken, with the main themes emerging from the data presented in Section 5. Excerpts from buyer reviews are presented as written on EL.

Additionally, the findings of a brief review of health advice provided online to those involved in prostitution during the pandemic, and the implications of such advice, are presented in Section 4.

Interviews and webinar

For the purposes of this study, it was possible to capture evidence from key frontline services providing specialist supports to women in prostitution and victims of trafficking across Ireland. This includes the two largest such providers in the country – the NGO Ruhama and the HSE's¹⁵ Women's Health Service and Anti Human Trafficking Team, each of which supports hundreds of women impacted by the sex trade each year.¹⁶ Additionally, the Immigrant Council of Ireland, an independent law centre, contributed evidence to this study based on their legal and advocacy work with migrant women who have experienced sexual exploitation.

A senior representative from each of these organisations contributed to a webinar hosted by SERP at the end of May 2020, which explored the impact of the Covid-19 on Ireland's sex trade.¹⁷ Contributors shared initial insights gleaned from their frontline practice with women in prostitution during the pandemic.

Qualitative interviews were subsequently undertaken during the summer of 2020 online and over the telephone with these same support providers, which explored more deeply the impacts the pandemic was having on those who access their services, the specific challenges and risks they were facing in this context, and how each service had adapted to try to meet women's needs. It was not possible to interview women currently in prostitution face-to-face at this time due to the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions in place. Virtual interviews were not an option for this group either due to both ethical and safety concerns – this approach would have involved interviewing potentially vulnerable research subjects about difficult or upsetting personal issues while many were located in very unsafe environments (see Section 2), and without the supports they may subsequently have required readily to hand. In the absence of interviews, every effort was made to ensure that the anonymised experiences of women in the sex trade during the pandemic are still placed at the forefront of this study, drawing on the reports and disclosures women made to their trusted frontline support workers during the crisis. Both the webinar and the interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. The findings are presented throughout this report.

14 For full details of the methods employed here and how reviews were selected for analysis see O'Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020; *op cit*, in particular Appendix C.

15 The Irish Health Service Executive.

16 For a full description of these services and the specialist supports they offer see O'Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020; *op cit*.

17 SERP webinar, May 2020: *Sexual Exploitation in the Shadow of Covid-19: Experiences From the Frontline*: <https://www.facebook.com/SERP/IRL/videos/vb.101986618192960/285378042510417/?type=2&theater>

Findings 1

Impact of the pandemic on the numbers advertised

The vast majority of off-street prostitution in Ireland is advertised online, primarily via the aforementioned Escort Ireland (EI) website, which is Ireland's largest prostitution advertising platform, and continues to dominate the market in this regard.¹⁸ The advertising of prostitution remains illegal in Ireland but the company that operates EI circumvents this legislation by basing its operations in Spain.¹⁹

Prior to the pandemic there were typically over 650 'profiles' advertised on the website every day, and sometimes many more. As lockdown²⁰ approached, support services observed that many of the women in the Irish sex trade who are EU citizens returned to their home country. Others who were 'touring'²¹ in Western Europe when lockdown occurred became stuck in whatever country there were in when the lockdown measures were imposed. However, for many women in Ireland from outside the EU, returning to their country of origin was simply not an option because they could not afford to finance the trip and/or because they do not have legal status in Ireland and feared being unable to return if they left.

Some of the women who remained in Ireland stopped seeing buyers initially at the onset of lockdown for fear of contracting coronavirus, but most found that this was not a sustainable situation. Previous and forthcoming research has identified the levels of poverty and extensive financial obligations and pressures facing women in prostitution in Ireland.²² These can include the exorbitant, over-inflated rents charged by landlords who know that their properties are being used for the purposes of prostitution, the costs of prostitution advertising, 'agent' or 'booker' fees, bills and existing debts. Additionally, for many women, remittances to their home countries are critical to supporting family members who heavily rely on this money to live day-to-day, and some women 'owe' or must hand over money to a pimp or trafficker. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the women who 'paused' as lockdown commenced reported that they felt that they had no other option but to return to prostitution, despite being well aware that they risked exposure to coronavirus as a result.

Evidence gleaned from EI reflects these findings. In the early stages of lockdown, the number of profiles advertised on the site slipped below 300, less than half the norm. However, during the data monitoring period numbers began to steadily increase again week-on-week during lockdown, as Graph 1 illustrates. This is likely to be the result of a combination of factors including the persistence of demand from sex buyers, the actions taken by the website to secure their

18 O'Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020; *op cit*.

19 Escort Ireland is operated by Lazarus Trading SL, based in Las Palmas, Spain.

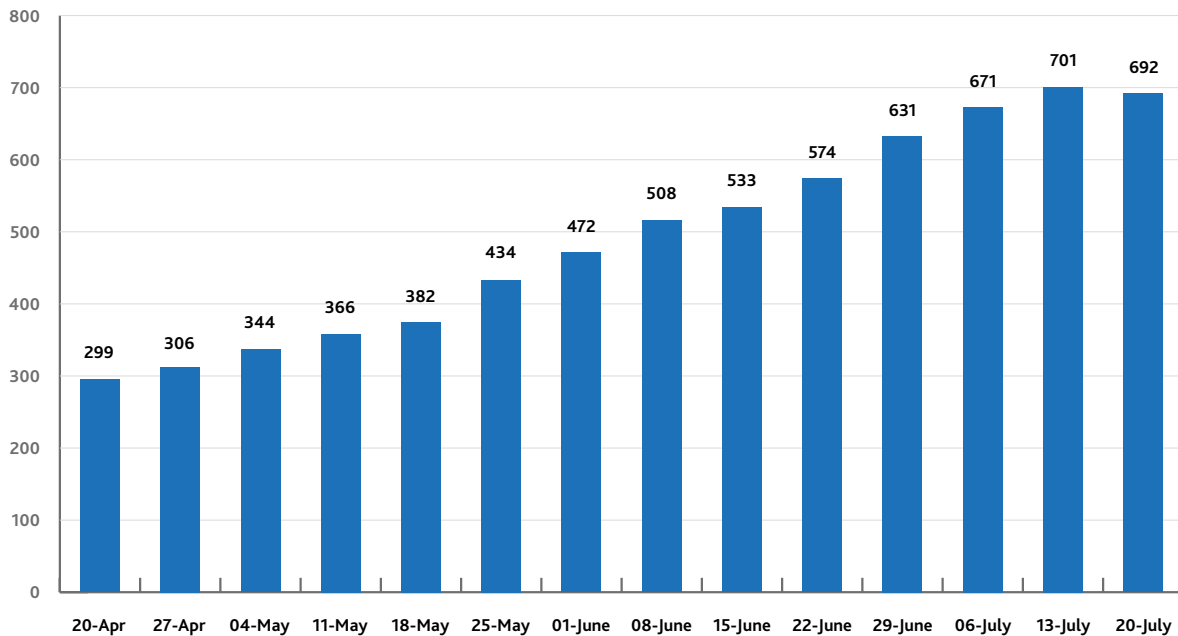
20 This is the term widely used in media and public discourse to refer to the imposition by the State of stringent restrictions on travel, commerce, social interaction, and access to public spaces in an effort to control the spread of coronavirus. The 'lockdown' in Ireland essentially began on 12/03/20 and has continued to varying degrees, with phases of lifting and then (re)introducing of various restrictions, right through 2020.

21 'Touring' and being 'on tour' are sex trade terms for women who move (or are moved) from location to location, either within a country or across borders, for the purposes of prostitution.

22 O'Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020; *op cit*; Breslin, R., Latham, L., and O'Connor, M., (forthcoming, 2021); *op cit*.

advertising revenue (see Section 3), women being advertised by pimps and traffickers, and the fact that many women had no option but to return to prostitution due to the significant financial and other pressures they were facing during this period, and beyond.

Graph 1: Total number of profiles advertised on the website during the data monitoring period



The end of June 2020 marked the easing of most lockdown restrictions and much of the Irish economy and society began to reopen. By early July the number of profiles on EI had already returned to pre-Covid-19 levels. This has remained the case despite a second wave of the virus and the subsequent imposition of many of the original lockdown restrictions once again.

It was clear that EI and the sex trade more broadly attempted to operate a 'business as usual' approach as much as possible throughout the pandemic. During the data monitoring period the advertising and purchase of sexual access to women in prostitution continued all across Ireland²³ – in its cities, but also in its towns large and small, as Table 1 demonstrates.

23 Again, it is worth noting that the *Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act, 2017* criminalised those who purchase sex in Ireland whilst decriminalising the seller of sex.

Table 1: Number of profiles advertised by location

| Date/Location | Number of profiles advertised* | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|------|-----|------|------|------|-----|-----|------|------|------|-----|------|------|
| | 20/4 | 27/4 | 4/5 | 11/5 | 18/5 | 25/5 | 1/6 | 8/6 | 15/6 | 22/6 | 29/6 | 6/7 | 13/7 | 20/7 |
| Dublin | 122 | 123 | 139 | 154 | 156 | 178 | 186 | 216 | 210 | 240 | 268 | 307 | 292 | 305 |
| Cork | 25 | 23 | 30 | 33 | 30 | 41 | 49 | 48 | 59 | 63 | 57 | 63 | 74 | 65 |
| Belfast | 14 | 13 | 15 | 11 | 15 | 19 | 27 | 31 | 35 | 30 | 40 | 31 | 38 | 25 |
| Limerick | 14 | 12 | 14 | 19 | 22 | 26 | 37 | 27 | 27 | 26 | 39 | 45 | 36 | 43 |
| Galway | 13 | 21 | 16 | 12 | 17 | 19 | 21 | 24 | 18 | 18 | 23 | 27 | 28 | 34 |
| Rest of Ireland** | 85 | 87 | 98 | 107 | 114 | 120 | 123 | 133 | 164 | 176 | 179 | 179 | 233 | 220 |

* This does not include those who were exclusively 'virtual' – i.e. the small number of women who were not advertised in a specific geographic location because they were seeing buyers virtually *only* (e.g. by phone, webcam or other online methods).

