

From the Streets to the Screen: Sex Work, Stigma, Desire and Covid-19 in Mexico City

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This article explores how the labour practices of sex workers in Mexico City have been affected by Covid-19. More specifically, it analyses (a) how the pandemic increases the stigmatisation of sex workers; (b) the causes that prompted Mexican sex workers to resort to erotic online platforms; (c) the advantages and disadvantages of online sex work; (d) the forms of mutual support sex workers in Mexico City offer each other in order to familiarise themselves with this new modality of work. Thus, this study provides the basis for analysis of sex work, stigma and desire in the context of Covid-19 in Mexico.

Keywords: Covid-19, internet, Mexico City, sex work, sexuality, stigma.

I started to write this article in March 2021, while I was living in Mexico City, working as a postdoctoral researcher at the UNAM's Centre for Research and Gender Studies on a project analysing the relationships between sex work, public space, feminism and Covid-19 in Mexico City. As a feminist anthropologist who works on issues related to gender and sexuality and whose primary concern is to understand the complexity of sex work in different cultural contexts, I had to ask myself how the Covid-19 pandemic was affecting the lives of women (cis and trans) engaged in sex work in this context. The data and the analysis presented here are the first results of this research.

Mexico has adopted the regulatory model for sex work, which is often mistakenly confused with a model that tolerates and defends the needs of sex workers. Mexico City is the only federal entity recognising sex work as 'non-salaried work', a term that first appeared on 2 May 1975 in the *Reglamento para los trabajadores no asalariados del Distrito Federal* (Regulations for Non-Salaried Workers of the Federal District), making it possible for people who work on the street without an employment contract or a fixed salary – such as shoe shiners, car attendants, street musicians and lottery ticket sellers – to be registered with the Dirección General del Trabajo (Directorate General for Labour). This recognition of the labour relations involved in sex work was achieved after a long struggle by sex workers in Mexico City and represents a major achievement (Lamas, 2017). Nevertheless, the regulatory model's internal contradictions are reflected in the fact that today, in Mexico City, in practice, there are supposedly 'anti-trafficking' operations that harass and detain sex workers, and, at the same time, a judicial resolution that obliges the Government of Mexico City to recognise their labour rights (Lamas, 2016). The emphasis on 'trafficking' on which this model is based effectively

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legalises the control and repression of sex work and the punishment of those engaged in this activity. As long as the regulatory model is not fully implemented in Mexico City, sex work, while not a crime, will not be truly recognised, in practice, as work.

The vulnerability of Mexico City sex workers was exacerbated by the pandemic. The spread of Covid-19, and the measures imposed by governments to contain it, affected bodily habits in both public and private spaces. Sexual relations were also subject to limitation and control. For most of the population, the adaptation to the preventive measures affecting their sexual behaviours related exclusively to their affective and erotic experiences; for example, confinement reduced the possibility of sporadic and casual sexual encounters, while fear of contagion contributed to a preference for lower-risk sexual positions. For sex workers, however, it represented an obstacle to their work and an increase in the stigma associated with it. In Mexico, at the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the socialist government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador adopted preventive practices focused on citizen responsibility. Although these did not include police control of city streets, these measures increased class inequalities. Those most affected were people working in public spaces whose work depends on physical contact with others, such as sex workers. Not having access to a pavement on which to negotiate sexual services and the additional difficulty of finding cheap hotels (still open) in which to engage in sexual activity in exchange for money has worsened the working conditions of the women who work on the streets.

The Covid-19 pandemic also highlighted gender inequalities. Sex workers are one of the groups most affected, because demand for services fell significantly. This is due not only to the government's preventive measures (such as the closure of hotels where erotic services are sold) but also to the fear of contagion that fed the stigma against sex workers, considered dirty and as transmitters of disease. As sociologist Erving Goffman (1986/2008) argues, social stigma is made up of a set of attributes that are imposed on and discredit those who display socially sanctionable behaviours. Deprived of protection by the state and abandoned by some clients due to fear of contagion, sex workers in Mexico City have had to look for other alternatives to presential sex work. The use of virtual platforms supporting paid erotic services is a good solution in this respect. On a number of different platforms, online sex workers (called in the jargon *webcam girls* or *models*) can sell sexual services (striptease, masturbation, erotic fantasies, sadomasochistic practices) to clients looking for a moment of pleasure, company or fun on the networks (Jones, 2015; Campbell et al., 2019; Stegeman, 2021). A 'public chat' makes it possible to chat with the workers for free, a preliminary phase to the 'private chat' (pvt), where the clients' fantasies are realised through payment. In addition to offering live shows, 'webcam girls' can sell intimate videos and photos and their personal contacts such as phone numbers.

