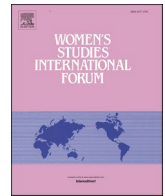




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Review

'Business can't stop.' Women engaged in prostitution during the COVID-19 pandemic in southern Spain: A qualitative study[☆]

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ABSTRACT

A detailed analysis was made of the experience of women engaged in prostitution during the state of emergency due to the COVID-19 virus through a phenomenological study. Eleven telephone interviews were conducted with women engaged in prostitution. It was found that confinement had increased the vulnerability of these women. Business has not stopped and they continue to work fearful of being infected and with increased abuse from the 'clients'. Economic necessity and pressures from the organisations that exploit them are the main reasons for engaging in prostitution during the pandemic.

Introduction

The sex industry is one of our society's most lucrative businesses (Chicano, 2018). With regard to prostitution, it must be emphasised that up to 90% of the women working as prostitutes are forced to do so (de Miguel Álvarez, 2012). The number of human trafficking victims identified in Europe has nearly doubled in recent years, according to the Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) (2020a). Prostitution has evolved as a reality, becoming a global industry, with a very important component of racial dominance (Cobo, 2004). Approximately 40% of the victims of trafficking identified are illegal immigrants and sexual exploitation is the most primary aim of the exploitative activity (MSSSI, 2015). It is not easy to distinguish between forced prostitution and sex trafficking (García-Cuesta, López-Sala, Hernández-Corrochano, & Mena-Martínez, 2011) because these are not clearly defined; it is difficult even for the professionals who prosecute this crime and deal with the victims (Sánchez, 2011). The GRETA (2018) report recommends that Spain improve the identification of, and assistance to, victims of this form of trafficking and offers recommendations to raise awareness of, prevent and prosecute this crime in the labour sectors where it is most likely to occur, such as prostitution. The stereotypes of the image and characteristics assigned to people who are victims of trafficking have a negative impact on identification when there is no agreement on definitions and the

people trafficked are not identified (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016).

One thing women in the world of prostitution share is a lack of opportunities. Most are illegal immigrants living in poverty or belong to disadvantaged racial groups, which makes them very vulnerable (Gómez-Suárez & Pérez-Freire, 2016). These vulnerabilities cause the women who have them to be particular easy to exploit by both clients and traffickers (Gerassi, 2020). Prostitution involves the denial of the most basic values of dignity, equality and freedom (Fiscalía General del Estado, 2019). Many of these women want to stop engaging in prostitution, but do not know how (MacKinnon, 2011). However, men are convinced that women engage in prostitution with complete freedom (Meneses, Uroz, & Rua, 2018), a belief rooted in a patriarchal ideology that values women as subordinate to men (Lara Palacios, Monreal-Gimeno, & Sánchez Fernández, 2019).

Gender studies confirm the cultural construction historically reflected in forms of male domination and female subjection, socially and politically specified in patriarchal systems. Patriarchy perpetuates gender inequality; men have economic and ideological means that women will not obtain (Cobo, 1995).

Prostitution is based on male dominance, masking unequal power relations (Cobo, 2004). Prostitution occurs in this context of inequalities. In turn, it (re)produces inequality and serves to support the patriarchal order because it perpetuates and strengthens differential gender roles, mainly those that are seen in the context of sexuality

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(Ranea Triviño, 2019). Economic and patriarchal globalization mainly affects women who occupy spaces of exclusion and exploitation, preventing them from achieving free and individual development (Cobo, 2011). We live in a culture of sexuality that objectifies women and that perpetuates a system of dominance over them (Cobo, 2004).

All this makes us approach the topic of prostitution from a gender perspective that will help us to explain and examine the specific situations of social discrimination that affect women within the social system (García-Cuesta et al., 2011). We cannot analyse prostitution without considering the pivotal elements of inequality and the power relationships that make it possible for there to be people engaging in prostitution and, in addition, privileged people paying for prostitution services (Gómez-Suárez & Pérez-Freire, 2016; Ranea Triviño, 2019).