** This includes Northern Ireland as the website also advertises prostitution in this jurisdiction.

The youngest women advertised during this same period were eighteen years of age and the oldest 64. On average, just under one third (32.5%) of those advertised during this period were aged 25 and under.²⁴ The most common nationalities featured on the site were also recorded (those represented by four or more persons) and grouped by geographic region. At each point during data capture the largest majority of those advertised on the site were from Latin America and the Caribbean as Tables 2 and 3 below show.

Table 2: Origin of the women in the profiles advertised (20/04-01/06)

| Date/Region | % of profiles advertised | | | | | | | Average* |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----------|
| | 20/04 | 27/04 | 04/05 | 11/05 | 18/05 | 25/05 | 01/06 | |
| Ireland & the UK | 5% | 4% | 5% | 5% | 6% | 6% | 6% | 5% |
| Latin America & the Caribbean | 56% | 54% | 52% | 47% | 46% | 43% | 44% | 49% |
| Central & Eastern Europe | 20% | 20% | 23% | 24% | 22% | 22% | 21% | 22% |
| Western Europe | 20% | 21% | 19% | 20% | 20% | 21% | 22% | 20% |

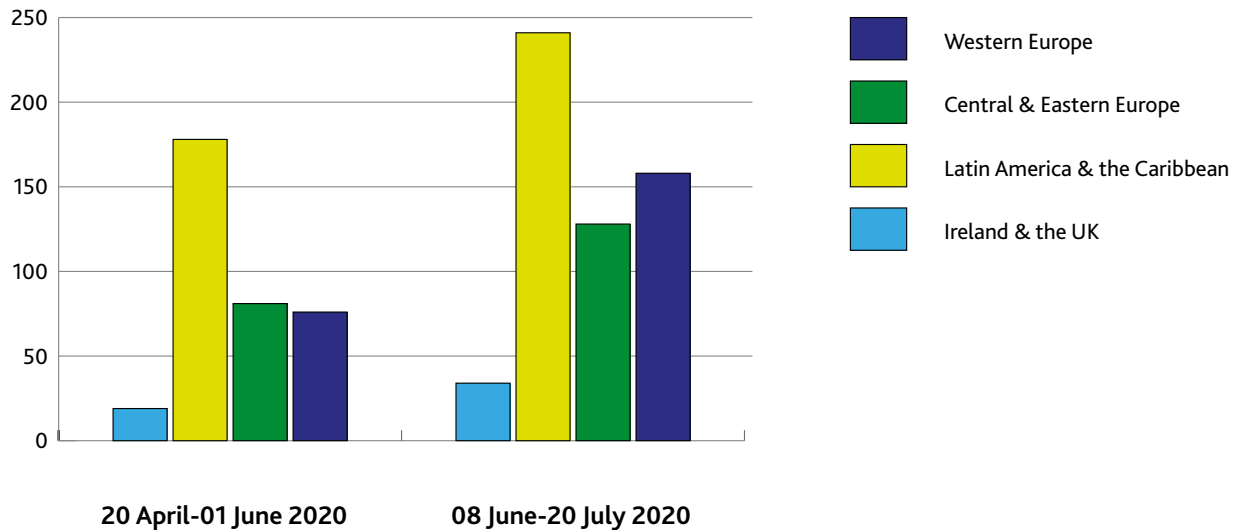
* All numbers are subject to rounding and the averages total less than 100% as many nationalities represented in very small numbers (three profiles or less) were not recorded.

Table 3: Origin of the women in the profiles advertised (08/06-20/07)

| Date/Region | % of profiles advertised | | | | | | | Average* |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----------|
| | 08/06 | 15/06 | 22/06 | 29/06 | 06/07 | 13/07 | 20/07 | |
| Ireland & the UK | 7% | 5% | 5% | 5% | 5% | 5% | 7% | 5.5% |
| Latin America & the Caribbean | 39% | 37% | 37% | 39% | 39% | 37% | 44% | 39% |
| Central & Eastern Europe | 22% | 22% | 20% | 21% | 20% | 20% | 22% | 21% |
| Western Europe | 21% | 23% | 25% | 23% | 24% | 27% | 34% | 25% |

* All numbers are subject to rounding and the averages total less than 100% as many nationalities represented in very small numbers (three profiles or less) were not recorded.

Chart 1: Origin of the women in the profiles advertised



While women from Latin America and the Caribbean are typically a large proportion of those advertised on EI, this was even more so the case during the early stages of the pandemic, representing on average almost half (49%) of the most common nationalities during the first half of the data monitoring period (Table 2). This may be explained by the fact that women in prostitution in Ireland who are from Latin America are more likely than their European counterparts to have insecure immigration status in Ireland, and indeed in some cases, to be undocumented.²⁵ These women did not have the option to travel home (as many EU women reportedly did) or to somewhere else they might be safe, and were less likely to be eligible for any kind of State supports. This essentially left them with no choice but to continue in prostitution in order to provide for their basic needs and continue to support their families.

During the second half of the data monitoring period the proportion of women advertised who are from Latin American and the Caribbean decreased by ten percent (Table 3), accompanied by a smaller increase in the number of women advertised from Western Europe, alongside other nationalities (in small numbers so they are not included in this analysis). This may reflect the easing of travel restrictions that occurred during this period, with more people arriving into Ireland by air at this time, particularly on short-haul flights.

25 Undocumented in this context means without formal permission to be in the State.

Findings 2

Women's experiences during the pandemic

Interviewees and webinar contributors were at pains to express that many of the issues facing women in prostitution during the pandemic – such as severe financial pressures, high degrees of isolation, exposure to harm and violence – were *existing issues* that women in the sex trade were already facing, but which were now being further exacerbated by Covid-19, as Ruhama have recently documented.²⁶ Frontline service providers noted that women in prostitution who were vulnerable to begin with, were clearly subjected to further risks and adversities during the crisis. A number of key themes emerged from the qualitative data in this regard and these are outlined below.

2.1 Precarity

“Being geographically trapped due to Covid-19 puts additional pressures on already pressurised migrant women... [It] increased the risks, hardships and pressures experienced by migrant women, it made the list of [their] vulnerabilities much longer.” Immigrant Council of Ireland

As discussed above, in the initial weeks of lockdown a significant proportion of those who remained in the sex trade were women with insecure immigration status. Whilst many women from EU countries managed to make it home before lockdown was initiated in Ireland, those without similar freedom of movement had no choice but to remain in the State. This included women from Latin America on short-term visas, or whose visas had expired and they were therefore undocumented in Ireland. Additionally, women from Africa and Asia faced similar precarities, particularly those who were undocumented or asylum seekers, some of whom had been accommodated by the State in Direct Provision,²⁷ where the risk of contracting Covid-19 was disproportionately high.²⁸

What also became quickly apparent was the number of women who were essentially trapped in whatever brothel they last found themselves in, when lockdown arrived. As noted above, large numbers of migrant women in the Irish sex trade ‘tour’,²⁹ renting apartments in which to see buyers for very short periods of weeks or sometimes just days, often at greatly over-inflated rates.³⁰ In ‘normal times’ they have ‘no fixed abode’ in Ireland – they are constantly on the move, living out of a suitcase and sleeping in the same places they also see buyers. But once lockdown was

26 Ruhama, 2020. *Taking the Pulse on COVID 19 – The Experiences and Needs of Women in Prostitution During COVID 19: Forgotten Voices of the Pandemic*. Dublin: Ruhama.

27 RIA is the Irish State's Reception and Integration Agency, which provides accommodation for applicants for international protection and suspected victims of human trafficking (commonly known as 'Direct Provision').

28 Irish Refugee Council, 2020. *“Powerless”: Experiences of Direct Provision During the Covid-19 Pandemic*. Dublin: Irish Refugee Council.

29 'Touring' and being 'on tour' are sex trade terms for women who move, or are moved, from location to location, either within a country or across borders, for the purposes of prostitution.

30 O'Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020; *op cit*.

put in place many women found that they could not move from their current location and had nowhere else to go.

“We have a lot of women who are undocumented, who would have been here on a student visa years ago or would have applied for asylum and not got it. They stayed [in Ireland in prostitution]... And a lot of them would have moved about as well. But now what has happened is they’re kind of stuck in one place, they can’t move about... Most of the women don’t have their own cars and there’s very little public transport right now... women are doing different things by hook or by crook to try and keep a roof over their head.” Ruhama

With an initial drop in the number of buyers seeking to purchase sexual access to women in prostitution, many women had no way to make money for rent and other basics and were facing the serious risk of being made homeless. Unscrupulous landlords, already charging exorbitant rents for premises they know are being used for prostitution, threatened women with eviction when they could not pay. Some women reported to support services that their landlords were ‘advising’ them on how they could make more money from buyers in order to pay their rent, for example by providing sex acts or riskier practices that they would not normally be willing to provide. In other cases, women were compelled to provide sex acts to their landlords in exchange for remaining in their apartment.

Over the last decade, An Garda Síochána³¹ have taken more of a protective rather than a punitive role in their approach to women in prostitution, and in 2017 persons who sell sex in Ireland were decriminalised. The *Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act, 2017* has since had a significant impact on the policing of the sex trade with a major shift in the focus of Garda enforcement from those selling sex towards the targeting of buyers and organisers.³² In recognition of women’s extreme vulnerabilities and isolation during the pandemic, the Garda National Protective Services Bureau (GNPSB) attempted on several occasions to contact all those in prostitution they could reach via the phone numbers in their advertising profiles.³³ Support and contact details were offered in a number of different languages. The majority responded regarding accommodation and money concerns, and were referred to support services accordingly, but a small number also sought direct help from the Gardaí.