Although there is an extensive research literature on stigma and sex work (Agustín, 2007; Lamas, 2017; Benoit et al., 2018; Fitzgerald and McGarry, 2018; Acién González and Checa, 2020), there has been little discussion of how the vulnerability of sex workers has increased in recent years due to the pandemic. Results from Lam (2020) and Azam et al. (2020) highlight how people who sell sexual services for money in Europe and the United States have had to face different obstacles in their work activities, because of the reduction in the number of clients resulting from the belief that sex workers are to blame for the spread of the virus. The most significant studies in this regard are those by Benedetti (2022), Gallego (2021) and Silveira Passos and Almeida-Santos (2020), which not only show how the pandemic has undermined the purchasing power of sex workers but also examine online or virtual sex work as

a new mode of work and/or a means of advertising and arranging encounters. Their work refers to Brazil (Benedetti), Colombia (Gallego), and Argentina and Chile (Silveira Passos and Almeida-Santos). This study aims to contribute to this emerging literature, from a Mexico City perspective.

The main objectives of this article are to explore how the labour practices of sex workers in Mexico City have been affected by Covid-19 and the impossibility of practising their occupation on public roads and in hotels and to understand how virtual platforms offering paid erotic services have come to constitute both a new work model and a space of labour. The specific objectives, each of which is addressed in a separate section, are: (1) to observe to what extent the stigmatisation of sex workers increased with Covid-19 in Mexico City; (2) to analyse why sex workers resorted to online sex work as a source of income during the pandemic in Mexico City; (3) to identify the advantages and disadvantages of online sex work; and (4) to understand the forms of mutual support offered by sex workers in Mexico City to help each other adapt to online sex work.

Methodology

Fieldwork and Interviews

For several years now – ten to be precise – I have subscribed to a feminism that defends sex workers' and trans people's rights by mixing feminist theory and activism. Thus, when choosing the most appropriate methodological tools for my research, I opted for models that highlight collaboration with the protagonists of these same investigations. According to Barbara Biglia, the aim is to avoid creating a 'new methodological cage, but [to] offer instead a possible starting or transit point that must be adapted to the characteristics of each research undertaking, as well as to the peculiarities of the subjectivities involved' (2007: 415). The tools of collaborative feminist methodology therefore seemed to me the appropriate path to bring together my anthropological and activist concerns. As Joanne Rappaport (2015) explains, collaborative research is at its best when focusing on the impact of public policy and when working hand in hand with activists. A collaborative methodology can be used by feminist ethnographers to co-construct scientific knowledge with research participants. In this context, an article by Stéphanie Wahab (2003), which describes the substantive, epistemological, methodological and ethical issues that arose during a feminist participatory research project with six female sex workers in Seattle, demonstrates the advantages but also the difficulties of collaborative methodology. One such advantage could be the possibility for participants to meet and exchange thoughts, feelings and experiences, as well as inform the process of enquiry and increase the authenticity of the findings. One difficulty, however, could be the tensions that can arise due to issues of power between researcher and collaborators.

Although my research was based on ethnographic approaches, including observation on some streets dedicated to the sale and purchase of sexual services in Mexico City and on some virtual platforms offering erotic services, the methodology focuses on in-depth interviews as tools of narrative co-construction (Bruner, 1987) or narr-actions (Biglia, 2007). During the narrative process, participants can remember and share their personal stories and experiences. That story and relationship are fundamentally related becomes obvious when reviewing the etymology of the words in Spanish: *relato* and *relación*. Both are composed of the syntactic units *re* (again) and *lat* (carry). Telling and relating mean 'bringing personal facts back to someone's knowledge', digging into the

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intimate dimension, remembering it and offering it to someone, turning private elements into public. That is why one might say that the story is a relationship. Precisely because of this function as a bridge between a micro (individual and private) and a macro (social and collective) dimension, the story is an essential and enriching tool for ethnographic research. The stories open cracks that lead us beyond what we see, the superficial and the obvious, inviting us to discover how the personal and the collective overlap. Thus, the sex workers' stories create a relationship between an intimate dimension and a public one and between their worlds and mine.

