



# **FEMALE SEX WORKERS LIFE IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC**

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE CONSEQUENCES  
OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SWEDEN

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In 2020, COVID-19 spread worldwide, and a state of pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization. Female sex workers are in many ways dependant on the social conditions of society and have, throughout time, been considered as a highly victimized group. This study aims to gain insight into the changes and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has had on female sex workers in Sweden by conducting semi-structured interviews with individuals who, through their employment, have connections to female sex workers. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results revealed four themes that describe the changes and consequences witnessed by the participants. The first theme entails the vulnerabilities and circumstances that female sex workers are conditioned by in society. The second theme demonstrates the economic consequences which the pandemic outbreak caused. Not only in relation to expenses and difficulties traveling but also in terms of an increased market due to unemployment and lockdowns in Central Europe. This theme also includes a subgroup of physical consequences as a result of the competition created by the increased market of female sex workers in Sweden. This has caused the women to have to take additional risks and abuse. The third theme includes the bureaucratic and social complications caused by the social restrictions enforced to hinder the spread of the COVID-19. The fourth and last theme presents the participants' post-pandemic predictions.

*Keywords:* consequences, COVID-19, female sex workers, pandemic, sex work industry, victimization.

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# INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2020, a novel coronavirus spread all over the world and shook society to its core. On February 11th, the World Health Organization (WHO) named the new virus COVID-19. One month later, on March 11th, WHO declared that the COVID-19 is to be considered a Pandemic (WHO 2021). As countries all around the world have tried to handle a state of emergency and combat the rapid spread of the COVID-19, several implementations had to be enforced upon society and its citizens. COVID-19 has had major impacts on several dimensions, such as education and employment rates (Folkhälsomyndigheten 2020). No one has been left unaffected regardless of nationality, gender, or socioeconomic status. The research of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has been relevant throughout the media and academics from scholars of medicine, criminology, and sociology. However, one group of people who are often considered as one of the most victimized and oppressed groups of society, the female sex workers, has been left unexplored.

In this thesis, the changes and consequences which the COVID-19 pandemic has had on female sex workers from March of 2020 to March of 2021 will be explored. In the research of criminology, the victimization of female sex workers has been extensively studied and explored on various levels. Female sex workers are often considered outsiders in society. It is a group which in several ways are vulnerable, not only due to them often lacking permanent residence or a legitimate employment status (Matthews 2015; Svedin et al. 2012) but also due to the various forms of abuse they are exposed to (Farley 2003; Hedin & Månsson 1998). Many of the women working in the sex work industry in Sweden come from countries that lack educational and economic opportunities, and they, therefore, travel to Sweden with the intention of gaining financial stability for themselves and their families (Hedin & Månsson 1998; Laanemets 2008). The lives of female sex workers are in several ways shaped by their surroundings and social circumstances, such as social protection and legislation. As the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced and changed structures and routines of society, agencies, and authorities, one might wonder how the pandemic has affected the people who, prior to the pandemic outbreak, already were in a vulnerable position. Not only on a personal level but also their surroundings and the social factors which they rely on (Polismyndigheten 2019).

## **Aim**

The aim of this study is to gain insight into the changes and consequences which the COVID-19 pandemic has had on female sex workers in Sweden. By interviewing people who have connections to female sex workers through their employment, their experiences and knowledge will be used as material to gain an understanding of how female sex workers' daily lives have been changed during the period of March 2020 to March 2021. Furthermore, this thesis also aims to understand how the consequences are associated with each other.

## **Research Questions**

1. How has female sex workers' life changed during the COVID-19 Pandemic?
2. What are the consequences of these changes for female sex workers?

## **Previous Research**

### *Victimization of Female Sex Workers*

Female sex workers have throughout history been victimized and oppressed by various factors of society. In this section, some of those factors will be presented to give an understanding of the victimization of female sex workers globally and in Sweden.

Studies have shown evidence that several women in the sex work industry have been exposed to human trafficking with the purpose of selling sexual services. Many of those women experience mental and physical abuse (Matthews 2015). The sex trafficking industry is often compared to a form of modern-day slavery, where women are bought, sold, and transferred all over the world for the purpose of gaining profit (Raymond, Hughes, & Gomez, 2001). In some cases, women are lured into trafficking with promises of financial opportunities. These types of cases and forms of oppression are typical for controlling and binding women to the sex work industry (Raymond, Hughes, & Gomez 2001; Ribeiro 2010; Wilson 1998). The general understanding of the central reasons for why women involve themselves in the sex work industry is due to socioeconomic disadvantages, such as low level of education or lack of opportunities to gain legitimate employment and financial security in their home country (Hedin & Månsson 1998; Laanemets 2008). They are, therefore, dependant on the financial stability which sex work is able to provide.

Research and reports on the sex work situation in Sweden found that many of the women selling sexual services in Sweden had a foreign origin. The majority of the women

come from countries in East Europe or Nigeria. Research also found that many of these women have a background in human trafficking (Ribeiro 2010; Svedin et al. 2012). It is a group that is highly vulnerable due to them often lacking permanent residence or a legitimate employment status (Matthews 2015; Svedin et al. 2012). The women themselves tend not to report crimes of human trafficking. Instead, most reported cases come from organizations or institutions that focus on supporting and protecting female sex workers. As many of the women lack knowledge of the Swedish legal system and language, such organizations are crucial for the possibility of protecting and giving legal remedy to the women oppressed by the sex work industry (Polismyndigheten 2019).