It was found that women with no option but to remain in premises known for prostitution were at heightened risk of drawing the attention of local pimps and organisers during the pandemic. In some cases women were threatened for staying too long on what was perceived to be an organiser’s ‘patch’, and this made them very vulnerable to coming under the control of these third parties who offer ‘protection’ in exchange for a cut of the money women make in prostitution. An Garda Síochána intervened in a number of such cases to provide support to women and ensure their safety during this time.

Women living in other precarious circumstances during lockdown, such as those who were couch-surfing, living in homeless accommodation or Direct Provision found that their risk of contracting Covid-19 was greatly heightened by their living situation, with poor facilities and

31 The Irish police service.

32 For a fuller analysis of the evolution of An Garda Síochána’s supportive, non-punitive approach to women in the Irish sex trade and the impacts this has had see O’ Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020; *op cit*.

33 <https://extra.ie/2020/05/15/news/irish-news/gardai-sex-workers-covid-19> (Last retrieved 10/12/20)

cramped conditions where the maintenance of social distancing was almost impossible. A number of the women supported by Ruhama who were living in Direct Provision tested positive for Covid-19.

2.2 Financial pressures

“These women have no money. They have no income. They’ve absolutely no income... yesterday – two women we gave a hundred euro to just for food.” Ruhama

“In order to reach financial help, women have to disclose their identity and situation to authorities... sometimes feared by them.”

Immigrant Council of Ireland

It is unsurprising that some women trapped in the Irish sex trade during the pandemic found themselves destitute. Many migrant women in prostitution in Ireland do not have a PPS number,³⁴ or any official evidence of recent earnings and find themselves with no recourse to public funds. Some are wary or fearful of State authorities in general and are therefore very unlikely to approach State welfare services for support. Specialist support services such as the WHS did have some success in securing emergency welfare payments during the pandemic for a number of women with a PPS number. But even women who have a PPS number, including some Irish women, reported that they were extremely reluctant to disclose to, or be identified by State services, as being involved in prostitution.

In a similar vein, women were very wary of accessing some of the non-State emergency funds available at this time, and in particular the ‘hardship fund’ established by EI.³⁵ This provided one-off payments of €100 to women who could show proof that they were recent advertisers on EI. Some women in dire financial straits who accessed this fund expressed serious concerns about the extent of personal data EI now held about them as a result, including in many cases their real names³⁶ and bank account details.

In addition to the financial pressures reported by women to cover their basics in terms of rent, food and other essentials, many are also providing significant financial assistance to their families in their country of origin through the money they make in prostitution.³⁷ During the pandemic women reported to services significant concerns and anxieties about the wellbeing of their families back home, particularly those in countries where the State and public health responses to the virus were negligible, or haphazard at best. Some women felt that they had no option but to continue to send money home to families in countries where access to healthcare, even during a pandemic, is based on one’s ability to pay. In other cases, women under the control of pimps or traffickers had no choice but to acquiesce to their demands for money regardless of the global crisis.

These are the kinds of pressures that led women to either stay in prostitution throughout the pandemic or resume once again after a short pause once money ran out.

34 A Personal Public Service (PPS) Number is a unique reference number issued by the State and used to access social welfare benefits and public services in Ireland.

35 <https://www.escort-ireland.com/press/covid19.html> (Last retrieved 06/12/20); <https://uglymugs.ie/covid-19/our-emergency-fund/> (Last retrieved 07/12/20)

36 In most cases women’s real names are not used when they advertise or are advertised on EI.

37 Breslin, R., Latham, L., and O’Connor, M., (forthcoming, 2021); *op cit*.

“Women in prostitution have literally been thrown off the cliff edge because they don’t have any finance and they’re not entitled to social protection... it’s not a reality for everyone to stop [seeing buyers] because they are in dire financial straits and under the control of pimps and traffickers who still want to make money from them.” Ruhama

2.3 Harms to health

“Migrant women in the sex trade are used to a high-risk environment and they are aware of the gamble with safety and health in the prostitution system. Yet the Covid-19 situation makes the health risks very real and unmanageable.” Immigrant Council of Ireland

There is no question that the risk of being infected with coronavirus is heightened through the close physical and sexual contact involved when buyers purchase sexual access to women’s bodies. Many women reported their fears of becoming infected in this way.

“We’ve one woman now and she was doing massage and doing happy ending massage [a massage that ends with a sex act performed on the buyer] and she stopped, but she had no money, so she has started again. So, she is very worried. She’s very concerned... We’ve given her, masks, gloves, all the rest of it.” Ruhama

Indeed, it was clear that the pandemic was impacting women’s health in a myriad of ways. The WHS reported that drug use increased during this time, particularly amongst women involved in street prostitution. Services also noted the heightened visibility of drug-using homeless young women on the streets during lockdown and highlighted their vulnerability to sexual exploitation in this context.

In addition to the risks of contracting Covid-19 in prostitution, risks to women’s sexual health abounded.

“Despite all the health warnings men still want to engage in risky sex, such as sex without a condom, including anal sex, so that’s caused huge stress and concern for our service users.” Ruhama

The HSE Women’s Health Service (WHS) – the main sexual health service for women in prostitution in Ireland – had to close its sexual health clinics as a result of the pandemic, although staff remained available to support and advise women by phone. Other public and private sexual health services around the country were also closed. With greater demands for risky practices by buyers, and without direct access to testing and contraception, sexual health was a serious issue for many women in prostitution.

“We’ve had daily contact with women right throughout and offer a triage system by phone and treatment options... we plan out with women and our consultant gynae... infectious diseases doctor. We’ve had many issues of crisis pregnancy, issues relating to termination of pregnancy services, contraception, Mirena coil issues, sexual health symptoms and treatment of all those infections, secondly the psychological impacts... women are feeling very isolated and want to talk.” HSE Women’s Health Service

The impact of extreme isolation on women in prostitution during lockdown was highlighted by all services, as was the impact that women’s very difficult circumstances were having on their mental health. Separated more than ever from their family and friends, women reported loneliness, stress and depression and expressed a real need to talk about what they were facing and to access counselling to support them to cope.

“People’s mental health is in a very fragile place right now.” Ruhama

2.4 Ill treatment and violence

“And the thing is for women in Covid with no income – there’s boundaries you cross... You cross your own boundaries. Because you have to. And that takes away any control you had. So, any sense that you had that you might be independent or anything else, that is eroded in that transaction... once they eroded that boundary it’s gone now.” Ruhama

Support providers described how women under pressure to make money during the pandemic acquiesced to buyers’ demands for risky sex acts that command a higher price, but that they would not normally be willing to provide. Conversely, there were reports of buyers, aware that the number of men purchasing sexual access to women was reduced in the early weeks of lockdown and that women were badly in need of money, who negotiated ‘discounts’ on this basis. Women in this situation felt bargained down but unable to turn buyers away.

The erosion of women’s own boundaries and the means they have to try and keep themselves safe is of serious concern. Whilst having to engage in multiple unwanted sexual acts is the very nature of prostitution, women do try to maintain certain boundaries regarding what they are and are not willing to do with buyers, in an attempt to protect themselves.³⁸ An erosion of these boundaries evidently occurred for some women during the pandemic, and this is likely to have long-term implications for their wellbeing.

“I presume there will be pieces to be picked up in a year’s time, two years’ time, whatever, when people get through this, the collective trauma of this, and then the individual trauma of having shifted your boundaries during this time.” Ruhama

Each service noted heightened risks and dangers facing women in prostitution during the pan-

38 O’Connor, M., 2017. ‘Choice, Agency, Consent and Coercion: Complex Issues in the Lives of Prostituted and Trafficked Women’. *Women’s International Studies Forum*, 62, (pp. 8-16).

demographic and witnessed an increase in physical and sexual violence against women during this time, with a number of different perpetrators responsible.

“We see increased risk and actual reports of violence by partner, by pimps and by buyers. Pressure is now on for money and it pushes women into making poor decisions, so safety is a real issue and always a risk in prostitution and women are constantly assessing this risk and they have their own measures in how they do that... So, they are very well used to weighing up those odds and risk assessing constantly but now I really feel they're under a lot of duress as the need for finance grows, they have severely limited capacity to bring in money. So, they are taking decisions that they would not normally take, so those safety mechanisms are not there for them at the moment.” HSE Women's Health Service

“Violence has always been inherent in prostitution, but now with women having to change and reduce some of the activities they're willing to provide they've been threatened and endured violence. So, some women have stopped [seeing buyers] because of the level of violence they are experiencing but it's not a reality for everyone to stop...” Ruhama

This increase in violence experienced by women in prostitution during the pandemic is also in evidence in studies carried out in other countries.³⁹

2.5 Support service responses

In addition to the significant adversities women faced in the context of the pandemic outlined above, other issues presented challenges to some groups of women in particular.⁴⁰ There was also the sense that the crisis was a kind of double-edged sword. Some women who stopped prostitution, even for a short period, were given the chance to experience life outside of it and some contacted services to say that they were ready to explore pathways to exiting for good. Conversely, services expressed serious concerns about women who had exited recently into jobs in the service and hospitality industry – some of first jobs to be permanently lost in the pandemic. The stability of their exit was placed in jeopardy by the pandemic, as has been observed in other studies.⁴¹ Without other viable alternatives, the fear was that these women may return to prostitution. In a similar vein, some noted the threat that the economic downturn caused by Covid-19 will drive women and girls already in poverty or precarious life situations into the sex trade in future.

It is clear that the crisis required support providers to be light on their feet, to listen to their

39 See for example: Boyer, D.K., 2020. 'Prostitution During the Pandemic: Findings Show Need for the Nordic Model'. *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*. 5: 1; Farley, M., 2020. 'Prostitution, the Sex Trade, and the COVID-19 Pandemic'. *Logos – A Journal of Modern Society & Culture*, 19: 1; Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), 2020 'At the Edge of the Margins' Virtual Roundtable Series: <https://catwinternational.org/resource/at-the-edge-of-the-margins-virtual-roundtable-series-emerging-issues/> (Last retrieved 09/12/20)

40 These include women struggling to cope with parenting and home-schooling their children during lockdown in highly unsuitable accommodation such as Direct Provision and women being stuck in limbo in terms of their status in Ireland as the work of INIS (the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service) effectively ground to a halt during the initial stages of lockdown.