Spain is the European country with the greatest demand for paid sex and the third worldwide, behind only Thailand and Puerto Rico. It is also one of the world's primary destination for trafficking women (UNODC, 2018), with annual revenues of 37 billion euros (MSSSI, 2015). In Spain, a 2009 survey conducted by the Centre for Sociological Research estimated that 32.1% of men had paid for sexual relations, encouraged by the fact that Spanish legislation sanctions neither the women who are prostituted nor the clients (Meneses, Rua, & Uroz, 2018) despite prostitution being considered a form of violence and exploitation of women (García-Cuesta et al., 2011). Almería, in southern Spain, is one of the Spanish provinces with a large population of foreign residents: 20.28% (OPAM, 2019) due to its situation as Europe's 'southern border' and to its intensive farming, with more than 31,000 ha of greenhouses (Cajamar, 2019). There is a large demand for labour and, in addition, the province has been identified as one of those with the greatest number of female trafficking victims in all of Spain (APRAMP, 2019; MSSSI, 2015).

Since December 2019, the COVID-19 epidemic has expanded from Wuhan, China (Zhu et al., 2020) to a growing number of countries, with Spain being one of the most affected (Legido-Quigley et al., 2020). The impact of this pandemic depends on the number of people infected, its transmissibility and severity (Lipsitch, Swerdlow, & Finelli, 2020). In response, the Spanish government issued Royal Decree 463/2020 (Gobierno Español, 2020) declaring a 'state of emergency' beginning on 14 March. This included providing for the lockdown of the population and other measures to prevent transmission such as closing schools, leisure and sport facilities, bars and restaurants. The situation of exclusion experienced by women engaged in prostitution has been increased by this obligation to remain confined (APRAMP, 2020; Médicos del Mundo, 2020). The GRETA Group of Experts (2020a, 2020b) has warned of the extreme vulnerability of trafficked women during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this exceptional health and social context, our study aims to describe and understand the experience that women engaged in prostitution are undergoing in relation to the pandemic, confinement and their personal situations in Almería.

Methodology

Design of study

A qualitative study was designed based on an interpretive phenomenological approach as the best strategy to understand human experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Michael, 2009) and to study an event, but from the perspective of those experiencing it, since people try to create meanings for their experiences (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). In our case, it is the experiences of women engaged in prostitution in relation to the pandemic, confinement and their personal situations.

The survey informants are women engaged in prostitution (hereinafter WIP) in southern Spain, specifically in Almería. The recruitment of research participants was carried out using the snowball sampling strategy. Through the first informant (who was known due to the professional work of one of the researchers), we made contact with other women who, in turn, provided us with access to other women. Another participant was recruited by calling a contact number published on a

website for sexual services. Participation was voluntary.

The majority of informants work in apartments located in urban centres classified as areas that are enclosed and invisible. A specific characteristic of the area studied in terms of where prostitution is carried out are run-down *cortijos*, farm houses scattered among the greenhouses. Because of the difficulty in locating them and the language barrier of the WIPs who engage in prostitution there, we do not have any informants working in these places.

Eleven WIPs participated in the study; of these, the majority (seven) were from Colombia. Except for two cases, the women interviewed were between 25 and 30 years old, and the majority have been in Spain for less than one year. None of the informants has any support from family in Spain. Ten are currently working, mainly in rented rooms where they draw no attention. The only one who is unable to work is the informant who usually works the streets but cannot do so because of the state of emergency. When eleven participants had been interviewed, topics began to be repeated; at that point, the researchers felt that data saturation had been achieved, and data collection was completed. The characteristics of all informants appear in Table 1.

Data collection

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews based on a guide with a set of open-ended questions to facilitate in-depth discussion of the topics of interest, addressing aspects such as the impact of the situation of confinement on their lives, fear of catching COVID-19, their emotions and feelings, and the relationship with their surroundings.

The interviews were conducted via telephone calls during the first two weeks of April 2020. The day and time were agreed with the informants in advance to ensure that they had enough time to take part in the interview in a relaxed manner. The average duration of the interviews was 30 min and they were carried out by a female researcher in order to improve the climate of trust of the study participants. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and were recorded with the permission of the women.

