

# Providing Services to Women in Situations of Prostitution and Human Trafficking during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Spain, Italy, and Portugal

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## Abstract

This short article discusses the challenges faced by women engaging in prostitution/sex work or in situations of trafficking for sexual exploitation during the COVID-19 pandemic. These included housing and food insecurity, violence, failure by the police to identify them as trafficked persons, lack of social assistance, and the inability to renew residence and work permits. The article also presents the support provided to women by the NGO Hermanas Oblatas in Spain, Portugal, and Italy.

Suggested citation: O García-Vázquez and C Meneses-Falcón, 'Providing Services to Women in Situations of Prostitution and Human Trafficking during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Spain, Italy, and Portugal', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 21, 2023, pp. 141-144, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201223219>

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted multiple aspects of economic and social life and had particularly damaging effects on marginalised groups, including women engaged in prostitution/sex work and survivors of human trafficking. To better understand this impact from the perspective of a service provider, we spoke with social workers from the NGO Hermanas Oblatas<sup>1</sup> in Spain, Portugal, and Italy. The organisation provides social services to cis and trans women engaged in prostitution/sex work and to survivors of human trafficking for sexual exploitation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Nuestra misión', Hermanas Oblatas del Santísimo Redentor, retrieved 29 June 2023, <https://hermanasoblatas.org/nuestra-mision> (hereinafter Oblatas).

<sup>2</sup> For more information in Spanish about our research, see: C Meneses-Falcón, A Rúa Vicites, and O García-Vázquez, *Intervención Social con Mujeres en Prostitución y Víctimas de Trata: Aportaciones y experiencias durante el COVID-19*, Universidad de Granada, Granada, 2022.

According to the social workers, a major challenge for the women they supported was their legal status. **Regularisation** procedures in the three countries were delayed or stopped and many asylum applications were rejected. As a result, many women experienced fear and anguish. The fear of being expelled from Spain led to the search for alternatives, such as marriages of convenience. In Portugal, the women could regularise their status online, but some did not have internet access and the government did not offer any other option. Fortunately, there were no deportations during lockdowns. However, protection services stopped or saw their capacity reduced, forcing some women to continue living with their traffickers or bosses.

Another major concern was the **worsened economic situation** due to women losing their income either from prostitution/sex work or other jobs in the informal economy. In addition, many could not open a bank account, which was a requirement for receiving financial aid or support for energy payments from the government. Thus, most women could only obtain assistance from friends and NGOs. Oblatas provided many women with either financial support or assistance with requesting government aid.

In relation to **employment**, even though many of the women did not wish to continue engaging in prostitution/sex work during the lockdowns, it continued to be the main economic opportunity available to them. While brothels were closed during lockdowns, most women worked in prostitution flats or on the streets. Some moved to Northern European countries, such as the Netherlands, because they had more opportunities to work there than in the south of Europe. Oblatas also supported women who were no longer working face-to-face with clients but offering online services. While generally safer, these services were sometimes problematic too because some clients made recordings and used them to blackmail the women afterwards.

The women also experienced difficulties with **housing**. Some were no longer able to pay rent, others were forced to choose between paying rent and buying food, and still others became homeless at the beginning of the pandemic. They were also unable to pay the cost of the places they were renting in prostitution flats or clubs, generating debts with the owners and madams/managers. During closures in Spain, some were evicted from their homes. Others moved in with friends and workmates in order to share expenses and avoid homelessness, but there were situations of overcrowding and different cohabitation problems.

In relation to their **social networks**, many women's intimate relationships were abusive and did not last long. At their workplace, some women spoke about increased competition for the few remaining clients but there were also stories of women supporting each other. A small number of women described their clients as abusers, but the majority saw them as a source of income. In some cases, during lockdowns, clients helped the women to pay for rent and food. Some women also said they found comfort in their faith community and beliefs.

Others continued making use of NGO services, such as the Italian language classes that Oblatas in Italy had moved online.

Many women experienced feelings of anxiety and guilt because they could not financially support their **families** and children in their country of origin. For those who had not seen their families for years, the loneliness caused by the pandemic was even more taxing. However, the vast majority kept in touch with their families in their country of origin through WhatsApp, which was a source of emotional support. Additionally, in Italy, Oblatas allowed them to use the organisation's phone to connect with their families. Most of the women were mothers and some were living with their children. They needed counselling to work on the mother-child relationship, especially during house confinement. Those whose children were in their origin country pointed out that it was very difficult to obtain family reunification. Twenty women opted to return to their respective countries of origin during the pandemic, primarily to be closer to their families.

Women were also worried about exposure to COVID-19. Those who continued working tried to ensure that their clients obeyed safety instructions (such as cleaning their hands with alcohol gel or refraining from kissing). Regarding their workplaces, they felt safer working in prostitution flats or clubs than on the street or at industrial estates, where there were no hygiene measures or access to water. With regards to **healthcare** more generally,<sup>3</sup> many doctor's appointments were cancelled or conducted by telephone, causing misunderstanding between the women and the doctors due to language and cultural barriers. Oblatas' social workers also had to put more effort into addressing the women's mental health, especially mood disorders and feelings of helplessness and anxiety caused by situations of uncertainty and isolation. Many women had experienced violence, either from their intimate partners or in situations involving sexual exploitation or trafficking. Oblatas also noticed increased use of alcohol and drugs by the women as a way of managing their fears caused by the pandemic. At the same time, some of the women reported positive effects of the lockdowns, such as having more time to look for alternative work or starting some form of training.

During the lockdowns in Spain, some of the women were **sanctioned** for engaging in prostitution/sex work in public spaces or for travelling to work in locations other than their place of residence. The lockdown measures prohibited being on the streets unless there was an official work justification. However, due

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<sup>3</sup> For more information in English about the health impact on trafficking victims, see: O García-Vázquez and C Meneses-Falcón, 'Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Health of Survivors of Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation: A qualitative study in Spain', *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMHS-03-2023-0026>.

to the informal nature of their work, women engaging in prostitution/sex work, cleaning, and caregiving could not prove such official work justification.

In conclusion, from the point of view of the social workers at Oblatas, the pandemic negatively impacted the progress that many women had achieved, such as leaving abusive conditions and entering the formal labour market. However, the worst impacts came from the lack of protection by the social welfare system. Given the system's failure to protect the rights and wellbeing of these women, the role of NGOs and social networks in filling this need was indispensable.

As we move out of the pandemic, European countries must ensure that all residents, regardless of migration status, are entitled to social protections in times of crisis. Additionally, states and NGOs should consider providing this marginalised group with access to smartphones and the internet as a source of emotional support and socioeconomic inclusion.

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