41 Boyer, D.K., 2020; *op cit*.

service users and adapt their responses accordingly. The three services who participated in this study demonstrated a great deal of flexibility and innovation in the ways they were able to move many of their services and forms of support online or provide them remotely without any shutdown period. In the case of Ruhama, the pandemic led them to put new supports in place, including delivering emergency packs of essentials to women trapped in lockdown around the country and giving women access to technology so they could communicate with their families and support workers. Establishing new online supports including a befriending service, a parenting support group, a self-care group and an evening social group to address women's levels of social isolation are examples of other innovative approaches. It was noted that by using mainly online means, instead of relying on face-to-face contacts, the service was able to reach a larger cohort of women based all over the country than usual, and they reported being busier than ever because women were making contact more often online.

While not all of these necessary adaptations may be ideal or sustainable for women permanently, support providers noted that the ability to adapt quickly is one positive learning and legacy arising from Covid-19, as are the 'exiting windows' that are leading some women to seek longer-term support in planning for their futures.

“Women are [being] exposed to very real risks with regards to their lives. All the other pressures and needs and risks to migrant women’s wellbeing have to be addressed with concrete measures and with great urgency now. However, the Covid-19 situation is also an opportunity and a reminder that we have to be thinking of a system of assistance that has at its centre a prostituted migrant woman, due to the prevalent profile and due to the curtailed rights and the multiple invisible barriers faced by such women.”

Immigrant Council of Ireland

Findings 3

A 'virtual' sex trade?

Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown clearly presented a challenge for the continuation of the sex trade in Ireland, as noted above, EI attempted to maintain a 'business as usual' approach as far as was possible. At the same time, EI also made some swift adaptations to its offerings aimed at protecting its commercial interests.

Despite advertising the provision of specific sex acts in detail, the website claims that those who are advertised charge for their 'time and companionship only'.⁴² During the pandemic, the site released a number of official statements on the subject of Covid-19.⁴³ In each, the site operators professed their concern for the wellbeing of their 'customers' (i.e. those who advertise/are advertised on their site), stating that their health and safety is the site operators' 'top priority'. But in doing so they simultaneously absolved themselves of all responsibility for these 'customers' in the context of the global pandemic:

‘We must be clear that we are not an employer of escorts, all of the escorts who advertise on our website are independent escorts making their own free choice to advertise and work as escorts. *We cannot manage or control these individuals by telling them what they can or cannot do* [emphasis added]. We cannot tell escorts they can or cannot work.’⁴⁴

In fact, despite these claims of 'independence', evidence of pimping, the organisation of prostitution, and the profiteering of criminal gangs in the Irish sex trade abounds, and brings into question how many women can truly be 'independent' in this context, even when so many are advertised as such.⁴⁵ But simply put, if no one is advertising on their site, EI has no revenue. Therefore, in an effort to protect its business and keep 'advertisers' engaged and continuing to advertise to buyers, the site offered refunds for current or scheduled adverts after lockdown restrictions were imposed. However, refunds were only provided in the form of credits that could be used on the site for advertising in future. Discounts for those who continued to advertise were also provided, as was a 'hardship fund' (see Section 2 above).

In terms of specific adaptations, the site also developed a new 'non-contact' advertising section as follows:

‘Our development teams have been working around the clock for over two weeks without rest in order to rush new features and new products out onto the website. We are getting these products out to give escorts the option to work remotely via phonesex or webcam. We have introduced a

42 Again, it is worth noting that while the advertising of prostitution remains illegal in Ireland, EI circumvents this legislation by basing its operations in Spain.

43 These can be found on the site here: <https://www.escort-ireland.com/press.html> (Last retrieved 06/12/20)

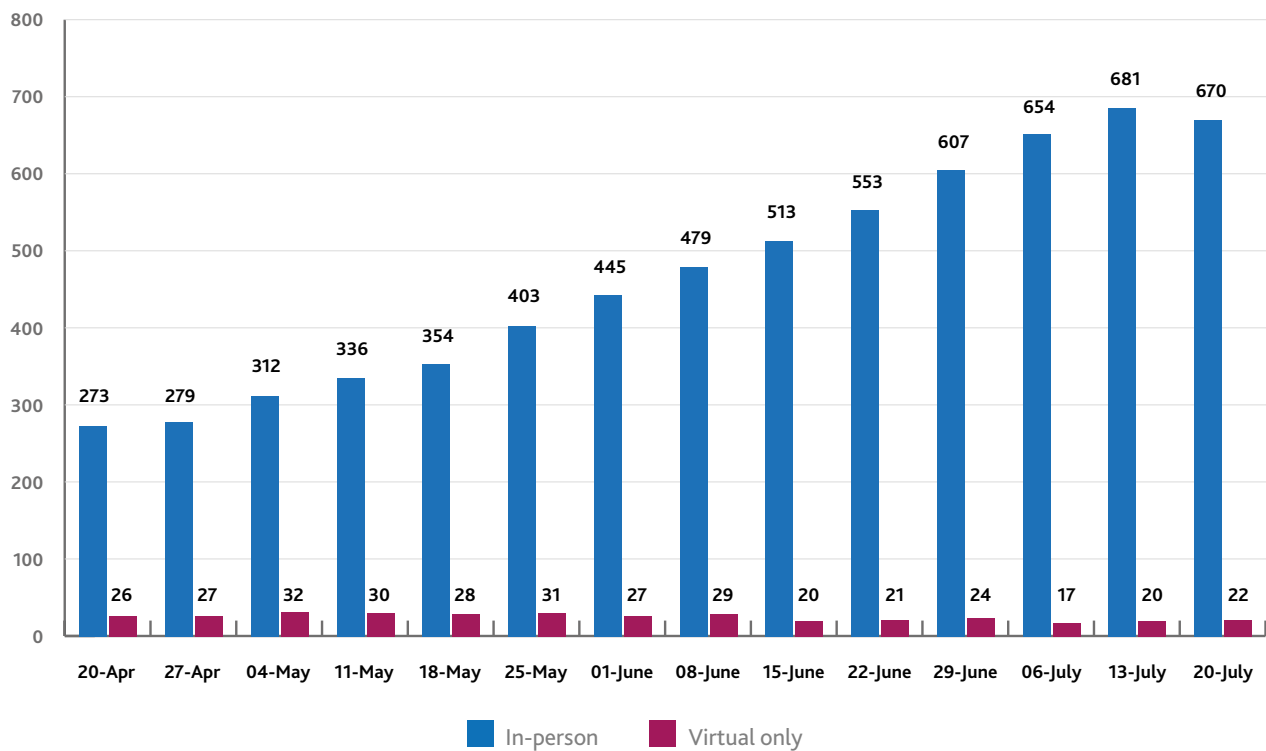
44 Statement from Escort-Ireland.com, 25/03/2020. *Acting Responsibly during COVID-19*. <https://www.escort-ireland.com/press/covid19-statement.html> (Last retrieved 06/12/20)

45 O'Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020; *op cit*.

brand new “NON-CONTACT” section and encouraged our advertisers to make use of it. *Over half of the advertisers on the website are now working in the NON-CONTACT section...* [emphasis added].⁴⁶

Despite this claim, data monitoring of the site revealed that the vast majority of women advertised continued to see buyers in-person during this period. While it is the case that on average 41.3% of women were advertised in the ‘non-contact’ section during the data monitoring period, in fact almost all of these were also seeing buyers in person, in addition to interactions via phone or webcam. Closer inspection of the site found that a small number of women were advertising in a subcategory called ‘virtual’ – these were the only women on the site who were interacting with buyers exclusively in the virtual world – i.e. by phone, webcam or other online means only. In fact, during the data monitoring period spanning lockdown, an average of only 5.8% of those advertised on the site were operating virtually *only*, as Graph 2 demonstrates. The rest – 94.2% – continued with in-person physical and sexual contact with buyers.

Graph 2: Number of ‘in-person’ versus ‘virtual’ profiles advertised during the data monitoring period



During lockdown there was a great deal of discussion in both mainstream and social media on the challenges of ‘going virtual’ in the sex trade.⁴⁷ It was reported that from a practical perspective this involved more than simply switching on a webcam – specific equipment may be required (separate camera, tripod, lighting, sex toys etc.). This is in addition to the time, technological know-how and other skills required to make videos or undertake ‘camming’, to effectively ‘market’ oneself in the virtual world, build an online following and establish a secure means to be paid online. It also requires women to be in a safe and private location, which is not the case

46 Statement from Escort-Ireland.com, 25/03/2020; *op cit*.

47 For just one example see: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52183773> (Last retrieved 06/12/20)

for many in Ireland's sex trade, particularly those who found themselves trapped by lockdown in whatever brothel they were last based and feeling very unsafe. Finally, the 'going rate' for virtual contact with sex buyers remains far lower than in-person contact,⁴⁸ meaning that for many women under severe financial pressure or coercion, being 'virtual' only was simply not a viable option.

With over 94% of women advertised on EI continuing to have to see buyers in person during the pandemic the implications are clear. When considering who is truly 'independent' in the Irish sex trade, who can exercise free choice and full control over their circumstances, particularly in the context of a global health crisis, it is suggested that data presented in Graph 2 above speaks volumes.

Yet for EI, the pandemic demonstrated their versatility in adapting to market conditions and identifying new opportunities to profit from prostitution. In its responses to the Covid-19 crisis it also set out its plans for the future.