Matthews (2008) discusses the complexity of understanding sex workers' victimization and oppression. As sex workers are not a homogenous group, one can not conclude that the women are subjected to the same forms of victimization. The intensity and nature of the victimization are dependent on the form of sex work the women are involved in. Several women involved in sex work have testified that they have grown up in neglectful and abusive homes with a background of sexual violence. In research by Svedin and Priebe (2007) and Hedin and Månsson (1998), sexual abuse in one's childhood is considered to be a common factor for many women in the sex work industry. In Svedin and Priebe's research (2004; 2009) on adolescence in Sweden and the common causes for their involvement in sex work, strong connections between the teenagers who had sold sexual services and a history of sexual abuse could be found. This traumatic experience can influence the child's ability to create healthy socialization and relation to sexuality. It is not unusual that the child incorporates the abuser's perspective and behavior into their own identity, which results in the child believing that she is "good for nothing than sex" (Farley 2003, p. 257). Consequently, they become highly vulnerable to exploitation and victimization by the sex work industry (Farley 2003; Hedin & Månsson 1998).

Female sex workers are not only put in a position of victimization by past traumatic experiences, clients, or pimps but also by society itself. The women are often regarded as outsiders or criminals in the eyes of the public (Matthews 2015; Svedin et al. 2012). In the public sphere, female sex workers often have to endure various forms of harassment from the community they live and work in. Due to their involvement in the sex work industry, the women experience marginalization and stigmatization from the public and state agencies (Matthews 2008; Sanders 2004).

## *Research on the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Since the COVID-19 pandemic is active during the process of writing this thesis, research on the consequences of the pandemic in relation to female sex workers and their victimizations is scarce. However, in an article published by Norstedts Juridik<sup>1</sup> in January 2021, the victimization of sex workers was discussed in relation to the Covid- 19 pandemic. In the article, two social secretaries working at the Mika clinic<sup>2</sup>, spoke on the increased dangers that women in sex work are positioned in. One example is the situation where women are forced to meet clients whom they typically would decline. As the pandemic continues to affect society and its citizens, the police have started to see a new group of teenagers selling sexual services and the general victimization of women in Sweden has increased. According to Simon Häggström, a detective at the national operations department (NOA) of människohandelsgruppen, sex work is often described as the oldest profession in history. However, in reality, it should be considered the oldest form of oppression. Häggström claims that the police force might not always be the most suitable in assisting victims of human trafficking. Therefore, organizations such as the Mika clinic are preferred in giving such support to the women before the police force is involved (Norstedts Juridik 2021).

Gerell, Kardell, and Kindgren (2020) explored the association between crime in Sweden and COVID-19. In this study, eight forms of crime categories were investigated from police-reported crimes during ten weeks. Since the COVID-19 interventions from the Swedish government have been much less strict than that of other countries, the researchers predicted weaker consequences on the crime rates. Despite this, assaults, burglary, and pickpocketing have decreased significantly. In contrast, the levels of narcotics and personal robbery had been unchanged. The level of reductions is relatively low for the majority of the crime categories, with a decrease of approximately 5-20%. The most significant exception was pickpocketing, with a 59% reduction relative to the expected levels.

Eisner and Nivette (2020) predicted that the majority of consequences caused by COVID-19 are expected to come from the measures promoting social distancing. Their hypothesis is that while domestic violence will increase, street violence will decrease. Moreover, it is likely that child maltreatment will increase due to an increase in mental health

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<sup>1</sup>Norstedts Juridik/ Norstedts Law, is part of the Karnov Group and is publisher and supplier of juridical tools and services. The company is supported by Zeteo, one of Sweden's largest jurisdictional information services (Karnov Group 2019).

<sup>2</sup> An organization located in Stockholm who provides various forms of support to individuals who sell sexual services

issues as a result of lockdown and the virus. The present study will take a closer look on if and how sex workers daily life has changed due to the pandemic.

## **METHOD**

### **Procedure**

#### *Participant Recruitment*

Through an initial contact within the police force, five additional contacts were recruited using a snowball sampling. The contacts consisted of two police officers who are part of the Människohandelsgruppen<sup>3</sup>, one district attorney and two social workers active at Evonhuset<sup>4</sup>. Within this group of contacts, two defaults occurred. Out of the three potential participants from the police force, two participated in interviews, while the third police officer did not respond to any of the emails sent. Regarding the two social services workers at Evonhuset, only one was able to participate as the second person was on maternity leave. In the process of finding additional individuals to interview, a member of The Salvation Army was also contacted as they had been recommended and mentioned by other participants who had been interviewed. However, they declined participation. Since the majority of the participants were employed within state-owned institutions or organizations, it felt essential to interview individuals and organizations who were independent of the state and had a closer relationship with female sex workers. The hope was that those individuals could give a different perspective and dimension of female sex workers' experiences. After searching for various voluntary organizations that work with female sex workers, two organizations could be

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<sup>3</sup>Direct translation: Human trafficking group. This group is part of the Swedish police authority and aims to make Sweden into an unattractive market for human trafficking through preventative enforcement and combating organized criminal networks (Polismyndigheten 2019).

<sup>4</sup>Evonhuset is located in Malmö and provides support to individuals who sell, purchase, and/or trade sexual services. Evonhuset offers counseling, meetings, and practical support. Also guidance in terms of contacts with other social resources such as the police force (Nationellt metodstödsteam mot prostitution och människohandel n.d.).



found, Noomi<sup>5</sup> and Talita<sup>6</sup>. After sending emails to the two organizations, Noomi agreed to participate in an interview, while Talita declined participation.