In undertaking this research, I first sought to establish a climate of trust with the interviewees in order to avoid reproducing the type of violence that Bourdieu defines as 'symbolic violence', which is the 'violence that is exercised on a social agent with their complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 142). Thus, with the open and in-depth interviews (face-to-face, but virtual), I sought to treat the interviewee not simply as a mere provider of information but rather as a subject endowed with agency. I sought consistently to listen to the needs and the emotions of the interviewees and to take account of the limitations on their time. I adopted an intersectional feminist perspective in my approach to sex work, acknowledging the effects of different axes of inequality such as gender identity and expression, age, origin or ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Although my intention is not to compress stories and emotions into ethnographic quotations, I could not escape the power relations that are inevitably present even in those projects that strive to establish horizontal relations. Anthropologists are aware that we research from a privileged place and that our knowledge can only be situated (Haraway, 1991/1995). In order to try to overcome the hierarchy embedded in the role of the academic/researcher/ethnographer, I therefore appealed to what is for me one of the most important methodological tools: empathy, or rather, 'attunement', as Despret (2004: 120) puts it. 'Tuning in' to sex workers constituted an ethnographic challenge, then, but above all a feminist and political one.

Fieldwork took place between March 2020 (shortly before the pandemic reached Mexico City) and July 2020 and focused on streets in Mexico City dedicated to the sale and purchase of sexual services, such as Tlalpan, Sullivan and Guerrero avenues, and virtual platforms offering erotic services, such as Cam4 or Chaturbate. Having to carry out my fieldwork in the middle of the pandemic, I had to use the so-called 'digital ethnography' of Miller and Horst (2012). I aimed to capture social realities through digital technologies, adapting the methods and tools of classic ethnography to an online environment; thus, for example, implementing in-depth interviews via Zoom. I interviewed seven sex workers, and carried out 35 in-depth interviews, five with each worker.

Participants

The seven sex workers interviewed were between 21 and 34 years old. I interviewed cis, lesbian and trans women of middle- or working-class backgrounds. Most of them have a steady partner and three are mothers. They work on the street, in flats, in their own homes, or via erotic websites. Not all of them took to online sex work during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this section I briefly introduce each of them.

Magda is 28 years old and the mother of a 7-year-old daughter. After working for many years in clubs, she currently offers sexual services at weekends, in a rented apartment shared with other sex workers. She works alone, with friends, and sometimes with her partner as well. She is an anarcho-feminist activist for the rights of sex workers and trans people. I met Magda in a talk about sex work at the U-tópicas bookshop in Mexico

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City in November 2019 and established a close relationship with her. We had frequent conversations on Facebook, as well as the face-to-face meetings which had taken place before Covid-19.

Meraki is 21 years old and studies Literature and Philosophy in Mexico City. From the age of 14, she has been a declared lesbian and feminist. At first, she worked for an agency which retained a large percentage of her earnings and then she began to provide services on her own, advertising through social networks and meeting clients in hotels. I met Meraki in a talk about sex work at the Voces en Tinta bookshop in Mexico City, before the pandemic, in December 2019.

Vane is 28 years old and has a degree in accounting. She is an independent escort and has been working in the sex industry for two years. She lives with her mother, her father, her partner and her three-year-old son. She advertises herself on the Internet and works in hotels. I met Vane through Facebook, during the pandemic, in April 2020.

Lucia is a 25-year-old trans woman who works on the street. She is a transfeminist and advocate for the rights of trans people and sex workers. I met Lucia through a talk she gave on Instagram in May 2020.

Celeste is 31 years old and works with colleagues in flats that she rents at the weekend. She has another job during the week, and her sex work allows her to make extra income. I met Celeste through Facebook in April 2020.

Alicia is 34 years old and works on virtual platforms, in particular Chaturbate and Onlyfans. She is also a nude model and escort. I met Alicia during my fieldwork on Chaturbate, in June 2020.

Rita is 29 years old and works on virtual platforms, in particular Cam4. She is the mother of three daughters, and with her sex work, she supports her parents, three daughters and herself. I met Rita through my fieldwork on Cam4 in April 2020.