'The Future: We are working around the clock to push out our next range of products or services with a focus and priority on services which generate revenue for you. In the next days and week we hope to release our beta versions of our next services which include:

- Our EscortFans platform which will allow you to offer subscription services to your fans where you can share content in return for revenue. If this is a service you wish to offer, please consider generating photo and video content in advance.
- Our Webcam platform offering. If this is a service you wish to offer, please consider the technology you will require to do so.
- Our XPhone booking platform. This will enable you to schedule erotic calls with your customers.'⁴⁹

The 'EscortFans' platform⁵⁰ was launched by the company that runs EI in July 2020, describing itself as an 'escort-friendly social media platform'. It allows 'fans' (buyers) to pay a monthly subscription to interact with 'escorts', view pictures and videos, chat and watch live 'performances', all of a sexual nature. To be featured on the site women must pay a fee to EscortFans for acting as their 'agent'.⁵¹ This fee is deducted from fans' subscription fees. EscortFans is also heavily promoted on the main EI website, inviting buyers to 'see exclusive content from your favourite escorts!'. EscortFans is believed to have been in development prior to Covid-19, most likely in light of the popularity of OnlyFans,⁵² but it seems apparent that the pandemic hastened its completion and subsequent launch. It is clear that the sex trade was adept at adapting and diversifying in the face of this global crisis, and in doing so, was able to deliver new platforms for the purchase of 'virtual' sexual access to women and thus new ways to profit from prostitution.

48 Farley, M., 2020; *op cit*. In the Irish context, buyers typically pay up to €150 for 30 minutes of in-person sexual access to the women advertised on EI, whereas the going rate for a 30 minute video call with a buyer is approximately €35-€45.

49 Statement from Escort-Ireland.com re COVID-19, 19/03/2020. *Helping our customers at their time of need.* <https://www.escort-ireland.com/press/covid19.html> (Last retrieved 06/12/20)

50 <https://www.escortfans.com/> (Last retrieved 06/12/20)

51 <https://www.escortfans.com/terms> (Last retrieved 08/12/20)

52 OnlyFans is a content subscription service where content creators earn money from their 'fans' subscription fees. Originally popular with social media 'influencers', it has become increasingly known for featuring explicit content, including from those involved in the sex trade. <https://onlyfans.com/> (Last retrieved 08/12/20)

Findings 4

Implications of 'in-person' and 'virtual' prostitution during Covid-19

It is important to consider the implications for that large majority of women – over 94% – who clearly had few options but to continue to see buyers in person throughout the height of the pandemic and beyond. Clearly, very close physical and sexual contact with buyers in the context of prostitution made women very vulnerable to contracting coronavirus and passing it on to other buyers before showing any symptoms themselves, or if they remained asymptomatic.

Migrant women in prostitution in Ireland tend to be quite socially isolated⁵³ and many do not have their family members in the country with them. By contrast, most sex buyers in Ireland are married or in long-term relationships,⁵⁴ and having chosen to 'break lockdown' to purchase sexual access to women in prostitution, potentially exposing themselves to coronavirus in the process, they will have then returned home to expose their own family members to the same risks.

“Women are reporting that punters [buyers] are asking for all the usual... and they're married punters and all the rest of it. So, while their wife and kids are doing this whole isolation thing back in the house, you know, the man has to leave because 'I have to do something in work', but he's not. And with Covid he's still going back [to his home and family] afterwards.” Ruhama

During the pandemic, the official public health advice from the HSE regarding sexual contact included:

- Being sexually active with another person involves some risk of getting the virus
- Only be sexually active with a partner living in your household
- If you decide to be sexually active with someone living outside of your household, limit it to as few partners as possible, preferably one regular partner
- Avoid sexual activity and especially kissing if you or your partner has symptoms of coronavirus
- Consider masturbation or remote sexual activity as alternatives to physical sexual activity with partners.⁵⁵

This is in fairly stark contrast to some of the health advice issued by 'sex work' and sex trade advocates during the same period. While these advocates acknowledged the risks to persons in prostitution of contracting coronavirus and advised them to 'take some time off' if they were

53 Breslin, R., Latham, L., and O'Connor, M., (forthcoming, 2021); *op cit*.

54 Yonkova, N., and Keegan, E., 2014. *Tackling Demand for Sexual Services of Trafficked Women and Girls*. Dublin: Immigrant Council of Ireland, Stop Traffick! EU Project.

55 HSE Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme, *Sex and Coronavirus (COVID-19)*: <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/sexual-health/sex-and-coronavirus/> (Last retrieved 07/12/20)

able to, they also offered harm reduction advice to those who needed to continue seeing buyers in person. This included a dizzying array of advice around hygiene and cleaning practices recommended in the case of every encounter with a buyer, for example:

- “—Make sure your client washes his hands for 20 seconds upon entry
- Make sure you and your client take long hot showers before and after
- Wash your hands after handling money and get your client to do the same; spray money with sanitiser or other disinfectant
- Avoid touching your face and your client’s face if possible. Otherwise use clean gloves, to be carefully removed and disposed of afterwards
- Use single-use lube sachets, or if using a bottle clean the outside between uses
- When a client has left, clean all surfaces that he has touched (including doorknobs, handles, elevator buttons, showers, taps, toilet flushers, light switches, sex toys and equipment) with soap and water or disinfectant
- Between jobs, change any towels, blankets, sheets etc. and thoroughly wash all fabrics that have been touched, in hot water on a long cycle. Use gloves when handling fabrics.”⁵⁶

All of these recommended measures certainly have the potential to reduce the risk of contracting or spreading coronavirus. But arguably, many are impractical, onerous, difficult to sustain or indeed impossible for women staying in premises operating as brothels that may not have laundry or even proper washing facilities, or indeed a limitless supply of fresh towels, bedding, and so on. As previously noted, a significant proportion of women in prostitution in Ireland are permanently ‘on tour’, with no fixed abode and essentially living out of a suitcase, so closely adhering to these recommended measures would be particularly challenging for them. Crucially, these measures are based on the incorrect assumption that all women in prostitution are ‘independent’ and have full control over their own environment and actions. This is clearly not the case for women who must answer to pimps and prostitution organisers, who are unlikely to be supportive of such money and time-consuming hygiene measures that would undoubtedly limit the number of buyers a woman can see.

The same advocates also provided a series of recommendations regarding physical and sexual contact with buyers during the pandemic:

- “—If at all possible, work online rather than meeting clients
- Do not do in-person sex work with a client who is displaying symptoms of the virus/if you are displaying symptoms and ask clients a series of screening questions about their symptoms, recent travel etc.
- Refrain from kissing and insist on condom-covered services including for blowjobs and dental dams for rimming
- Keep away from the customer’s face throughout (doggy style or sex from

56 See for example advice given by the Sex Workers Alliance Ireland (SWAI), *Harm Reduction, Sex Work and Covid-19* <https://sexworkersallianceireland.org/2020/03/harm-reduction-sex-work-and-covid-19/> (Last retrieved 07/12/20); The Sexual Health Centre Cork, *#SafeRsexwork Guide to Dealing with COVID-19 Outbreak* <https://www.sexualhealthcentre.com/news/2020/4/9/the-sexual-health-centre-launches-safety-guide-for-sex-workers-during-covid-19> (Last retrieved 07/12/20)

behind is safer than face-to-face)

- Prioritise positions where you or your client are face-down, to minimise shared breathing space
- If you are giving a hand job do it from behind to stay away from their face
- For women in street prostitution: Carry a soft bag for your knees so you can do oral while the customer stands
- For buyers: Wear a condom for all sex acts (without complaint!).⁵⁷

Once again, many of these protective measures appear to be based on the flawed assumption that women can have full control over all of their interactions with buyers, at all times. Advice such as 'insisting on' and 'prioritising' certain behaviours with buyers suggests that it is the woman who is 'in charge' and that all buyers are compliant as a result. This ignores the significant economic and often social power differential that typically exists between the buyer and the person they are purchasing sexual access to⁵⁸ – although this dynamic is hinted at in one of the advocates' tips: 'Each worker charges according to her situation but if possible do not drop your prices. Remember that for your client this is leisure but for you, it's your livelihood'.

In fact, research with women in prostitution consistently reveals that buyers regularly demand sex acts, including potentially unsafe practices such as vaginal and anal sex without a condom, that women do not wish to perform, but may capitulate to doing so under pressure. The advocates' 'tip' for buyers that they should wear condoms 'without complaint' hints at the fact that some buyers frequently expect and demand unprotected sex. Women also describe the threats and use of violence by buyers to coerce them into acts they did not consent to. Whilst women are usually doing everything they can to keep themselves safe in prostitution, ultimately for many it is the buyer and not the woman who is 'calling the shots', according to his own desires and demands.⁵⁹

With this in mind, one particular aspect of the above advice must be challenged. Although it is the case that 'sex from behind' may reduce the risk for women of contracting coronavirus, it *increases their risk* of contracting a number of STIs in the case of unprotected anal sex (which carries higher risks of infection than oral or vaginal sex), but also leaves women more exposed to 'stealth' – the practice of removing a condom during intercourse without the woman's consent. Research has found that this is a fairly common experience for women in prostitution,⁶⁰ and more

57 Advice given by the Sex Workers Alliance Ireland (SWAI), *Harm Reduction, Sex Work and Covid-19* <https://sexworkersallianceireland.org/2020/03/harm-reduction-sex-work-and-covid-19/> (Last retrieved 07/12/20); The Sexual Health Centre Cork, *#SafeRsexwork Guide to Dealing with COVID-19 Outbreak* <https://www.sexualhealthcentre.com/news/2020/4/9/the-sexual-health-centre-launches-safety-guide-for-sex-workers-during-covid-19> (Last retrieved 07/12/20) and The Sexual Health Centre Cork, *The Sexual Health Centre Launches New Resource for Street-Based Sex Workers with GOSHH and SWAI* <https://www.sexualhealthcentre.com/news/2020/7/23/the-sexual-health-centre-launches-new-resource-for-street-based-sex-workers-with-goshh-and-swai> (Last retrieved 07/12/20)

58 O'Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020; *op cit*; Kelleher Associates, O'Connor M., and Pillinger, J., 2009. *Globalisation, Sex Trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*. Dublin: Immigrant Council of Ireland; Coy, M., 2009. *Invaded Spaces and Feeling Dirty: Women's Narratives of Violation in Prostitution and Sexual Violence*. In Horvath, M., and Brown, J., (eds). *Rape: Challenging Contemporary Thinking*. Oregon: Willan; Coy, M., Horvath, M., and Kelly, L., 2007. *'It's Just Like Going to the Supermarket': Men Buying Sex in East London*, Report for Safe Exit. London: London Metropolitan University.