In total, five individuals were recruited to participate in interviews. This included two police officers who work within Männiksohandelsgruppen, one district attorney who actively works in cases related to human trafficking and female exploitation, one social worker who works at Evonhuset and one social worker who works within the voluntary organization Noomi as responsible for the outreach activities.

### *Data Collection and Instruments*

This thesis is constructed with a qualitative research design. In terms of data collection, semi-structured interviews were selected. A semi-structured interview gives the opportunity to both have a structured interview with pre-written questions with an open-ended structure and follow-up questions throughout the interview to create the possibility to investigate each participant's experience and professional knowledge of the topic (William 2015; Packer 2011). The interviews were all conducted online as the pandemic was still ongoing at the time of data collection. The questions chosen for this study were originally written in Swedish as it is the native language of the participants and interviewer. The questions can be found in *Appendix 1*. and have been translated into English.

The interviews were conducted through video conference service or phone call depending on the participants' needs. The interviews were all digitally audio recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed verbatim. The time of the interviews ranged from approximately 45 to 60 minutes. For the sake of presenting the results in English, the relevant sections from the transcribed material were translated from Swedish to English, which can be seen in the section of results.

### **Data Material**

The original raw material of this thesis is the digitally recorded interviews. The collected data has been transcribed in order to be able to process the material and conduct an analysis. The

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<sup>5</sup>Noomi is a voluntary organization located in Malmö. They provide support measures to individuals who have been exploited in human trafficking for the purpose of providing sexual services or sex work. Noomi operates a sheltered house, provides legal counseling, and works to reach out to people active in sex work. Noomi also focuses on educating and advocacy work. The organization is run by the voluntary association Hela Människan (Hela Människan n.d.).

<sup>6</sup>Talita is an voluntary organization that works preventative, reach out to people active in sex work, and rehabilitative. Their goal is to give people in sex work a new chance to a new life. Talita is active both in Sweden and internationally and runs two sheltered houses in Stockholm (Talita n.d.).

transcribing was conducted by the interviewer as it is a highly valuable process in familiarizing oneself with the data and the first step in performing the analysis (Riessman 1993; Bird 2005). The participants included in this thesis were people who, through their job and/or employment, have a connection to female sex workers on a regular basis. The participants have relations with the women on different dimensions, all from police officers or district attorneys to social workers and people working in voluntary organizations. All of the participants are employed and active in Malmö, Sweden.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Prior to the interviews, the participants were all informed of the study and asked for consent. The information sent to the participants also included the principles of voluntarism so that all participants were aware that they could at any time discontinue their participation (Menih 2013). Furthermore, factors to ensure confidentiality and respect each participant's anonymity and autonomy had to be taken into consideration when handling personal information such as emails or phone numbers (Kelley et al. 2003). Due to the interviews needing to be recorded and transcribed, approval to digitally record the interview on a dictaphone was requested from all participants. While transcribing the recorded data, the names or information that could identify the participants were excluded. The recorded data was immediately deleted after the transcribing was finished (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006).

Due to the pandemic being active at the time of the interviews, all of the interviews were conducted online to ensure the safety of all participants involved. Malmö University zoom link, with a password, was used to fulfill the highest possible security, which was advised by Malmö University. For the participants who, due to their institutions or organizations policy, were not allowed to use Zoom video conferencing, either a phone call or Microsoft Teams was used.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The data were analyzed through a thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. This approach of analysis is applied as it can in a flexible manner identify, report, and analyze themes and patterns across data. Thematic analysis's primary objective is to create a process for characterizing and interpreting data on individuals' experiences and knowledge in relation to the research question and area of the study (Braun & Clarke 2006; 2012). Therefore, rather than searching for the frequency of the themes or how many times it

occurred in the data material, themes that were relevant to the research question were considered of more analytic value (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas 2013). Thus, thematic analysis is well suited for this study's aim to understand and identify changes and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the female sex workers in Sweden, despite the rather low number of participants.

To conduct this type of analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist of "criteria for a good thematic analysis" (p. 96) was used. Furthermore, the analysis process followed the six recursive phases, going back and forth as necessary for the analytic process to be completed. The six phases go as follows: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

### *Data Analysis Process*

In phase one, the familiarization of the data began by reading the transcribed material repeatedly and creating notes of general thoughts. During the second phase, the initial codes were created of the data systematically. Sections that were interesting for the analysis or were seen as essential factors were formed into codes. These codes were put into an excel document to be able to systematically add sentences together with suitable codes. In the third phase, the searching and creation of themes began. The process of searching for themes was initiated by organizing the codes created previously into themes and subthemes. Also, the themes were delineated so that one could see the connections among them. This process was time-consuming and required one to read the data several times. Once the fourth phase was reached, the various themes and subthemes were once again reviewed to control the external heterogeneity (identifiable and clear differences between the themes) and the internal homogeneity (purposeful coherence of data between the themes). During phase five, the themes were named and defined. The notes of the various themes were read, and the definitions of the themes and subthemes were clarified. In the final phase, phase six, the result and discussion relating to the research questions were produced.

## **RESULTS**

The various themes and subthemes extracted from the data are presented in *Table 1*. In the analysis process of the data, four themes could be found. These themes are *Financial Vulnerabilities*, *Economic Consequences*, *Social Restrictions*, and *Post-Pandemic Prediction*.