Data management and analysis

The recordings of the interviews were transcribed and reviewed by the interviewer in order to ensure that the transcript was accurate. The data were stored, managed, classified and ordered with the help of

Table 1
Characteristics of the informants.

	Country of origin	Age	Years in Spain	Family support	Place of work	Currently working
WIP1	Brazil	41	3 years	No	Rented room	Yes
WIP2	Colombia	30	2 years	No	Rented room	Yes
WIP3	Romania	63	15 years	No	Street	No
WIP4	Brazil	27	7 months	No	Rented room	Yes
WIP5	Colombia	25	4 months	No	Rented room	Yes
WIP6	Colombia	30	1 year	No	Rented room	Yes
WIP7	Colombia	28	5 months	No	Rented room	Yes
WIP8	Colombia	30	6 months	No	Rented room	Yes
WIP9	Colombia	29	9 months	No	Rented room	Yes
WIP10	Colombia	26	1 year	No	Rented room	Yes
WIP11	Romania	23	11 months	No	Rented room	Yes

ATLAS-ti 8.0 qualitative data analysis software. An iterative reading of the transcripts was done first, followed by the identification of emerging themes and their classification in order to create a system of categories to work with (Duque & Aristizábal, 2019).

Preliminary considerations

Before beginning to describe our results, the research team wishes to stress that the WIPs who agreed to participate in this study want it to reflect the situation of exclusion they are in and how they are exposed to COVID-19 for economic reasons: *We have no choice but to work; it's not a choice of wanting to or not. WIP2*. Moreover, they also want to emphasise—*so that society will be aware*—that, during the state of the health emergency, 'clients' continue to go to the places where prostitution takes place, that not only are they not complying with the quarantine, but the way they treat the women is even more degrading than before: *We want them to know that there are 'clients' and how they treat us. WIP1*.

In this study, the term 'client' is placed between quotes for ethical reasons, since 'client' is a term used for people who obtain a product or service by means of an economic transaction. It must be realised that, in the case of prostitution, the product or the merchandise is a human being. *"The term 'client' conveys the subtext of de-politicisation."* (Cobo, 2017).

Ethical considerations

The research protocol was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Nursing, Physiotherapy and Medicine of the University of Almería (protocol number EFM 74/2020). To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, a code was assigned to each participant. In all cases, an informed consent form was explained and read aloud and each informant gave her verbal agreement since personal contact was impossible.

Results

The lives of WIPs have been substantially altered since the first cases of people infected by COVID-19 were identified. After initially identifying 39 codes in the data, more prominent codes emerged and these were grouped into themes. A more detailed analysis made it possible to identify three main thematic categories that we present in the Table of Results (Table 2).

With or without COVID-19: Business can't stop

The prostitution business has been adapting to the arrival of COVID-19 and the state of health emergency with the goal of continuing their economic exploitation of the WIPs.

Reaction to infected or symptomatic WIPs

The respiratory symptoms caused by COVID-19 can be very striking. The reaction of the organisations and/or people who exploit the women has been to hide them, not to isolate them and prevent possible contagion, but rather to avoid losing 'clienteles'. The WIPs call the person who manages and oversees them the 'manager'; they are commonly known as 'Madames'.

A colleague and I had a little bit of fever and headache, very little cough, for a few days. The manager didn't let us leave the room on those days so that the 'clients' who came wouldn't see us.

WIP4

In other cases, women with symptoms moved are moved from the place they were working to another of the organisation's places.

Table 2
Thematic categories.