59 Breslin, R., Latham, L., and O'Connor, M., (forthcoming, 2021); *op cit*; O'Connor, M., 2018. *The Sex Economy*. UK: Agenda Publishing; O'Connor, M., 2017. *op cit*; Jovanovski, N., and Tyler, M., 2018. "'Bitch, You Got What You Deserved!": Violation and Violence in Sex Buyer Reviews of Legal Brothels.' *Violence Against Women*, 24: 16 (pp. 1887–1908); Farley, M., Bindel, J., and Golding, J., 2009. *Men Who Buy Sex: Who They Buy and What They Know*. London: Eaves and San Francisco: Prostitution Research and Education.

60 Breslin, R., Latham, L., and O'Connor, M., (forthcoming, 2021); *op cit*.

likely to happen 'by stealth' when she is not facing the buyer. The risks associated with stealthing include STIs and unwanted pregnancies, in addition to mental health impacts. Arguably the advice that 'from behind' is 'safer' for women is misleading – while it is suggested that this position may keep women safer from Covid-19, it also renders them potentially more vulnerable to other health risks, at a time when the vast majority of sexual health and STI screening services across the country were closed.

It seems clear that much of the harm reduction information and advice provided to women in prostitution by the sex trade and its advocates during the coronavirus pandemic is predicated on the claimed or assumed 'independence' of these women. This is despite that fact that over 94% of women advertised during this time appeared to have no option but to continue to see buyers in person, despite the clear risks involved. It therefore seems unrealistic to expect women in very difficult, constrained circumstances in the sex trade to be able to follow such advice.

“I really feel they’re under a lot of duress as the need for finance grows... The threat of assault, physical and sexual, is always there in prostitution, and we would have concerns that the extreme harm reduction advice compounds that pressure, such as to avoid face-to-face sex, clean all sex products meticulously, wash down surfaces, sheets, air rooms etc. etc. It reminds me of the extremes that women are trapped in in the industry... I’m reminded when we look at these kinds of harm reduction measures... or look to how often and how rigorously they have to clean up after every person and adjust the type of ‘sex’ they’re having, that I just feel that we’re placing too much emphasis on that and that we should be looking at the wider issues in relation to trying to keep women totally safe and avoid them having to be put into that circumstance in the first place.”

Women’s Health Service

This is not to suggest that virtual/non-contact prostitution is without harmful consequences for the women involved. Even though most women in the Irish sex trade do not seem to be in a position to 'go virtual', nevertheless globally, online prostitution has increased during the pandemic.⁶¹ This is perhaps unsurprising when it has been greatly encouraged and even facilitated by the sex trade and its advocates. Yet researchers have noted that women doing webcamming can experience 'intense distress' from having to constantly 'playact' whatever a buyer asks for, which can be emotionally demanding and extremely draining.⁶² There is also the real and ever-present risk of women losing or indeed never having control over the use and resale of their images and videos, which may end up on global pornography sites and circulating indefinitely online. Women fear 'revenge porn', or what is more accurately described as image-based sexual abuse if this happens, including harassment, blackmail, and the ever-present fear that their explicit images and videos will be leaked to or viewed by partners, parents, friends, employers and even their children, at any point in the future.

There is little to stop buyers from using technology to record a woman's live online 'performance', keeping these and any images or videos they received for their own use, sharing them freely or selling them online. Platforms for this content do not appear to be able to guarantee security – the leak of a huge volume of explicit content from the OnlyFans platform earlier in 2020

61 Farley, M., 2020; *op cit.*

62 *ibid.*

is just one such example of the harms that can befall women in the virtual sex trade.⁶³ In the Irish context, there have been recent reports of the uploading and sharing of thousands of images and videos of Irish women and girls online, without their consent, some of which originated from OnlyFans.⁶⁴ It is clear that women's fears about lack of control of such content are well-founded – it is notable that the newly-created EscortFans platform retains the full and perpetual rights to the retention and use of any materials that women upload to it.⁶⁵

63 See for example: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/onlyfans-leak-porn-hack-videos-photos-file-a9365406.html> (Last retrieved 08/12/20); <https://www.insider.com/onlyfans-porn-leak-has-serious-safety-implications-say-creators-2020-3> (Last retrieved 08/12/20)

64 See for example <https://www.thejournal.ie/images-of-irish-women-shared-without-consent-5271799-Nov2020/> (Last retrieved 08/12/20); <https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-40087115.html> (Last retrieved 08/12/20)

65 <https://www.escortfans.com/terms> (Last retrieved 08/12/20)

Findings 5

Sex buyer insights

Data were captured from buyer reviews on EI on a weekly basis at the same time each week for a period of 14 weeks in total, beginning in April 2020 and ending in July 2020. Over 1,300 buyer reviews were read and analysed during the data capture period.⁶⁶ It was more than evident from the reviews posted that many buyers⁶⁷ continued to purchase in-person sexual access to women in prostitution throughout the pandemic and subsequent lockdown, sometimes travelling cross-county or even further to do so.⁶⁸ Some buyers also paid for virtual (online) access to women and posted reviews about these 'encounters'. For the purposes of this study, the focus of analysis was reviews that made direct references or allusions to the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown and those that described acts or behaviours that could have an impact on the risk of exposure to coronavirus for the woman being reviewed, the buyer, or both. A thematic analysis of these reviews was undertaken, with the main themes emerging from the data as follows:

- General references to lockdown and coronavirus/Covid-19
- Buyers' motivations for purchasing sexual access to women during lockdown
- Discretion
- Hygiene, health and safety
- Demand for sex acts
- The purchase of virtual sexual access to women
- Satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the 'service' received during lockdown.

The main themes that emerged are explored further below.

5.1 Motivations for purchasing sexual access during lockdown

In their reviews, a number of buyers made reference to what motivated them to 'break lockdown' in order to purchase sexual access to women in prostitution. This meant different things at different times as various restrictions were imposed, lifted and then reinstated, but in general this refers to ignoring social and physical distancing guidelines, breaking travel limits/restrictions, travelling for non-essential purposes and failing to limit one's contacts to one's family or close circle. It is also very unlikely that buyers reported contacts with women in prostitution to contact tracers, because they feared the repercussions, including their families finding out.

66 For full details of the methods employed here and how reviews were selected for analysis see O'Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020; *op cit*, in particular Appendix C.

67 It is evident from the conversations in the 'Community' section of the EI website that some buyers stopped completely and were critical of those who continued. Other buyers were directly critical of the women who continued to see buyers in person.

68 Unsurprisingly, the number of reviews posted on EI increased during the data monitoring period roughly in line with the steady increase in the number of profiles advertised across the 14 weeks.

Buyers noted that their primary motivations in this context were that they were 'bored at home' or that they had 'needs' that had to be met, that enduring the stress and anxiety of lockdown meant that they 'deserved' a treat or to give themselves a 'present'.

'I have been hibernating for a while now and was missing the fun side of life. So, I decided to find somebody to satisfy my needs...' *Lovemetender2*; 22/04/20

'I was feeling so horny with this lockdown and after seeing [woman's profile name⁶⁹] I was so excited to see her.' *BobFan*; 18/05/20

'Had a dreadful itch for some companionship, so phone [name] to see if she was available and she was... Petite little thing... Had a great time with this little sexbomb. Highly recommended gents in a market not hugely populated with quality at the moment.' *babygravy*; 19/05/20

'Ok like all of us need a release from lockdown, so tried [name] and lucky I got her... well let's just say she knows her way around the bed, legs and bum to die for.' *Inneedofalover*; 16/05/20

'Very very tall, just as I wanted. I travelled 80kms to see her and really worth it. She's the best ladyboy in Ireland now.' *beezer*; 11/06/20

'After suffering from blue ball syndrome with being stuck around home most of the time and slowly growing an arm Popeye would be proud of i decided to bite the bullet and try something different... All in all a good experience and sorted these blue balls of mine big time, be a big decline in tissue purchases this week lol.' *BigDDBelfast*; 28/05/20

'Booking was easy, the language barrier wasn't a problem whatsoever. I paid for a long session as it has been a while since I visited an escort due to our current situation and I felt like treating myself. It was money well spent and [name] anticipated and accommodated my every fantasy. At my request she wore multiple outfits and she looked amazing in every one.' *BillBronson78*; 14/05/20

'Being a long time stuck home I decided to give a little present to myself and now I'm delighted I really did... I was greeted at the door by this little petite skinny girl!!!' *deaguello*; 01/05/20

Some buyers suggested that purchasing sexual access to a woman was an 'essential' service or indeed necessary in order to preserve their own mental health during the pandemic.