In relation to the theme *Economic Consequences*, a subgroup could be found. This subgroup was named *Physical Consequences*. It should be noted that all of the sections from the transcribed material have been paraphrased and translated from Swedish to English.

Table 1. Themes and subthemes of participants experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Subtheme</u>	<u>Subgroup</u>
<b>Vulnerabilities</b>	Socioeconomic Disadvantage Indebted Fear of COVID-19 Destructive Behaviour	
<b>Economic Consequences</b>	Increased Expenses Increased Market Increased Poverty COVID-19 Lockdown	
		<b>Physical Consequences</b> Additional Risks and Abuse
<b>Social Restrictions</b>	Paused Processes Operational Difficulties	
<b>Post-Pandemic Prediction</b>		

## **Vulnerabilities**

Before one can understand the various consequences that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on female sex workers and the sex work industry in Sweden, one must first look at the underlying contributors to female sex workers' victimization and background. By understanding such factors, one can also better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected those circumstances and their daily life. This theme is mainly concerned with the pre-pandemic circumstances and vulnerabilities in which female sex workers are characterized. Within the theme *Vulnerabilities*, four subthemes could be identified; *Socioeconomic Disadvantage*, *Indebted*, *Fear of COVID-19*, and *Destructive Behavior*.

### ***Socioeconomic Disadvantage***

When discussing the underlying contributors to why women chose the life of a sex worker, the concept of free will often becomes relevant. The participants in the study have witnessed that the majority of women involved in the sex work industry in Sweden are from countries with socioeconomic disadvantages, such as low opportunities for education or financial stability. Consequently, the women consider being a sex worker in Sweden as a better alternative than living in poverty in their home country.

*Police officer 1: We can discuss the concept of free will and what it means, if one lives in their home country in extreme poverty and has a family situation that requires that one earns money. Then the “free will” in relation to selling one's body in Sweden of free will just basically means that one alternative is better than the other. I can imagine that there are layers in hell<sup>7</sup> when one comes to Sweden as a sex worker.*

*Prosecutor: There are many that come here (Sweden) from other countries such as Rumania, and then get oppressed and used very brutally and must take a lot of clients.*

*Police officer 2: We have Swedish established people who might go to university and might have a destructive view on sex to illiterate young women from East Europe, South America, and Africa who does not have any knowledge of society. So the group of women is very broad and the victimization is very different.*

This factor itself is a significant contributor to why women turn to the sex work industry. In some cases, this factor is combined with the responsibility to provide for their family in their home country, which further binds them to work as sex workers. Many of the women who come to Sweden for financial stability are the primary provider for their families in their home country. They must earn an income to pay for their potential debt and make enough money to send to their family for the sake of their survival.

*Evonhuset: (the women) often have children that they need to provide for or older parents that are sickly or something like that. One needs to be responsible for providing for them. It is a burden for the women who come to Sweden to create a better economic situation than what they have at home.*

*Noomi: There were 5-6 women from Romania who had young children that they had to provide for in their home country. I would not like to call it free choice, they were forced. Either due to the circumstances or from someone forcing them.*

The participants from Evonhuset and Noomi spoke of how many of the women have to provide for their children or parents and therefore feel pressured to earn money, regardless of the risks they must take and the victimization they face.

### ***Indebted***

It is not unusual that the female sex workers are put in a debt position by the individuals “providing” the women with work and clients in Sweden. Not only by giving the women housing but also by paying for the travel expenses and therefore making it possible for the women to come to Sweden. The intention for “helping” the women go to Sweden is to earn money by pressuring them to pay back their debts regardless of the risks and possible harms they might experience.

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<sup>7</sup> The participant originally used the Swedish expression “det finns grader i helvetet”. It means that despite things being bad, it could always be worse. It refers to Dante's description of hell in Divine Comedy.

*Police officer 1: I can not prove it, but a person that lives in extreme poverty in Venezuela or Rumania or Nigeria does not have the ability or means to get to Sweden, they need "help".*

*Noomi: The women who come from other countries are very focused on making money, either to provide for their families and send money home or because of the threat of their alleged debt. There is always a debt. Some form of debt that they have to pay.*

As many of the women come from countries with low socioeconomic status or a situation of poverty, the women themselves would not be able to pay for the expenses to travel to Sweden. They must, therefore, rely on the possibilities which trafficking provides, despite the risks and position of debt they get positioned in.

### ***Fear of COVID-19***

At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, many women tried to leave the sex work industry or/and return to their home countries. However, shortly after, most of the women returned to Sweden and started selling sexual services once again due to their financial dependency on the income sex work provides and the responsibilities they must fulfill. The majority of the participants could see indications of this, not only from the decrease of advertisements online but also from talking to the women themselves who expressed their wish to leave Sweden and stop selling sexual services due to their fear and worries COVID-19.

*Noomi: When the pandemic broke out, there was much fear (among the women) and those who could, tried to quit or remove their advertisement. But since they need to make money, they can not do something about it. They are sex workers and pretty soon they all came back (to Sweden) or started selling sexual services again.*

*Evonhuset: There was also worry about the spread of the virus. For some, this was seen as the last drop since they can't protect themselves. Some felt that they had to apply for economic assistance since they did not want to sell sexual services. Some continued to sell since they had no other choice. They are in a situation of oppression or dependant on the money (they gain from selling sexual services).*

*Prosecutor: The market decreased in the beginning of the pandemic outbreak, but it feels like it increased after that.*

### ***Destructive Behavior***

Previously in this theme, the underlying contributors for involvement in sex work have been connected to various socioeconomic factors. However, when discussing female sex workers in Sweden, many participants mentioned another group of women with different contributors to the women previously addressed in this theme. The participants have witnesses that female sex workers who have a Swedish origin use sex work as a form of self-harm rather than

means for creating economic stability. The women sell sexual services to suppress feelings of anxiety caused by childhood trauma or abusive home conditions.

