18 March 2020

Statement on COVID-19 and Its Impact on Sex Workers
SEX WORKERS ARE NOT THE PROBLEM, WE ARE PART OF THE SOLUTION

The European network for sex workers’ rights (ICRSE) is calling for national governments to urgently act to ensure that sex workers, along with their families and communities, can access social protections during the COVID-19 pandemic. As more countries impose lock downs, self-isolation and travel restrictions many sex workers will lose most, or all, of their income and face financial hardship, increased vulnerability, destitution or homelessness. The often criminalised nature of sex work also means that many will be unable to access the safeguards provided for other workers, such as sick pay.

Many sex workers come from communities that already face high levels of marginalisation and social exclusion including women living in poverty, migrants and refugees, trans people and drug users. Sex workers who are the primary earners in their families, or who don't have alternative means of support are at risk of being forced into more precarious and dangerous situations to survive.

Sex workers in our region are already reporting:

- Drastic loss of income
- Closure of workplaces
- Lack of funds to pay for basic needs, support family members and dependents
- Inability to access community health services which have shut down or decreased their activities
- Increased pressure to take risks while working in order to secure income

This pandemic is revealing, with extreme urgency, the ways in which sex workers are forced to operate on the margins, in precarious circumstances, without the protections enjoyed by other workers. ICRSE supports efforts by governments to control transmissions of the virus.

However, public health measures that do not consider the circumstances of the most marginalised groups put their overall success at risk. In providing emergency measures and relief, governments must ensure that they reach workers who are excluded from the formal economy. As a minimum government’s must urgently provide:

- Immediate, appropriate and easy-to-access financial support for sex workers in crisis.
- No eviction and emergency housing for homeless sex workers
- A firewall between immigration authorities and health services to protect undocumented migrant sex workers from deportation when seeking care
- Access to health care for all sex workers, irrespective of their immigration status

All measures related to sex work must be based on public health and human rights principles and be developed in consultation with sex workers and their organisations to limit their negative impact. This unprecedented crisis calls for meaningful collaboration between all sectors of society, including those most marginalised. Only by involving sex workers do governments stand a chance to limit the pandemic and eventually end it.