OnlyFans and exclusion of sex workers from digital platforms: Statement and recommendations by the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe.

30/08/2021

ICRSE strongly condemns OnlyFans’ initial decision on imposing a ban on explicit content on the platform. The decision was disturbing and unfair for sex workers and caused high levels of stress and uncertainty. OnlyFans suspended the explicit content ban after facing fierce criticism from sex workers, other content creators and sex workers rights activists. Although the suspension of the explicit content ban can be considered a step in the right direction, the underlying reasons behind the exclusion of sex workers from digital platforms and financial services must be addressed urgently.

Today digital services play a crucial role in sex workers’ lives. Globally many sex workers depend on online platforms to work, communicate with colleagues and find information about key services. Especially since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, platforms such as OnlyFans have seen a dramatic upward surge in the number of members due to the COVID-19 restrictions that made providing in-person services difficult or impossible. As a result, sex workers’ workplaces were closed down, and the lack of government support to sex workers in almost all European countries meant working online was the only safe choice for many sex workers. Aside from its discriminatory nature, OnlyFans’ explicit content ban would have been a thoughtless and dangerous step. Pushing sex workers out of online platforms that enable them to work safely is nothing less than reckless and irresponsible, especially during a global pandemic.

The exclusion of sex workers from Only Fans also highlights the precarious nature of many ‘self-employed’ or ‘informal’ workers in the sex industry. Whilst the media focuses on the few high-earners on the platform, the vast majority of OnlyFans content creators earn an average of €150 (180$) per month¹. For many people, digitalised or not, the sale of sexual services can be the most acceptable and accessible option available to support themselves financially. Workers in the gig economy, where many content creators and sex workers belong, are rarely entitled to benefit from the state social safety net and may have limited options to access unemployment benefits, sick pay, or health benefits. The abrupt decision to ban explicit content from the platform (evaluated today at 1 billion dollars thanks to its 1.25 million ‘creators’) caused significant anxiety to sex workers who depend on it for a living.

Sex workers have helped to build the Internet as we know it.² Unfortunately, however, this contribution has always been ignored, and sex workers increasingly have been made the target of online censorship and discrimination by the very services they helped develop.

¹ XSRUS, “The Economics of OnlyFans”, 24 April 2020
² Sofia Barrett-Ibarria, "Sex Workers Pioneered the Early Internet—And It Screwed Them Over.”, VICE, 3 October 2018
Although the news around OnlyFans explicit content ban has become viral, it is not a first. Unfortunately, this type of betrayal from digital services against sex workers is something sex workers are very familiar with. Sex workers are often banned or shadowbanned on social media platforms and excluded from digital financial services such as PayPal or banking services, often without a redress mechanism. This exclusion has increased since 2018 after the United States Senate passed FOSTA/SESTA legislation that made platforms and other online services liable for the content created or shared by the users, making any sexual content potentially illegal. Although FOSTA/SESTA was prepared as an anti-trafficking measure, the law is predominantly used to curb online sex work and has had devastating effects on sex workers worldwide.

Concerns about commercial sexual exploitation of children or exploitation and trafficking of adults online are shared by sex workers and their organisations. Measures to end these crimes must consider the impact on the living and working conditions of those working in the sex industry. Abolition or prohibition of online adult content leads to further marginalisation and exploitation of content creators and workers, greater exposure to and reliance on exploitive third parties, higher risk of exposure to less secure platforms, and the inability to self-organise and defend their rights. Sex workers and other relevant stakeholders should be considered central actors to be consulted in developing policies, including policies on how to effectively address online child sexual exploitation, human trafficking facilitated online, revenge porn or distribution of sexually explicit images or videos of individuals without their consent. Well facilitated and well moderated social media may have significant positive effects on the online safety of sex workers and other content creators and prevent crime.

In light of the recent developments regarding OnlyFans, ICRSE demand that:

- Digital services and platforms must acknowledge the crucial role sex workers played and continue to play in the innovation processes along with other invisibilised communities.
- Sex workers deserve equal treatment from platforms and other digital services. Therefore, a strong commitment to the development and application of robust anti-discrimination policies must be a priority.
- All digital services must prioritise protecting the human rights of all people, including and most importantly, human rights of sex workers, racialised people, migrants, LGBTQI and other marginalised populations.
- Sex workers and other stakeholders must be meaningfully involved in the decision-making processes of online platforms and other digital services.
- Digital services must revoke their anti-sex work policies and make public apologies to sex workers' communities. Furthermore, accessible and transparent financial compensation mechanisms by platforms and other digital services must be developed for sex workers who were mistreated and have lost their earnings.

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4 Majic, S. “Same Same but Different? Gender, sex work, and respectability politics in the MyRedBook and Rentboy closures,” Anti-Trafficking Review, (14), p.82–98, 2020
5 Prostasia “Sexual content moderation and child protection”, 2019