Some of the participants could see evidence indicating an increase in this group of sex workers in Sweden after the COVID-19 outbreak. They believed that this was mainly due to the social restrictions and being more isolated from one's potentially abusive family. This has caused the women's mental health to deteriorate and be more vulnerable to grooming into the sex work industry and more prone to self-harm.

*Noomi: There is a different problem when it comes to Swedish girls and when it comes to destructive behaviors. They have been groomed or sexually abused at a young age and uses sex work as a way to numb their anxiety.*

*Evonhuset: There are also more young people who can be groomed or manipulated into selling sex and sex work due to the limit of social networks.*

*Åklagare: I think there is a big market with women from Sweden who has not come to Sweden to work, but they get involved in the sex work industry in other ways. They are young girls who get pulled into it with traumatic and abusive childhoods and hurt themselves by selling sexual services.*

## **Economic Consequences**

While the previous theme displayed the various contributors and circumstances to why women are unable to leave the sex work industry, which mainly consisted of financial and social reasons, this theme indicates the economic changes and consequences that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on female sex workers. The subthemes related to this theme are *Increased Expenses* and *Increased Market*. This theme also entails a subgroup, *Physical Consequences*, which is an indirect consequence of the economic consequences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Increased Expenses***

The first subtheme, *Increased Expenses*, is related to the economic issues which the pandemic has resulted in. Due to several countries' lockdowns or closed borders, it has restricted the availability for the women to travel to Sweden or their home countries. As most countries require that people take COVID-19 tests before traveling to prevent the spreading of COVID-19, the women have had more issues and worries about the increased traveling expenses. The tests create yet another cost that the women must pay for, and this sometimes makes it impossible for them to come to Sweden to earn money or travel home to be with their families.

*Noomi: It has become more expensive for the women to come here (Sweden). We can help the women with such matters. Now they have to take a COVID-19 test as well, before they travel. Now it is not only the plane ticket they need to pay for, but also the Covid- 19 test. It is quite expensive and they need to take that into consideration.*

### **Increased Market**

The second subtheme, *Increased Market*, entails the increased number of women on the sex work market in Sweden. The first group of women originates from the increased unemployment in Sweden. The pandemic has created an increased level of unemployment due to the closedown of several industries. The participants, especially Noomi and Evonhuset, started seeing a new group of female sex workers. The majority of the women had lost their employment and, as a consequence, started selling sexual services. Most of the women had either never been a sex worker before or had in the past sold a few times but quit once they got employment elsewhere.

*Evonhuset: A new group of people starts selling sexual services and it is often people who have not sold before but had other jobs that they might have lost now due to COVID-19, since the restaurant industry, the house cleaning industry, and hotels are closed down. In some cases they have sold a couple of times before and thinks that is the only way to earn money now*

*Noomi: We could see a lot of new women, meaning, women that have not sold sexual services before. These women were a bit older and had children in their home country, many came from South Europe and had lost their jobs and had to provide for their children.*

Another factor that has contributed to the increased market is the lockdown in Central Europe. The lockdown and closedown of the red light districts and legal brothels caused female sex workers to lose their employment. As a consequence, the women had to travel to another country where they could earn an income. The participants could see evidence of an increase in the online advertisements, especially when it came to German speaking women. They believe that due to Sweden being relatively open for traveling in 2020 compared to other countries, female sex workers working in Germany and the Netherlands traveled to Sweden.

*Police Officer 1: In Central Europe, for example Germany, they have a different legislation (when it comes to sex work) there with brothels. When it was closed down, Sweden started to look like a open market for sex work. As a consequence, the advertising market has increased in Sweden since the Covid- 19 pandemic started. I do not know the exact percentage, but I would say that it is close to 100 percent.*

*Prosecutor: Since it is possible to come to Sweden, we have had open boarders for a longer time, so Sweden has become a favorable contry for sex work since we do not have as many restrictions*



*as other countries. Unfortunately, I think it has increased in Sweden due to the lockdown in other countries.*

*Evonhuset: It has been lockdown in many countries but not Sweden. This can be a factor for why more women are choosing to come here to sell sexual services. They simply go to other places to sell. The red light district has been closed for a long time and this makes one wonder where all the women that have been in Germany and the Netherlands went.*

As presented in this subtheme, the increased number of female sex workers has had a significant impact on the women. As the number of women on the market increases, the women must work harder for their clients and compromise on their safety by offering acts they typically would not. This takes us to the indirect consequences of the *Economic Consequences*, the *Physical Consequences*.

## **Physical Consequences**

Although the *Physical Consequences* of the COVID-19 pandemic are a strong indication on their own, as it is an indirect consequence of the economic consequences, it must be discussed in relation to the previous theme. This subgroup, *Physical Consequences*, contains one subtheme, *Additional Risks and Abuse*.

### ***Additional Risks and Abuse***

As discussed in the previous subtheme, women are forced to take greater risks due to the increased number of female sex workers on the Swedish market. This includes accepting violent behaviors and demands from clients to reach the monthly quota, having sexual relations with a person who is showing symptoms of COVID-19, and lowering the prices for their service. It could also entail taking more clients or not using a condom, increasing the risk of pregnancy or getting a sexually transmitted disease (STD).