Thematic categories	Themes	Codes
With or without COVID-19 <i>Business can't stop</i>	Reaction to WIP infected or with symptoms	Hide those with symptoms Move those who are possibly infected Continue to work No health monitoring Changes from escort club to houses No working in the street Moved due to police pressure
	The business adapts	Lack of knowledge of protection WIP as a risk group Overcrowding in houses Prevention based on the will of the 'clients'
The women: between risking infection with COVID-19, need and social isolation.	The fear of COVID-19	Pay for the room Rents are adapted Shopping as a form of pressure Debts to mafias Pressure due to debts Work due to need
	Need that obligates: payments and debts that grow	No family here Concern for the family there Consequence of forced moves Only support is roommates
	Social isolation	The clients continue to visit They ask for the prices to be lowered They pressure the WIPs More aggressive Explanation of the aggressiveness
'The clients': <i>Taking advantage of the situation</i>	Looking for discounts	
	Worsening treatment from the 'clients'	

A girl from the escort club where I worked got sick. She had coronavirus symptoms and was working in the club as much as she could. There was a problem: a 'client' who was with the girl left the room very angry because he said that the girl was sick, that she didn't stop coughing, 'She couldn't even suck him off like that' and she seemed to have a fever. When they saw the situation, the club changed her to a chalet that belongs to the same owner.

WIP6

In no case was there any health check of the sick or symptomatic women. Access to health services was forbidden in order to prevent any attention being focused on the place where they work.

Two girls from another place came. They said they were infected. They were kept in a room for a few days. They didn't go to the hospital. They soon started to work.

WIP7

The fact that most of these women are foreigners living illegally in Spain have been used to prevent them from accessing health services, as an informant stated.

The manager told us that we shouldn't go because they would ask us how we had become infected and they would ask us for our papers.

WIP9

The business adapts

After the state of alarm was declared, escort clubs had to close. The WIPs from these places were moved to apartments or chalets where they could continue to work clandestinely.

We were brought a few days after the club was closed.

WIP7

There are places where the work is normal and the clients continue to go with the girls.

WIP4

Just one WIP, who usually works in the street, commented that she has had to stop working due to police pressure.

I kept on working until the last minute because I don't have anything to eat (...) I'm not as afraid of the virus as I am of a fine from the police for breaking quarantine.

WIP3

Law enforcement authorities have managed to shut down some of the apartments where prostitution is taking place, although the mobility to which the mafias subject the WIPs hinders detecting them.

For several night, the police went to some apartments, so they warned each other and hid the girls elsewhere so they wouldn't be seen.

WIP10

The women: between risking infection with COVID-19, need and social isolation

The vulnerability of the WIPs has increased because of the pandemic situation.

The fear of COVID-19

Just as the rest of the population, WIPs are afraid of becoming infected by the coronavirus, although they state that they are not very clear on how they can protect themselves.

We don't know about this quarantine stuff; we don't have masks or gloves. Why can't anyone go outside?

WIP3

The WIPs are a group of risk at risk of becoming infected by COVID-19 for various reasons. One the one hand, the places where they live are the same places where they work. There can be up to ten women in the same apartment in a situation of near overcrowding in which four or more share a room.

People are entering the house all day long; if one of the women is infected, it is impossible for the others not to be.

WIP8

The health status of the men who visit these women is also unknown. An informant tells us about her experience:

A 'client' I was with was coughing a lot. I got scared and asked him if he had the symptoms of the disease (...) we feel overwhelmed because we don't want to work because we're afraid of the disease.

WIP6

Although these women try to protect themselves to the best of their ability, they depend on the willingness of the clients.

The girls who serve the 'clients' try to do so wearing masks.

WIP1

Need that obligates: payments and debts that grow

All the informants agreed to that their greatest fear is not having the money to pay for, first of all, the rent for the rooms they live in, since that leads to them being thrown out of their homes and an increase in their debts.

I'm not afraid of the coronavirus; I'm afraid of not having any money. I don't know what I'll do if they throw me out for not paying.

WIP3

The organisations themselves are adjusting the money they charge the WIPs for the rooms they live and work in because of the drop in 'clients'.

The debts charged for the apartments are 50% less because the girls aren't working much. We pay 60 or 70 euros a week for a room.

WIP1

The debts to the organisations, mainly due to the trip from the country of origin to Spain, are one of the main signs for detecting a victim of trafficking. The informants comment that they have debts to pay and that, because of this, they are obliged to engage in prostitution, although only one told us how much she owed.