Ethical Considerations and Data Management

The participation of all sex workers involved in the study and data management followed ethical procedures. All participants received detailed information sheets about the aims, methods and implications of the research, as well as consent forms, before our interviews. Personal data (first name; work and home address etc.) collected during ethnographic fieldwork through in-depth interviews were fully anonymised and stored securely on a password-protected computer. The names that appear in this article are pseudonyms. In the few places where I have given information that could lead to the indirect identification of the person in question – for example, in relation to participation in specific events – I have obtained that participant's assurance that as it was a public appearance, they have no worries about someone who was present or who knew the speakers identifying them by the name they used at that point.

In relation to the use of virtual platforms (Cam4 or Chaturbate), I recognised that the best way to understand the dynamics that guide the construction and negotiation of desire online was to gain first-hand knowledge of how the platform works. I therefore opened an account as a 'webcam girl' on these two platforms. My field work was limited to the 'public chat', the space intended for conversation between users (clients and webcam girls), the space before the 'private chat' for paid sexual performances. Although I was there as an anthropologist, I was apparently a 'webcam girl' in the eyes of the users and those offering sexual services, and I therefore had to take care to clarify my role during the chat conversations.

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Since the objective of this research is to understand how sex workers came to use virtual spaces to offer erotic services during the pandemic, I focused on them in our conversations. Two of the workers, Rita and Alicia, agreed to collaborate with me and to cooperate with interviews carried out virtually on Zoom. These two women had already ‘come out of the [sex worker] closet’, so they do not hide their faces in their video transmissions. The ethical procedure explained above nonetheless applied equally to them.

I used Atlas.ti software for coding and categorisation of the data collected during the interviews (which were recorded and transcribed by means of an informed consent signed by participants).

Ethnographic Results

‘Covid-19 Has Increased the Stigma’

Stigma is a recurring factor in sex workers’ narratives (Juliano, 2002; Agustín, 2007; Bernstein, 2012; Bodelón, 2014; Torres, 2018). Feminist anthropologist Marta Lamas (1996, 2016), who devoted much of her life to understanding sex work in Mexico, explained in many of her studies that the stigma attached to female sex workers is related to society’s sexist reading of the female body. Sex (for free or for money) remains, according to Lamas (2017), a means to subjugate, classify and humiliate women. She also says that one of the most widespread imaginaries about sex work is that the women who do it are dirty, dangerous, polluting women. In reality, it is often the client who transmits an illness, as sex workers are often required to undergo medical check-ups to ascertain their state of health (see e.g. Plaza, 2014).

According to Mary Douglas (2001: 100): ‘Where the social system requires people to hold dangerously ambiguous roles, these persons are credited with uncontrolled, unconscious, dangerous, disapproved powers’. The idea of risk as a strategy to negotiate danger and distribute it more broadly is also incorporated into the mechanisms of social control deployed in the context of the pandemic. The stories of sex workers effectively show how, during this historical moment, pandemic, the social imaginary that sees them as contaminating and infectious, and therefore dangerous, people was reinforced:

When my neighbour at home, who knows what I do, found out that I was going to work in the middle of the pandemic, she started to avoid me. If I met her on the stairs, she would turn the other way. She would not even say hello to me. The hatred towards us has increased with Covid-19. (Magda, April 2020)

One day I went to meet a client in one of the few hotels that were open in Colonia Guerrero. When he went to pay for the room, the guy in the lobby looked at me and said: ‘Now we’ll have to disinfect the room twice’. The client and I decided never to return to this hotel. (Meraki, March 2020)

The patriarchal system wants us to be victims and sick. Covid-19 has increased the stigma of sex work and do you know why? Because people (and the clients themselves) think that we are going to infect them with the virus. But listen to me, if we go to work, it’s because we feel well. Ours is

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a physical job that requires a lot of intellectual and physical energy. If we feel tired, we do not go!!!! So if we go to work, it's because we are healthy. Besides, nobody thinks that it can also be the client who transmits the virus and any other illness. No, we are the ones to blame for everything. (Lucia, May 2020)

I think there is a lot of prejudice about health. The virus has spread such a fear that people still have trouble giving you a hug, a kiss on the cheek or a handshake. It certainly exists, but I think it has also served to divide people and create more prejudice. Many clients now do not want to come here and they write to tell me that they are afraid of getting the virus. And I tell them: but do not you have sex with your wife? And she, just like us, can have the virus. (Vane, May 2020)