*Police Officer 2: One can also speculate if the sex workers need to make money and also need to pay to the peoply they are indebted to, then they probably need to take even more risks or sell other services (due to the increased market). It might be other forms of sexual acts and violence to earn money. I can not prove it but it is likely that they are forced to do more than the normal sex and more advertisement to get more clients. They must take additional risks to reach the quota. And not only the risk with the virus but everything else, like not using a condom, anything to earn money.*

*Noomi: In the end, the women must take clients that are coughing. they do not have a choice. These women have become even more victimized since the pandemic outbreak.*

As the poverty among citizens has increased due to the unemployment in Sweden, an increase of crimes on female sex workers could be seen among the participants. The female

sex workers who live in apartment brothels have become more targeted for crimes such as robbery and abuse. People are aware that the women keep their money in the apartments and, therefore, become an attractive target. These robberies tend to be violent, and the women are often subjected to physical abuse.

*Noomi: When the pandemic erupted, there occurred a lot of robberies like that (at the apartment brothels) and I think it is because people were desperate. They lost their jobs and knew that there was cash in those apartments. The women felt that Sweden started to look like their home country, that kind of parallel, it became that bad.*

## **Social Restrictions**

The third theme found in the data is *Social Restrictions*. This theme reflects the bureaucratic and social issues which the restrictions enforced to hinder the spread of COVID-19 have caused. The subthemes of this theme are *Paused Processes* and *Operational Difficulties*. Female sex workers are a highly victimized group in society and are in many ways dependant on the social relations and protections which various organizations and institutions offer. The participants from Evonhuset and Noomi witnessed that the women's rights often are set aside and, therefore, such organizations are essential for the protection of the women's fundamental rights.

*Noomi: Extensive support refers to the emotional support, like helping with having contacts with social agencies, come along to the police station, or help a women who want to have an abortion. Our focus is to make sure that the women's rights are fulfilled. Their rights very often fall between the cracks.*

*Evonhuset: Our job includes informing the women about their rights and responsibilities in Sweden. Also to help the women to find the right institution, for example if they want to report a crime or need medical assistance. It is about asking the right questions for the women so that they understand what is happening and what kind of support they need. We try to make sure that they do not fall between the cracks.*

### **Paused Processes**

This subtheme includes the issues COVID-19 restrictions have brought upon institutions and organizations concerning educational enforcement and legal processes. The participants from the police force discussed how COVID-19 has made it difficult to continue the education Människohandelsgruppen is responsible for to their colleagues and other institutions while following the guidelines and social restrictions. The prosecutor expressed concern for the consequences the COVID-19 restrictions have had on legal proceedings. Since they are restricted to a limited number of people in the courtrooms, some questioning has to be done

online, which can have consequences on the results of the legal proceeding. It has also caused some women not to come to court due to their fear of the COVID-19.

*Prosecutor: Now when we are having proceedings at the court, we have to work in different proceeding cases so that we do not become too many people (in the room). We have had problems with women not being able to come to court, they are afraid due to corona. This has a great impact on the proceeding. It is possible to meet through the internet but it is not the same as having the people in the courtroom and directly speaking with them, I think it has been negative (for the proceedings).*

*Police 1: Yes the pandemic has affected our work, for us practically, our process- responsibility to educate colleagues and other institutions in the southern region has been paused.*

Noomi and Evonhuset do not only provide emotional support for the women but also focus on education and advocacy work. In terms of the educational work, most of the activities have been able to be conducted online. However, the advocacy work they perform for the rights of female sex workers has been paused or set aside. This includes communication with the border police or the work to change unfair legislation in Sweden. Closely related to this issue are the operational difficulties that have arisen as a consequence of restricting the spread of COVID-19.

### ***Operational Difficulties***

The *Operational Difficulties* mainly shows the issues that all the participants have experienced when keeping a relationship with the women. Since the collaboration between organizations/ institutions and female sex workers are dependant on trust, it is essential to create a connection and relationship with the women. This relationship is often created by personal meetings and various forms of assistance. The participants, especially Noomi and Evonhuset, have seen difficulties creating personal contacts and relationships with the women due to the pandemic.

*Evonhuset: It definitely affects the possibility to create trust and a good relationship with the women so that they feel that we can help. Usually, we are very flexible when it comes to meetings and want to be able to do that now as well. Otherwise we would have been able to meet more people and more regularly.*

*Noomi: It has become more difficult, before the pandemic, we would be out and visit. Now we try to be out and deliver condoms to brothels in Malmö. The women that just came to Malmö do not know where to turn for help. So we ask them to give us their address so that we can come to them and meet outside wearing masks and giving alcohol. We also give them translated information about COVID-19 from Folkhälsomyndigheten (the public health authority).*

The majority of the participants spoke on the importance of the support measures that help organizations can offer to the women in the forms of housing and counseling. Due to the pandemic, counseling centers had to be closed down and housing was restricted. Consequently, the mental health of the women degraded and fewer women were able to find a safe place to live in.