I have a debt of 3000 euros.

WIP5

After asking them what would happen if they did not pay their debts, they make it clear that paying is not optional, although they try to say that they are not afraid for their physical safety.

We feel very overwhelmed because we don't want to work, but we owe money and have to pay.

WIP9

The WIPs who are not working because they usually do so in the street, or are working less in order to avoid infection, are reaching an extreme situation of exclusion.

I have no food, I don't have anything, not even money to pay the rent.

WIP3

We work once a week to get money just to shop once a week.

WIP2

Social isolation

All of the informants are migrants and none has family support in Spain. Their families – in many cases, their children – are in their countries of origin and depend on any remittances the women are able to send them.

I'm more worried about the situation of my family than mine here; I have to send them everything I can.

WIP8

We miss our families, our kids. They were our support.

WIP6

The geographical mobility to which the organisations subject the WIPs usually increases their social isolation. Even if they justify this practice, it results in increased social isolation because they are not able to have any network of friends.

It's so that the client doesn't get tired of the same girls.

WIP78

I don't have anyone here who can help me, not even friends.

WIP4

The WIPs often talk about their colleagues, the women they live with, as their only support in Spain. They mention that they also create ties with other women who work in nearby apartments.

We are our own support and support each other dealing with the 'clients'

WIP5

With the confinement, the support of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with the WIPs has decreased. They also comment that few of the women are aware of the NGOs and the work they are doing. Their situation as illegal immigrants in Spain also causes mistrust.

Many girls don't even know where to go to ask for food. They don't know who to ask for help.

WIP5

Some girls are afraid of the associations that offer them preventive material; maybe they're afraid of not having papers.

WIP4

Effects on their mental health

The state of emergency has caused their social isolation and their invisibility to increase. Confined to the apartments where they work, unable to leave, having hardly any contact with the outside and with the pressure of having to make payments, their anxiety, feelings of loneliness, sadness and despair have increased.

All the girls are stressed, they are confined, working little and have no economic reserves.

WIP4

It ends up affecting my sleep; I've hardly slept since all this began.

WIP7

I cry every day.

WIP3

The 'clients': taking advantage of the situation

The clients continue to visit

Despite the state of health emergency, there are still men who seek the services of the WIP. In general, this is less frequent than usual, although it depends on the area where they work.

There are still many 'clients'. They come directly to the door of the chalet and enter.

WIP7

With regard to the characteristics of the 'clients', the informants comment that they are mainly Spaniards and of a very wide range of ages.

The 'clients' are almost all Spaniards in the club where we used to work. Now only Spaniards come to this chalet.

WIP7

Looking for discounts

With the confinement, the men are trying to take advantage of this exceptional situation to get cheaper prices. They all say that they have had cases in which the 'client' has demanded a *discount*, and have ended up having problems with them because of this.

He told me 'You girls shouldn't be working, should you? Maybe the police will find out.' Using the threat to make me charge him 20 euros.

WIP2

Worsening treatment from the 'clients'

Our informants agree that treatment by the men is now worse and more dangerous than before and they are more violent. The reason they find for it is that they come with high levels of anxiety and aggressiveness.

The 'clients' aren't like before. Imagine what those men are like are with the quarantine, with fits of anxiety. I don't know what can happen. I might end up with a scare. If they treated us bad before, imagine now. Now they humiliate us.

WIP11

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe and understand the experience that WIPs are experiencing during the state of emergency due to COVID-19 in southern Spain. We have not found any previous studies on the WIPs' experience in situations of state of health emergencies such as that caused by the current pandemic. We identified relevant themes determined by the actions of the organisations and/or people who exploit them – economic need, the social isolation of these women and the violence inflicted by the 'clients' – that worsen the situation of vulnerability of these women and cause them to be exposed to infection by coronavirus, as already shown by the [Experts Group GRETA \(2020a, 2020b\)](#).