'This lady knows exactly how to push my buttons. The finish is one that will stay with me for a while and reminds me of an extremely hot porn movie... Can only describe spending time with this lady as an undeniable "essential" activity during these times.' *red boy*; 22/05/20

'To maintain some small level of sanity, I decided to meet [name] today, we had kept in touch over the last couple of months but it's not the same as being in contact physically... all the problems of the world just disappear as we hug and she whispers in that sexy Brazilian accent...' *Ryankelvin*; 06/06/20

'My first day back in work today and by lunchtime... stressed does not even cover it. I

69 In most cases women's real names are not used when they advertise or are advertised on EI.

saw the rock star [name] was back in Dublin and i needed it. I would have crawled over hot coals to get to her. This lady gives me everything I need, everything I crave.' *Who-FlungDung; 29/06/20*

'Was in the city for a necessary family issue yesterday and decided to overnight and take advantage of [name's] availability this morning... Back to non-contact meetings again but this appointment was needed – mental health is important too.' *shaggy2; 17/05/20*

Buyers' strong sense of sexual entitlement is palpable in these reviews – they believe that purchasing sexual access to women in prostitution is something they have a right to and 'deserve'. They discuss the 'needs' they have that must be met, yet nowhere in any of the reviews is there any consideration given to the circumstances or needs of the women from whom they are purchasing sexual access or the risks they are facing. Buyers fail to even question why women might have to remain sexually available to them in the height of a global health crisis. These women's wellbeing is clearly very far from their minds as they are focused entirely on the achievement of their own sexual gratification.

5.2 Discretion, hygiene, health and safety

A few buyers noted the importance of discretion, and particularly discreet locations so that they would not be easily detected breaking any lockdown restrictions.

'Arrived at a familiar location, the streets were deserted as is usual now, quieter than Stephens Day / New Years Day.' *Franks1985; 21/04/20*

'I phoned [name] and arranged to go to a named street in Dublin 7, once I got there I realised that I had visited there before. In contrast to last time there were a lot of people hanging about which wasn't ideal, including a builder who gave me a filthy [look] on the way out, poor man :) ' *Franks1985; 15/04/20*

Many buyers mentioned the importance of 'safety', hygiene, and women who are 'hygienic' in their reviews, particularly in light of the health risks associated with the pandemic.

'... it all felt very natural, she is very sexy in person more so than her photos, she was also very hygienic.' *BigDaddyBigSocks; 20/04/20*

'I know [name] a long time now and can assure anybody considering a visit to [name] hygiene and safety are paramount with this lady.' *Lovedoctor; 30/04/20*

'This gorgeous lady is a hidden gem... Her sense of hygiene during these difficult times is superior and she is careful and meticulous.' *biggles172; 18/05/20*

'[Name is]... even more careful about safety her own and mine which is very important these days... [name] remembered what outfit I like and my favourites were performed and delivered with a smile.' *king cock; 17/04/20*

'We have to start safely taking things back to normal but in a safe way and she was able to do that. Safety and hygiene checked which I was quite happy with, she made me feel at ease very quickly. [Name] is a blond very beautiful and sexy young girl with a body to dye for [sic]. So young and firm and well proportioned.' *Robert1D; 23/05/20*

5.3 Demand for sex acts

Women's cleanliness and hygiene practices were highly-rated by buyers in their reviews and yet many of the same buyers simultaneously expected and requested a range of practices involving very close physical and sexual contact – such as hugging, cuddling, kissing, French kissing and OWO⁷⁰ – that would undoubtedly have increased their own and/or the woman's risk of exposure to coronavirus. Clearly, no amount of cleaning of bodies or of the surrounding environment could prevent the spread of the virus through an activity such as kissing for example.

'With all restrictions imposed, I managed to meet [name] again. I arrived at the place where I was greeted with a fabulous kiss.' *Soryn; 15/04/20*

'Formalities done with, chit chat and small talk in the way, we started kissing. From then on this was just a great experience. She literally and figuratively blew me away... As i said in my previous review for someone else, i consider myself a pretty good judge of French kisses, with my origins and all. And [name] is definitely a close contender to some of the most passionate kisses i've ever shared with someone.' *deathley40; 19/04/20*

'She is slim with unbelievable curves in the right places. The action itself was wonderful. I met her last week too and she was most accommodating with every request. She kisses you like you are her boyfriend and I really felt a connection.' *fatalbert; 01/06/20*

A few buyers described wearing a mask during their 'encounter' and there are numerous examples on the website of women asking them to do so. This is likely to reduce but not eliminate the risk of contracting coronavirus in the context of such close contact.

'I enjoyed the experience even though I was wearing a mask thought masks were a bit kinky... had a good long shower first and then I had a great time... place smells like she never stops disinfecting... with the mask she looks like a hot nurse.' *jack flash; 25/05/20*

Demand for sex acts without a condom was very common. In addition to the risk of exposure to a range of STIs as a result, coronavirus has also been detected in semen. It has yet to be fully determined whether coronavirus can actually be transmitted in this way, but it is clear that the acts that buyers describe here require very close body-to-body contact both externally and internally.

'[Name] is a very friendly chatty genuine 19 year old. Very petite with lovely small boobs. This was the second time I had seen her. It won't be the last! extra for gorgeous OWO. Thanks honey.' *Arbuthnot; 09/04/20*

'So [name] is a lovely young lass who set about her work with great gusto... first with OWO, then onto a few positions which was very satisfying... Shower offered after the main event but I declined because I was under time pressure.' *Franks1985; 15/04/20*

'She dose [sic] what she has listed in her favourites.⁷¹ Really nice french kissing very passionate she has the nicest lips... Owo, tea bagging + deep throat [penetration] were out of this world so much so I popped in no time... she would put a horn on a dead man...' *Ladylover18; 14/05/20*

70 'OWO' is 'oral without' – a term used in the sex trade for oral sex provided without a condom.

71 These are advertised in women's profiles on EI as a list of their favourite sex acts to 'perform' (also known as 'favs' or 'faves'), but in reality they relate more closely to what buyers typically want and expect women to provide. Buyers will often select women on the basis of the advertised acts they require.

'Professional escort, well mannered and attractive all favourites available. Very good owo and dt [deep throat penetration] expert.' *EARTHISFLAT*; 26/05/20

'Second time with [name]... Amazing owo and cim [cum-in-mouth]. Very nice body. I had a really good time.' *lickerpussy19*; 12/05/20

'Her English has improved slightly since the last time... had a great time with her today, finished her off with a very messy & explosive facial which I thoroughly enjoyed giving her. Great girl, go see her :-)' *MacMan87*; 25/06/20

There is an obvious contradiction here in the way buyers favour women who are 'hygienic' and safety-conscious while they themselves request acts that increase the risk of transmitting or contracting coronavirus. Once again it is clear that these buyers have prioritised their sexual desires over the health of the women to whom they are purchasing sexual access, but also their own health, the health of their close contacts and public health in general. International research clearly demonstrates that this was also the case amongst buyers in legalised prostitution regimes during Covid-19,⁷² such as Germany and New Zealand, but to an even greater extent given that both the number and proportion of women in prostitution in these regimes are exponentially higher than in Ireland.⁷³

5.4 The purchase of virtual sexual access to women

A number of buyers left reviews about their 'virtual' experiences with women during the pandemic including via webcam, 'sexting' or the receipt of explicit photos and videos.

'I got videos and pictures for my payment. If you like the look of [name] in her profile then you will definitely want to see the amazing videos that she sends.' *footjoblover32*; 07/05/20

'I have been talking to the beautiful [name] for a few days now through her textsex and have to say she has [been] blowing my mind in more ways than one...' *Chris8001*; 29/04/20

'The entire time we texted she was attentive and reciprocating, with no lapses between messages and this coupled with the glorious filth coming out of her almost overwhelmed me. I've never been so aroused by non-contact sex...' *EXXX*; 15/05/20

'She was just amazing in the custom video she made for me. I would [won't] be explicit here but you can be when you ask her for what you would like!' *StLune*; 09/05/20

'After signing up to her fan page would highly recommend [these] beautiful pictures uploaded daily. [Name] is starting to do short videos... her skills and moves in the video are of a pro... If you've ever met the beautiful [name] and want to see her again but can't due to lockdown subscribe to her fan page [and] purchase one of her videos...' *hung like a horse*; 30/05/20

72 Farley, 2020; *op cit*.

73 Walby, S., Apitusch, B., Armstrong, J., Balderston, S., Follis, K., Francis, B., Kelly, L., May-Chahal, C., Rashid, A., Shire, K., Towers, J. and Tunte, M., 2016. *Study on the Gender Dimension of Trafficking in Human Beings – Final Report*. Luxembourg: European Commission; O'Connor, M., 2018; *op cit*.

A common theme amongst these reviews was how much buyers stated they were looking forward to subsequently seeing the same woman they had seen virtually 'in the flesh', once pandemic-related restrictions have been lifted. It seems that the virtual experience whetted their appetite for the future purchase of sexual access in-person.

'Nice to see [name] back the last few weeks during these difficult times. Unfortunately it was a virtual meet over webcam... Can't wait for all this corona to be over so I can go and give [name] a big hug.' *David413; 05/04/20*

'... she makes a webcam session feel and look like an in person meeting... It will probably be a while before we'll be able to meet in person, luckily virtually with [name] is the next best thing.' *MarkM2020; 07/05/20*

'Such soft skin, I really wish I could feel rather than just see on a screen. Anyway, she seems like good fun and is eager to please, with no demands really too much for her. Hopefully I will be able to meet her in person some day for more fun once the restrictions aren't as much.' *master6996; 10/05/20*

'Organised some virtual fun via phonesex... can't wait to do everything you said on the phone in person.' *j81; 29/04/20*

'I had never done video chat before but I found it a lot of fun. [Name] has the most perfect body with a beautiful weapon... She will be the first escort I meet once things are back to normal. If she can turn guys on doing video chat, I wonder how much of a turn on she is in the flesh???? See you soon to find out...' *footjoblover32; 17/04/20*

Finally, a few buyers mentioned the challenges that virtual 'encounters' presented when they were presumably in lockdown at home:

'I've video called this lady twice and both times were absolutely unbelievable... I will be having another sexy encounter, I just wish it was in person lol. Also, I couldn't talk both times and this was not a problem at all. She took over and left me very happy both times!' *Ciaran87; 27/04/20*

5.5 Satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the 'service' received during lockdown

It should be noted that the majority of reviews posted during the data monitoring period rated the women with five stars overall, with most buyers stating they were 'satisfied' and would recommend the woman to another buyer. 'Satisfaction' was also evidenced by the fact that some buyers claimed to return to the same woman on a weekly or even daily basis, while others claimed that they had multiple 'encounters' with different women on the same day – all this despite the restrictions imposed by lockdown.