The narratives of the participants show how the Covid-19 pandemic increased the fear of contagion and increased the use of hate speech towards sex workers. 'Whorephobia' is a term used to describe hatred and fear of sex workers and the disgust associated with their work, which works to regulate and reinforce traditional gender norms (Tempest, 2019, Blewett et al., 2018). During the pandemic, episodes of whorephobia also occurred in the media. For example, when Jess, a Mexican sex worker, singer and tarot reader, announced preventive health measures to deal with the epidemic in a video – such as avoiding kissing and serving clients with colds or coughs, the reaction was misogynistic and whorephobic aggression in the television programme *¿Qué importa!* (What Does it Matter?!, 25 March 2020). 'Something to be admired about this woman is that she has more restrictions than the Madrid airport', said the host. Faced with the whorephobic attitude in which the programme wrapped its message of prevention and care, the AMETS collective (Mexican Alliance of Sex Workers) demanded a public apology, which was never offered. Midori, a sex worker from this collective, commented on AMETS's online platform:

You can't make jokes or 'innocent' jokes when you're referring to populations that suffer, that suffer violence and stigma, as sex workers do. Jess made this first video, which they saw as a joke, in an attempt to open up a discussion about the security measures we sex workers could take, given that stopping is simply not an option for us. (Midori, March 2020)

Despite the hate speech, women who offer sex services try to take care of their own and their clients' health, and in the pandemic, they tried even harder to do so. They sought to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection by not providing services to people who had any symptoms of flu, cough or fever, using a condom for all sexual acts, avoiding face-to-face sexual positions, and avoiding kissing.

'And at the End of the Day We Haven't Performed Even a Single Service'

With the arrival of Covid-19 and instructions to stay at home, the only people on the streets of Mexico City were the homeless. The streets were empty, including those where sex workers would generally offer their services. So, on Tlalpan avenue, the number of trans women offering their services for a few pesos was reduced; on Sullivan you could no longer see well-groomed girls seducing middle-class customers, and in the Plaza de la

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Soledad there are no older women in front of the *basilica* waiting for clients. 'The streets are dead', as Lucia said of the situation:

For girls who work on the street, it's impossible to work now. There are no clients on the streets, there are only homeless people who live on the street, and many colleagues have been forced to live on the street since the hotels no longer allow them in. In addition, the few hotels open these days have raised their prices and only allow two people per room. (Lucia, 8 April 2020)

According to the women interviewed, the fee charged for their services ranges from 300 pesos to 1800 pesos per hour, depending on the client, the time and the type of service offered, while the price of a hotel room ranges from 300 pesos to 1500 pesos for a room per hour, depending on the area. Payment for hotel accommodation and condoms is the client's responsibility. However, with the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, the price of sexual services had to fall, affecting the sex workers who negotiate their services online and then meet the client in a hotel. This solution, however, did not seem to work very well. As Meraki commented:

Many clients call you and ask for an appointment, but in the end they don't come. Maybe because they're afraid of infection, or because they've got sick with Covid-19, or who knows why? And at the end of the day we haven't performed even a single service. And how can I pay for my university education like this? (Meraki, 2 April 2020)

Despite the difficulties of continuing sex work during the Covid-19 pandemic, none of the women interviewed had thought about leaving their profession. For them, it is not only a source of income, but a job which can also be considered as 'a form of anti-capitalist resistance', a job that 'gives a lot of freedom', an activity that is very empowering':

Sex work is the only job that allows me to be who I want to be. It is a job that allows me to imagine and create myself as I want, and that does not in any way limit me in the slightest; on the contrary, it liberates me. Sex work is a form of anti-capitalist resistance and dissent from below. The anarcho-punk movement and many social movements have been supported by whores because who else can acquire large amounts of money at the drop of a hat? It's a form of resistance. (Magda, 24 June 2020)

I have a 3-year-old son, and when I started as a sex worker, he was one. I really like the job I have because it feeds my son and me and allows me to live well and spend a lot of time with my family. Before, I worked as an accountant part-time in an office and earned a thousand pesos a week. You tell me how I can support myself and my son on this salary. Sex work gives me a lot of freedom. I feel valued, desired and proud of who I am and what I do. And do you know what? If someone envious speaks ill of me, I no longer care. (Vane, 5 March 2020)

Sex work is very empowering. I feel valued, desired in sex work. We sell company, affection and love, not just sex. Yeah? Most men actually buy the company pretending that they are looking for sex. Most men are

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looking for someone who listens to them. The relationship that I establish with my client is almost always very beautiful. I have clients who are friends, and many tend to use me as a confidante. We have a very lovely emotional bond. For example, when I'm sick, he asks me how I'm doing. (Meraki, 10 March 2020)

'Don't Worry, the Virus is not Transmitted through the Internet'

In recent years the Internet has been shaping the sexual experiences of many people. The use of applications to find a partner or to consume sexual experiences without any emotional commitments has multiplied. The proliferation of virtual platforms and applications has expanded the possibility of erotic and affective exchange, whether or not it is for money (Rodríguez Salazar and Rodríguez Morales, 2016). The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic led to an explosion in the use of these online platforms. Many sex workers (and people who had no previous engagement with sex work) turned to online erotic platforms as a source of income.