*Police Officer 2: Some have been affected by the spread of the virus and there have been issues with the sheltered housings. The women are already in a vulnerable position and these people are affected the most cause they are so dependant on social support. When the houses are closed due to the virus, the women are vulnerable in various aspects, they do not have any social safety or families or such. The housing is dependant on the people who run these places and if they get sick then the whole thing will collapse. There are a few people who help so many (women).*

*Evonhuset: COVID-19 have made it more difficult to travel but also had consequences on the support measures in the women's home countries. They close down due to the pandemic. The women in Sweden have told us at the clinics that it is more difficult to get help. There are no drop-in and they can not just call spontanualsy anymore. They can not just go to a clinic for help with their mental health, which makes them feel worse. And this also increases the isolation for the women.*

## **Post-Pandemic Predictions**

*Post-Pandemic Predictions* is a result of the changes and consequences directly or indirectly caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and will occur subsequent to the previously presented themes. The first position is based on two assumptions of the participants and predicts that the sex work market will increase and/or worsen in Sweden after the pandemic. The first assumption predicts that since some purchasers have avoided buying sexual services during the pandemic, they want to make up for the lost opportunities once the pandemic is over. The second assumption predicts that since many young people have been isolated from the social world, their mental health has degraded and could therefore become more prone to self-harm and destructive sexual behavior, which causes the women to engage in sex work to a greater extent.

*Evonhuset: If one were to think negatively, even more have been unemployed for a long time, more have been isolated for a long time and have not been able to have the important social interactions that one would usually have. Therefore, more will probably (mentaly) feel worse which could pressure them to sell sexual services for either financial reasons or various forms of self harm or destructive behaviours that they need to cope with. There are also more young people who can be groomed or manipulated into selling sex and sex work.*

*Police Officer 2: When you hear some of the purchasers saying that it is their rights to have sex and buy sex and those men say that since I have not been able to buy during the pandemic i must make up for it after the pandemic. They put themselves in a victim-situation. As long as that kind of mindset exists, there will always be purchasers.*

*Prosecutor: I am unfortunately quite pessimistic. I do not think it will get better. It feels like the internet has created different conditions for the sex work industry. I think the market will increase rather than decrease.*

Another position on the post-pandemic prediction, which is not far from the assumption that the market will increase but still differ in some aspects, predicts that the market will return to its original state prior to the pandemic. These participants predict that the market would stabilize and return to its original position after the pandemic due to the financial vulnerability and dependency that the women have on their sex work in Sweden.

*Police Officer 1: Yes I am quite convinced that it will (return to its original state). Much has changed during the last year, but it will most likely go back to normal again.*

*Noomi: we predict that the number of women from Nigeria will increase again (there was a decrease due to the difficulties to travel to Sweden). That is something that we worry about. Other than that, the market will most possibly return to its original state.*

## **DISCUSSION**

This thesis aims to address and search for the potential changes and consequences which the COVID-19 pandemic has had on female sex workers in Sweden. The result revealed that people who, through their job or employment, have connections to female sex workers on a regular basis have seen several changes and consequences that have caused the women issues both directly and indirectly. The various themes are not mutually exclusive as they in several ways overlap and are connected.

From the experiences and knowledge of the participants, various forms of vulnerability could be detected in female sex workers' daily life and work. Factors such as being indebted and socioeconomic vulnerabilities are not unique for women in Sweden. It can be seen in a number of research on the victimization of sex workers and human trafficking (e.g. Hedin & Månsson 1998; Laanemets 2008; Raymond, Hughes, & Gomez 2001; Ribeiro 2010; Wilson 1998). When the COVID-19 pandemic reached Sweden, those positions of vulnerability did not change for the women. Instead, they were challenged by yet another factor, fear of a new and unknown virus. The feelings of fear and worry from the women were witnessed by all of the participants, either through personal meetings or absence during legal hearings. At the beginning of the pandemic, the participants witnessed that several

women tried to leave the sex work industry and return to their home country. As a consequence, a decrease in the sex work market could be seen. However, since the women are bound by responsibilities, vulnerability, and financial dependency, they shortly had to start working again despite fearing for their safety and health.

Female sex workers are not a homogenous group of women and lives under different circumstances and vulnerabilities. Therefore, it is expected that the change and consequence of the pandemic outbreak could be different depending on the layers and intersections of the victimization (Matthews 2008). When discussing the nature of victimization among sex workers in Sweden, the participants identified another group of female sex workers, young teenagers or adults with an origin in Sweden. These women often originate from a traumatic childhood with evidence of sexual abuse. This behavior pattern can be seen in previous research on sex work in connection to destructive behavior and self-harm (e.g Farley 2003; Hedin & Månsson 1998). Svedin and Priebe (2004;07;09) conducted research on Swedish adolescence and the connection between sexually abusive trauma and sex work and found a strong connection between an abusive childhood and involvement in sex work. In terms of change after the pandemic outbreak, the participants could see increased women from this particular group. This could also be seen in Norstedts Juridik (2021), where the police stated that they have started seeing a new group of teenagers selling sexual services. The participants feared that young women had been affected by the social restrictions, both through having to isolate themselves with their potentially abusive families and losing fundamental social connections with their friends. As the maltreatment of children increases (Eisner & Nivette 2020) in combination with a decrease in social relations, the mental health of young women deteriorates, and to relieve their anxiety, they start seeking after sex work to self-harm. This issue could also have subsequent consequences on the sex work market as discussed in the result of *Post-Pandemic Predictions*.