Buyers who posted negative reviews or mentioned they were dissatisfied with some aspect of the 'encounter', typically complained that all of the sex acts they expected to be available, were not. It would seem likely that in an effort to protect themselves from coronavirus, some women were trying to avoid certain sex acts that might be riskier in this context.

'She is refreshingly true to her profile. Although some of the advertised favourites are not available due to current health concerns, she provides great service.' *Bukar; 18/05/20*

'Nice girl but service was basic and rushed, and no proper fk [French kissing], not for

lads that have seen a lot of women on this [site], sorry but need to be honest.' *E30m3*; 30/06/20

'Over the phone all fav are available but during the time she suddenly says kissing is not allowed which disappointed me slightly. Later I found there is communication issues as she doesn't speak English fluently... I will definitely visit again if she allows kissing. I definitely recommend to try this gorgeous cheesecake...' *Blackpunt*; 15/04/20

'Service was very uninspiring, nothing from the profile list was on offer and even standard favs were extra, very poor.' *DonnyDarko*; 01/07/20

'... nice looking girl and her photos are definitely her. However I was a bit disappointed that OWO was not included as standard. It normally is for girls on the site at that price... Was informed by her it was an extra which I didn't take her up on.' *Mac75*; 17/04/20

Other buyers complained that women seemed wary or had a poor 'attitude' – perhaps unsurprising given the potential risks they were facing.

'Nice enough looking girl. Nice big arse. Tried her best to be friendly, but seemed a bit hypersensitive. She didn't like the way I touched her hair etc... it was kind of a buzzkiller.' *TheGreatDestroyer*; 08/05/20

'Unfortunately this was a bit of a disappointment. I know these are strange times etc. and we shouldn't really be engaging in this past time but people depend on the accuracy of the review system... there was no real engagement and a lot of listed favourites were off the menu (could be due to these times but certainly no hygiene excuses). It was rushed and a get it over with attitude.' *Goodnhard*; 13/05/20

Finally, this reviewer gives a parting insight into the mindset of men who purchase sexual access to women in prostitution during a global pandemic.

'English is ok, so you are not going for a good conversation! Found it a bit irritating when she kept reminding me of the time left... and considering she was/is not that busy under the current circumstances [lockdown], I found this unnecessary – she should be grateful for punters.' *Thoreau*; 16/04/20

Conclusion

It is clear that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought into very sharp relief the harmful and abusive nature of the Irish sex trade as well as the detrimental impacts it has on those who are exploited within it. Populated in the main by vulnerable migrant women, their vulnerabilities and the levels of danger and isolation they face within the trade were heightened even further by this global crisis. While some were initially able to pause or stop seeing buyers in order to protect themselves from exposure to coronavirus, many hundreds remained seeing buyers in person, and this number increased to pre-Covid-19 levels as the weeks after initial lockdown passed. Some women were in a position to go completely 'virtual' and stop seeing buyers in-person, but this was a tiny minority (less than 6%). The vast majority had no option but to continue to do so, calling into question how many women are in fact truly 'independent' in the trade. Poverty, lack of money to keep a roof over their heads, provide for the basics and support their families back home, in addition to control and coercion by pimps and traffickers, were some of the many severe pressures to remain in prostitution that women experienced during this time.

There is much evidence to suggest that the existing issues that women face in the Irish sex trade were exacerbated by the pandemic. Women in prostitution were more isolated and even more trapped than ever before, far from family and friends – some in whatever brothel they last found themselves, with the landlord demanding rent. Many did not qualify for any form of State support and some were facing destitution as the number of buyers fell, or they tried to stop seeing buyers altogether. Women's health was also placed at significant risk – with every buyer they saw in person they faced potential exposure to coronavirus. Additionally, increased exposure to STIs and crisis pregnancies arose from buyer demands for riskier sex acts, together with the eroding of women's usual boundaries, so that they acquiesced to acts they would not normally engage in, as their dire financial straits deepened. This was further compounded by a rise in the levels of both physical and sexual violence that women in prostitution were already experiencing prior to the pandemic, at the hands of partners, buyers and pimps. All of these threats and adversities, accompanied by high levels of fear and social isolation, also had a negative impact on women's mental health during this time.

Those who profit from prostitution demonstrated their agility in the face of a global health crisis, making a series of adaptations to ensure that it was 'business as usual', as far as that was possible. Through discounts and new ways of advertising, women were incentivised to remain in prostitution, thereby securing EI's revenue. The exhortations and advice by both prostitution advertisers and 'sex work' advocates to 'stay safe' whilst seeing buyers, seemed to hinge on the false assumption that all women in prostitution are fully 'independent', and have control over their own environment, money and circumstances. This of course is not the case, and as such, much of the onerous and impractical harm reduction advice provided by 'sex work' advocates in particular rang false at this time, failing as it did to take account of the extremely difficult and highly constrained situations many women in the sex trade found themselves in as the pandemic erupted.

By stark contrast, some buyers continued to purchase sexual access to women in prostitution during Covid-19 simply because they felt the urge to do so and believed that they deserved a 'treat'. Sexual access to women in prostitution was something to which they felt entitled at this time – it helped to ease the stress and boredom of lockdown and preserve their mental health and wellbeing. Buyers valued women's efforts to ensure safety and hygiene, yet demanded a variety of practices that clearly enhanced the risks for both parties in terms of contracting coronavirus, alongside unprotected sex acts that carry STI and pregnancy risks. Buyers expressed disappoint-

ment and dissatisfaction when women, in an attempt to protect themselves, were not offering all the usual buyer 'favourites'. However, buyers failed to even question, or perhaps chose to wilfully ignore, why women might have to remain sexually available to them in the height of a global health crisis. It was more than apparent that these buyers prioritised their sexual desires over the health of the women to whom they purchased sexual access, but also their own health, the health of their close contacts and public health in general.

A terrible legacy of this pandemic is that as an economic crisis follows, women who had previously exited prostitution may be drawn back into it, while other women and girls in dire financial need may enter for the first time. Equally negative are the adaptations and innovations made by the sex trade during this time to encourage and incentivise women to remain in prostitution. Platforms like EscortFans essentially represent an expansion of new frontiers of commercial sexual exploitation. There is no doubt that rates of image-based sexual abuse and exploitation will grow in tandem with such platforms.

Yet, if anything, what Covid-19 has highlighted more than ever before is that prostitution is not a solution to women's poverty.⁷⁴ With the right supports and resources in place women can be provided with real and concrete alternatives. As this snapshot study shows, support providers who take a woman-centred approach also have the ability to adapt and innovate in the face of a global crisis. But building a positive post-pandemic legacy for women trapped in the Irish sex trade will require the political will and commitment to ensuring that all women and girls in prostitution have full access to systematic, structured forms of exiting support that allow them to create new lives free from sexual exploitation.

74 Ruhama, 2020; *op cit.*

Recommendations

Exiting supports

- The State must provide enhanced resourcing of specialist NGO and statutory services with a proven track record of providing holistic, trauma-informed responses to women in prostitution both locally and nationally. This should include addressing immediate and long-term needs, especially in relation to women's sexual and mental health, alongside dedicated supports for women to exit and build sustainable lives outside prostitution
- In a true reflection of Ireland's Nordic/Equality model of prostitution legislation, exiting prostitution needs to be recognised and effectively resourced by the State as a statutory right. This needs to be accompanied by a dedicated package of structured supports (similar to the suite of services currently provided to victims of trafficking in Ireland) that should include regularisation of their immigration status, access to housing, health services and social protection, access to justice and the provision of education, training and employment opportunities.

Sexual health and related supports

- As the only dedicated State sexual health service for women in prostitution in Ireland, the HSE must reopen the WHS's clinical service as a matter of urgency. For many women in prostitution, this is the only health service that they access in Ireland and many are in critical need of its services, including access to both regular and emergency contraception, testing and treatment of STIs, and supports in relation to crisis pregnancies and accessing terminations.

Justice and law enforcement

- Continued education and training of An Garda Síochána is needed to ensure that the culture change involved in shifting the burden of criminality from seller to buyer in prostitution is fully embedded across the police service⁷⁵
- Regular, targeted awareness raising efforts are required to ensure that women in prostitution know that they are decriminalised and the protections they can expect
- An Garda Síochána should continue to proactively conduct operations against sex buyers to tackle and deter the demand for prostitution that fuels Ireland's exploitative sex trade during this pandemic and beyond
- High level investigations and operations by An Garda Síochána targeting pimps, traffickers and the organisers of prostitution across Ireland need to be fully resourced
- Action must be taken to effectively tackle Ireland's online prostitution advertisers, who are circumventing Ireland's legislation in this regard, and making significant profits from the prostitution of vulnerable women as a result.

75 Full a fuller analysis of this approach to the policing of the sex trade in Ireland see O'Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020; *op cit.*

Research

- Continued monitoring is required of the implementation of the *Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act, 2017*
- Further research is also required in a number of key areas to strengthen the evidence base on the nature, operation and impacts of prostitution and the sex trade as a whole in Ireland including:
 - A more in-depth exploration of the mental health impacts of prostitution – addressing women’s multiple experiences of unwanted, undesired sexual acts in the context of prostitution, how they can be supported to overcome any trauma arising from these experiences and the role of trauma-informed practice in this regard
 - A study to examine in greater detail racialised systems of exploitation within the Irish sex trade, the patterns, tactics and recruitment methods used in drawing migrant women into the trade, and how these can be tackled from a prevention perspective
 - An exploration of women’s entrapment within prostitution and the complexities of the exiting process, including documenting a model of good practice in the provision of exiting supports
 - Ongoing monitoring and further research on the development of new online platforms and mechanisms for sexual exploitation.

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