Desire, just like gender and sexuality, is not an a priori noun that suddenly enters the cracks of our social relationships. It is rather an action, performative, dynamic and in constant flux (Butler, 1987). As Jones (2015) and Jonsson et al. (2014) observe, explicit sexuality is not always the protagonist in the virtual platforms offering paid sexual services; desire can also inhabit the territories of affectivity and emotions. My ethnographic research has allowed me to understand how the co-construction of desire between model and client in the spaces of online erotic platforms reflects the subjectivities of both parties. According to the sex workers making use of erotic platforms and what I observed myself during fieldwork in these spaces, clients pay for a moment of company and complicity that can transcend masturbation or sexual fantasies. Moreover, the 'webcam girl' finds in online sex work a space in which to enjoy their own sexuality. The narratives of the women interviewed confirm this argument:

The sexual services offered on the internet are mostly online sales of time and attention to someone who is lonely and frustrated, or who simply wants to play with fantasy to get excited. Clients pay us to perform their erotic trips. We are creators of desire, not only the client's, but also our own. That's what I like the most about this job. (Magda, 20 May 2020)

I really like working as a webcam girl, the model who offers erotic services on virtual platforms selling sex online. Seeing myself on the screen naked and moving sensually fascinates me. My perception of myself has improved a lot with this job because I learned to explore my body and feel pleasure with it. Before going online, I dress up and make myself attractive, and the truth is that I fell in love with myself again! And above all, there is the economic side. Would you have thought that I can support my parents, my three children, and myself with this job? What more could I want from a job? (Rita, 4 July 2020)

Virtuality generates new ways of relating to subjects, and these constitute spaces from which users achieve new types of agencies and expectations (Palumbo, 2019). The desire negotiated online is not encapsulated and mutilated in pixels but lives and takes agency, adapting to new scenarios. Fantasy and imagination are unleashed where the tactile, olfactory and gustatory dimension of – and with the – other body cannot be accessed.

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The phenomenology of desire transcends the presence and breaks the bars between the intimate and public dimensions, between present and omnipresent time.

Sex work online has both advantages and disadvantages. Although it eliminates the risk of physical attacks by clients, neighbours or the police, it presents a risk of cyberbullying, hacking, or the illegal distribution of intimate material uploaded on the networks by the sex workers, including the recording of live shows. This practice is colloquially known as ‘capping’, shorthand for ‘capturing’ (Jones, 2015; Miller and Sinnanan, 2014). As Alicia, who started this work after losing her job as a waitress due to Covid-19, told me:

I feel very safe physically because if a client has an attitude that I do not like, I get rid of him with a click. I believe that this way of working online has many advantages compared to face-to-face work precisely because it does not expose you to violence from clients. The only thing that can happen is that they appropriate the erotic material, but this issue does not concern me since I do not show my face. (Alicia, 13 April 2020)

This oscillation between pleasure and danger is realised within the framework of labour exploitation. The managers of the platforms enrich themselves by charging a large percentage (from 20 percent to 50 percent) of the services provided by the models. The lack of regulation of online sex work increases the vulnerability of those who make a living from it. Celeste underlined the power imbalances characterising the (neoliberal) space of online erotic platforms:

I have always worked independently and face to face. For the last two months I have been working online and I am very happy because I am getting new virtual clients. The only thing I don't like is that the income doesn't all go to us models, the webpage operators keep a very high percentage (sometimes even half) for each online service. That seems very unfair to me. That's why I'm thinking of creating a self-managed webpage with some of my sex worker friends. (Celeste, 3 June 2020)

Vane, on the other hand, talks about what she considers to be the greatest advantage:

Online sex work enabled me to support myself and my son during the pandemic. Many of my clients that I used to receive in hotels started coming less frequently for fear of infection. So I created a profile on a platform for sexual services and invited them to connect online. ‘Don't worry, the virus isn't transmitted through the internet’, I told them. In this way I didn't lose my clients completely, and in addition I made new ones through online erotic platforms. (Vane, 4 June 2020)

With advantages and disadvantages, online erotic platforms are being used by many sex workers to survive in times characterised by fear of contagion and confinement. However, it is important to emphasise that not all of them are able to access this recourse due to the lack of basic conditions: the Internet or a private space in which to carry out online sexual activity. Once again, the pandemic dictates inequalities.