Throughout the research process, we have taken into account the re-victimisation of the WIPs as they recounted their experiences conditioned by pressure, threats and their administrative situation in Spain ([Jorge Barbuzano, Antolínez Domínguez, & García Sedano, 2019](#)) or because they are victims of trafficking ([Silva, Manzanero, Bengoa, & Contreras, 2018](#)).

During the period of the state of emergency, the organisations that exploit WIPs have continued to function, hiding the women, moving the ones with symptoms of COVID-19 infection, coercing them, violating their rights and denying them medical assistance. The closure of escort clubs has led to the WIPs moving to apartments. These prostitution sites are *hidden* or *invisible*; only the 'clients' know where they are. This clandestine situation makes the women even more vulnerable to abuse ([Ranea Triviño, 2019](#)).

WIPs must overcome the fear of catching the COVID-19 virus caused by the obligation to continue engaging in prostitution. It is estimated that 90% of WIPs work as prostitutes because they are forced ([de Miguel Álvarez, 2012](#)).

The coercion used by the organisations is seen in the obligation to pay debts and other expenses mentioned by the informants such as accommodation and food. The WIPs deny this pressure and omit detailed information about their current situations. In no case do they raise the possibility of not making these payments since they are aware that this alternative does not exist for them, evidence of these women's' difficult situations ([Silva et al., 2018](#)). We suspect that they may be victims of trafficking for sexual purposes. The violence to which WIPs are subjected to by the mafias, pimps and clients, and their anxiousness to make the payments ends up becoming normalised; in another context, this would be considered rape or sexual abuse ([Chicano, 2018](#)). To normalise

the situation of prostitution and coercion in which these women live is to normalise the acceptance of sexual violence (Sirvent Garcia del Valle, 2019). As Cobo (2017) says prostitution is an exceptional viewpoint to understand how the most brutal logics of both global capitalism and patriarchal systems are embodied in this institution. Trafficking being the fundamental tool for sexual exploitation as presented in this study.

Most WIPs are migrants (Gómez-Suárez & Pérez-Freire, 2016) – as are all of our informants – without family or a network of support in Spain. Their social circles are reduced to their roommates and the ‘clients’, what Palacios Picos, Pinedo González, and de la Iglesia Gutiérrez (2018) call ‘familial loneliness’. This social isolation brings them a feeling of loneliness that affects them psychologically. There is a relationship between psychological damage and health (Pinedo González, Palacios Picos, & de la Iglesia Gutiérrez, 2018). In our study, we found that – as shown by other authors – social isolation leads to increased vulnerability to loneliness (Krüsi, Kerr, Taylor, Rhodes, & Shannon, 2016) that makes them incapable of seeking alternatives to prostitution. Poor and alone, without support networks, they have no choice but to continue in that world (Anthias, 2013). For WIPs, this activity is seen as a means of survival (Gerassi, 2015) without being aware of their situation as victims of sexual exploitation.

Conclusions

The activity of engaging in prostitution has not stopped at any time during the state of emergency. The conditions for engaging in prostitution have worsened during this quarantine, since the activity exposes them to a disease that they fear and do not know how to prevent. With confinement, WIPs have become clandestine and invisible, increasing their vulnerability and exclusion.

The pressure of the organisations that exploit them to take responsibility for payments and for debts incurred, and the social isolation they suffer has led to an increase in anxiety, feelings of loneliness and despair among the WIPs.

The WIPs continue to receive ‘clients’ who pressure them to lower their prices for sex services; an increase in aggressive behaviour towards the women has been found.

An increase in support networks and the work of NGOs and associations working with WIPs is essential in order to empower these women and help them to escape the snares of prostitution.

Constraints of the study

The WIPs’ distrust of people they do not know and the monitoring they are subjected to in the places where they live and engage in prostitution hindered the process of recruiting participants for the study. This study was unable to include informants who work in farmhouses because these women are difficult to reach. Many of them are unknown to the associations or the police since they are hidden and constantly moved from farmhouse to farmhouse, and because of to the language barrier, since most of these women are originally from Nigeria.

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