

In the shadow of Taiwan's coronavirus success, hostesses have been organising for financial support and solidarity

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For the last five years Chi Yang* has been working as a hostess in a club on Linsen North Road in Taipei's popular red-light district. There, the 25-year-old and her colleagues entertain customers who pay them to sing, drink and dine with them in private rooms, where sexual intercourse is illegal but not unheard of. Although Yang works part-time to supplement her degree in fashion design, she was relieved to return to work in late May after the club closed for six weeks during a government-enforced ban on hostess bars and dance halls during the height of the coronavirus pandemic. "I told my mum that I would not be able to send her any money if the closedown lasted until June," says Yang, whose family is dependent on her for financial assistance.

After a hostess tested positive for COVID-19 on 8 April, the Taiwanese government ordered a temporary shutdown of adult entertainment venues across the country, citing the need to enforce social distancing guidelines. However, in a country where [the service sector](#) accounts for approximately 60 per cent of GDP and 60 per cent of national employment, this was the only segment affected by the ban : besides localised shutdowns, pubs, restaurants, cinemas, hairdressers and other businesses remained open throughout the pandemic.

Taiwan has been widely praised for its success in preventing the spread of COVID-19, with [just seven deaths and 451 live cases](#) at present. However, the forced closure of hostess bars and dance halls has sparked controversy. "It has directly impeded the most vulnerable workers," says Chen Hong-Pei, a spokesperson for the Collective of Sex Workers And Supporters (COSWAS).

"It's [a manifestation of] the public stigmatisation towards adult-entertainment venues. The government assumed that few people would speak out for hostesses and sex workers," she adds.

The legal status of sex work in Taiwan is ambivalent. [Since 2011](#), local governments have been permitted to designate red-light areas within their administrative regions, meaning that, officially, only sex workers and clients operating outside of those areas face penalties. However, none of Taiwan's 22 local authorities have set up a sex trade zone to date – no-one wants to deal with the political risks associated with enforcement – and yet there are various red-light districts across the country with sex workers operating in massage parlours, KTV bars, tea houses, so-called 'love hotels' and online. Generally, the authorities turn a blind eye, however, this leaves sex workers and hostesses largely unprotected and in limbo.

The most vulnerable are the migrant sex workers, some who come to Taiwan voluntarily from neighbouring countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines and China, and other who are trafficked and forced into sex work against their will. Taiwan has been [a Tier 1 country](#) (denoting full

compliance with minimum trafficking protection standards) in the United States' Trafficking in Persons Report since 2009, although concerns have persisted over the sex trafficking of primarily migrant workers, with around 100 cases investigated in recent years. Despite facing the worst working conditions foreign hostesses and migrant sex workers are less likely to speak out for fear of getting in trouble with the authorities, and ultimately deported.

The economic pressure caused by the ban has led many hostesses to seek so-called 'communication work', where they either find clients independently via social media platforms or work with an agent who connects them with men who they meet up with in bars, restaurants or in private rooms. Unlike working in bars or dance halls, the women have to work in unfamiliar and sometimes, unsafe environments, such as a client's home. There is also a higher expectation for sex with communication work because in the dance halls and bars, agents are responsible for looking after hostesses and everything operates under the careful watch of the establishment's owner.

"Hostesses have to carry higher risks [when doing communication work] as clients know they are not under the protection of either the bars or agents. Once we received a call from a hostess who had been sexually assaulted while doing communication work. The client had attempted to rape her," says KB*, an agent who organises work for hostesses.

KB admits that some clients are taking advantage of the current situation by trying to reduce the agreed payment for a hostess's work or by refusing to pay at all. Furthermore, many hostesses who had previously refused are now performing various sex services in order to make a living. Some agents provide general training for hostesses before they start working to teach them how to keep themselves safe.

As not all hostesses accept sex work, those that do not have to learn how to escape safely when clients want to have sex with them. Meanwhile, sex workers must always how to ask clients to wear a condom. And during the pandemic, sex workers in massage parlours have had to wear masks while performing sexual acts.

Some hostesses say their income has dropped by [as much as 80 per cent](#) during the pandemic, with others making no money at all. The money hostesses earn varies, with younger Taiwanese women usually earning more than older hostesses or migrant workers, but weekly incomes range from 4,000 New Taiwanese Dollars (approximately US\$135) to NT\$25,000 (US\$850). Many of the women in the hostess industry are single mothers or the main breadwinners for their families, with loans and debts to pay off. This puts them under significant pressure to take on extra work, more dangerous work, and work longer hours.

No bailout for sex workers

While the Taiwanese government has provided millions of dollars of financial support for businesses and workers that have lost their income or jobs due to COVID-19, many hostesses have not qualified for any of the assistance. As Professor Mei-Hua Chen from the department of sociology at the National Sun Yat-sen University in Taiwan explained in [her recent *Taiwan Insight* article](#) on the impact of the coronavirus on sex workers : "The majority of hostess bars, dancing halls and various other sexual establishment avoid directly hiring women, they outsource hostess jobs to independent agents to maximise their profits. Moreover, agents usually work as business partners who take [a cut for organising] work for hostesses or sex workers on a daily basis."

As most hostesses do not have the required documents to prove they are employed, they are ineligible for even the small, one-time cash transfer of NT\$10,000 (US\$335) that has been paid to informal and low-income workers without labour insurance since 6 May. Ann Lee*, 27, is one of the

very few hostesses whose bailout application has been accepted. But she says she received NT\$20,000 (US\$680) in support, not because of the impact the government's ban had on her hostessing work, but rather "my family is just too poor".

The economic impact of the ban is also causing mental health problems. "More and more hostesses and sex workers are attempting suicide or self-mutilation," says Sophie Lin*, another agent who previously worked as a hostess for three years.

"In fact, many of them already have mental disorders," she says, referring to the fact that women working as hostesses are often treated as outcasts by their families and in their communities.

Lin knows all about the crushing impact of poor mental health. Her mother has a severe mental illness, and so Lin is not only the family's main breadwinner, she is also her mother's primary carer. But she tries not to focus on her hardships. Instead, together with Yang and Lee, she has been assisting hostesses and sex workers during the pandemic through a Facebook page called [Diary of the Serving Ladies](#), initiated and run by a group of hostesses and agents.

"We help hostesses apply for bailouts and we also write press releases to call for government action. We are too busy to feel anxious or depressed about our own issues," says Lin. Since March, Lin says the group has helped over 70 hostesses and sex workers of all ages to apply for bailouts. Some agents and managers of hostess bars have also come to them for assistance, and they have also teamed up with other civil society groups to advocate for the rights of sex workers and hostesses.

"It's a new era to advocate on sex work issues in Taiwan. Today's young people have acquired higher education and have been involved in several social movements. At this time of pandemic, they know that they have to subvert the mainstream sexual stigma by themselves through collective actions as almost no other groups will speak for them," says Chen, whose work focuses on sex workers' rights.

Dance halls and hostess bars have gradually reopened in Taiwan, yet the public stigma towards the women who work in these establishments remains severe. "Mainstream society is still not friendly towards hostesses and sex workers in Taiwan," says Yang. "Working together with the team gives me the motivation to continue communicating with the public about our work and to help establish a safer and better-protected environment for those who work or who are considering working in this field."

Chen is optimistic that this generation of young, empowered and activist women will be able to make progress in the advancement of sex workers' rights. "I see new opportunities for this group of people," she says. "In the face of the crisis, they have started connecting with each other."

**Chi Yang, Ann Lee, Sophie Lin and KB are not their real names.*

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