'We Have to Support Each Other'

The narratives of the seven women interviewed demonstrated the difficulties encountered in online sex work, but also the solutions sex workers have come up with together. In Mexico City, not all sex workers have a basic knowledge of online tools. Many are mothers and it is therefore difficult for them to work online from home. Many live in suburban and poor neighbourhoods where an efficient internet connection is not always available. To overcome these obstacles, those who are already familiar with online sex work share their knowledge with co-workers:

We have to keep working, one way or another. And to achieve this, we have to support each other. Those of us who work online have to share our knowledge with the other girls. I am a webcam girl, that is, a virtual whore. Every sexual service happens through a screen, and I can work from home, which is the only thing they let us do now: work from home. That is why I give online sex work workshops to my colleagues so that they too can earn something, pay the rent and feed their loved ones. (Rita, 30 April 2020)

Rita teaches others essential tactics enabling them to work safely as a webcam girl in these workshops, from how to attract clients on the web to computer security measures. Talks and workshops on how to work online are multiplying, and some even offer their own home for use by other sex workers who live with their daughters or with relatives (who do not know about the work they do) or who do not have an internet connection in their own homes. Those who know how to work with audiovisual technology offer to take photos or videos for their companions so they can advertise themselves on social networks. Internet groups have emerged to share details of abusive or bullying clients. These can also allow members to share doubts and advice about sex work, and chats on sex work and the pandemic multiply. A network of resistance is being woven from below, as a feminist strategy (Rovira, 2017). In Meraki's words:

We are very close. This union between sex workers, and even clients, could remove stigmas and make people understand that we sell companionship, affection, and care, not just sex. And that we can be an example of feminist struggle because we not only take care of ourselves and our clients, but we also take care of and support ourselves as sex workers. This is also why we are feminists. (Meraki, 13 March 2020)

The Internet has become not only the setting for whorephobic discourses, but also a place to generate support and care networks, especially during the pandemic.

Conclusions

The aim of writing this article was to enrich the debate on sex work in Latin America/Mexico by describing how sex workers exercise agency in response to a situation as shocking as the Covid-19 epidemic and to do so from a feminism that foregrounds sex workers' rights and which recognises their experiences as a legitimate and valid source of knowledge production. In particular, this study has analysed how the labour practices of sex workers in Mexico City have been influenced by Covid-19 and I highlight how virtual platforms offering paid sexual services have become a new labour scenario in this

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historical period. The results demonstrate the relationship between the worsening of the work conditions of people who sell sexual services during the Covid-19 pandemic and the increasing stigma to which they are subject. The narratives of the women interviewed indicate that, although sex workers tried to adopt preventive measures to protect both themselves and their clients, they were unable to dislodge the many prejudices about sex workers associated with fear of infection. The pandemic also provided a fertile ground for hate speech towards sex workers.

The restrictions imposed by public authorities seeking to contain the virus increased the social inequalities suffered by Mexican sex workers: their labour activities were made more difficult (sex workers could no longer use the street to negotiate sexual services and there were no cheap hotels open for them to have sex with their clients). The stories of the women interviewed highlighted the desire to continue working and the need to find a solution to the economic crisis they were facing.

Working online protects sex workers against physical violence from clients. The virtual space of the screen, however, still entails risks for the sex worker: cyberbullying, slut-shaming (labelling as a whore), and the dissemination of intimate or pornographic material without consent (Miller and Sinnanan, 2014). The stories of the 'webcam girls' interviewed confirm that, despite the risks and lack of regulation that accompany online sex work, this new space offers the possibility of surviving in times characterised by fear of infection leading to lockdown.

Finally, results show that Mexican sex workers organise and use the same virtual networks to work together, organise and establish feminist practices of support. The narratives of the interviewees show that the sex workers who were already familiar with erotic online platforms shared their knowledge, from how to attract clients on the web to how to make use of computer security measures. Although workspaces change, solidarity between fellow sex workers does not diminish.

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