Due to the economic difficulties that the COVID-19 brought upon society, changes in unemployment have been severe. This could also be seen in the change in the number of women on the Swedish sex work market. The participants could see evidence that after the market decrease at the beginning of the pandemic, a significant increase occurred. This increase of female sex workers came from the increased unemployment and poverty in Sweden due to the closedown of the hotel- and restaurant business and the lockdown of legal brothels in Central Europe. Consequently, the increased market has caused women additional risks and abuse, which have had a negative consequence on the women's mental and physical health. Due to the increased number of women on the market in Sweden, female sex workers

must take more risks and bend their own rules and principles to gain clients. By doing so, the women could be at risk for illnesses such as STDs, unwanted pregnancies, and physical harm. In an article published by Norstedts Juridik (2021), organizations working with female sex workers in Stockholm saw similar indications for the female sex workers they had relations with, which supports the participants' experiences in Malmö.

Another consequence found by the participants was the increased occurrence of burglary in the apartment brothels. People suffering from the consequences of the pandemic and unemployment considers female sex workers as potential victims to gain money. Consequently, the women must not only accept clients whom they normally would not sell services to, but also be afraid to be abused and robbed in the place where they live. As the women already have to suffer from various forms of oppression, these consequences further invade their integrity and space. In contrast to this finding, criminological research by Gerell, Kardell, and Kindgren (2020) saw no increase in the number of burglary crimes after the pandemic outbreak in Sweden. However, since the paper was based on crimes reported to the police, the findings of this thesis can not be discarded. It is likely that women victimized at the brothels would not report the crimes themselves due to their reluctance towards institutions. The women might fear that rather than getting remedy for the crime committed to them, they might get deported or get involved in an investigation. This can be seen in previous research by Matthews (2015) and Svedin et al. (2012), where the vulnerability of female sex workers is discussed. Since the women often lack permanent residence or legitimate employment status, they are reluctant to report crimes or turn to institutions for legal assistance.

The social restrictions enforced by the Swedish government have changed and brought upon various consequences for female sex workers. The police force and other institutions have had multiple hinders due to the pandemic. Not only for conducting hearings or investigations that comply with the social restrictions but also for additional responsibilities such as providing education. Människohandelsgruppen is responsible for teaching and spreading information on human trafficking and the sex work industry. The pausing of such education might not have a direct consequence on female sex workers. However, it might create future problems. For instance, if the education on the victimization of female sex workers is paused, which often includes educating people who work for institutions such as the police force or Swedish migration-center, this might lead to future negative consequences for women seeking assistance. As biases and discrimination are already a significant issue for these women, which can be seen in work written by Matthews

(2008) and Sanders (2004), education and spreading information are crucial. Especially to individuals and institutions that are in a position of power in relation to female sex workers. Another consequence concerning social factors is the difficulty for organizations such as Noomi or Evonhuset to conduct their work in full capacity. Even though both organizations are making changes in relation to the restrictions while trying to fulfill the women's needs, the consequences of having to limit direct interactions and personal meetings are evident. As their relationship with the women is based on trust, the pandemic restrictions have made such a relationship more difficult to gain. As seen in the report by Polismyndigheten (2019) and also stated by the participants, female sex workers are highly dependant on the social protection which the organizations provide. Therefore, the limitation of facilities that provide housing and counseling has a great consequence on the women's mental and physical health.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The first potential limitation of this thesis is the number of participants. With only five participants, it could be difficult to gain a result that is considered scientifically valid. However, as the results have contributed to the knowledge of the potential consequences of the COVID-19 and the material gained from the interviews has reached a level of consistency, the number of participants does not necessarily have to be a limitation. As the pandemic is still ongoing at the time of conducting the study and writing this thesis, it would be difficult to be able to detect all of the changes and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has had on female sex workers in Sweden. Since the data collected are based on the participants' perceptions and not from the women themselves, it could be considered a secondary source and, therefore, a limitation.

From the changes and consequences which the participants witnessed and the various post-pandemic predictions, the importance of future research on this topic is evident, especially by adding the female sex workers' own stories and perspectives of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the social restrictions enforced by the Swedish government are relatively few compared to other countries around the world, comparative research in relation to change and consequences for victimized groups around the world would be highly relevant for future research.



## **CONCLUSION**

This thesis has provided an insight into the potential changes and consequences which the COVID-19 pandemic has brought upon female sex workers in Sweden. As the women are in a position of vulnerability and financial dependency on the sex work industry, they could not leave despite fearing for their health and lives. Moreover, the restrictions enforced by the Swedish government as a means to hinder the spread of the COVID-19 have caused teenagers and young people to feel isolated from their social safety net and trapped in their abusive homes, which have had negative consequences on their mental health. As a result, more girls and women use sex work as a way to self-harm and relieve anxiety. The findings also indicate that the pandemic has caused various economic consequences such as an increased number of women on the market, more competition for the women to gain clients, and an increase of expenses to be able to travel to or from Sweden. The physical consequences of the pandemic have caused the women increased levels of abuse and risks in their daily life. Another consequence that could be found is the difficulties that the pandemic has brought upon organizations and institutions working to protect and help female sex workers. This has also affected the women as they are dependant on the assistance of social protection. These findings highlight the need to further explore the changes and consequences of the pandemic and the victimization of female sex workers in Sweden.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1. Interview Questionnaire

1. What is your professional title?
2. How does your organization/institution work against sex work?
3. In your profession, how do you come in contact and work with female sex workers?
4. In your experience, what is the nature of the sex work industry in Malmö?
5. Have you experienced that the COVID-19 pandemic have had consequences on female sex workers in Malmö?
6. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your work?
7. How have you interpreted the female sex workers thoughts on the COVID-19 pandemic?
8. Have you experienced any changes in the sex work industry during the COVID-19 pandemic?
9. Have the nature of victimization for the female sex workers changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?
10. What do you predict will happen after the COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of the sex work industry?