

Title	Voices from 'backstage': London nightworkers before and during the pandemic
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Publication date	2020-10-19
Original Citation	MacQuarie, J.-C. and Martin, S. (2020) Voices From 'Backstage': London Nightworkers Before and During the Pandemic, Blog Post, Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society (COMPAS), Coronavirus and Mobility Forum, Available online: https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.13110635.v3
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.13110635.v3 - 10.6084/m9.figshare.13110635.v3
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Download date	2026-10-27 12:56:34
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14944

Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society (COMPAS) • Coronavirus and Mobility Forum

Voices From 'Backstage': London Nightworkers Before and During the Pandemic

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Published on: Oct 19, 2020

DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.13110635.v2

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Nightworkers, who move in the night as a means of earning a living, remain largely invisible from mainstream society, pandemic times or not. Yet their fears, uncertainties and acts of courage are equally revealing of what it means to be mobile in these times of immobility.

In recent years, not only as night ethnographer and migration scholars, but also as outreach worker and collaborator with NGOs working with vulnerable groups, we reached out to shift workers, including nightshifters in London. In this piece, we follow the examples set by Berger and Mohr (1975/2010), and by Agnes Varda (in *La Pointe Courte*, 1955), and bring their backstage voices to the forefront. We invite the reader to discern how moving in the night as a means to work connects or separates the nightworkers from the rest of the society.

John is originally from Kenya and has been driving London buses for over twelve years. Eleana does night outreach to support vulnerable women selling sex on the street. Finally, Bernie is a hospitality bar worker who was furloughed during lockdown. They all work in shifts, including nights, and struggle to adapt to the pandemic-led working conditions. On the backdrop of fears that the second wave of COVID-19 nears another nation-wide lockdown, these three backstage voices echo with hundreds of thousands other nightworkers facing the pandemic responsibly.

Fear and Responsibility

John has been driving a London double decker since the economic downturn in 2008. Born in Kenya, he was the national coach for the women volleyball team for over 15 years before he travelled to the UK in 1997 with the team. He could not return to his birth country as the ethnic clashes started. He has been working throughout the pandemic, on day and late evening shifts into the night.

"As a driver, I am locked for the whole shift in that cage. My box, where I sit to drive, has to be shut all the time. The way we used to work has changed since the pandemic. I cannot breathe! Many people died. So, it's very frightening! It feels like being imprisoned while I work to serve the public. It has been hard for me to work during the pandemic because I knew, if I don't work, I won't get money for my mortgage, for my family. That's another kind of fear. Not having money to support your family pushes you out of the door, pandemic or not. And for one reason or another, during the pandemic migrants were the ones working, doing essential work to keep London moving. On the whole, us, migrants are not appreciated for the work we do. We are the minority that works hard for the majority. I think that we're not really appreciated for the work that we do for the powerhouse of England. I feel that the government has let us down."

Holding Hands

Eleana is an experienced outreach development worker supporting street sex workers. Some of the outreach happens at night. As an outreach worker, Eleana explains that part of her job role is to do "hand holding – I do a lot of talking on behalf of the women while liaising with various community services." The age of these women ranges between 20 and 50, many are of mixed race, African, black Caribbean, Eastern Europeans and Brazilian. A lot of them live "hand to mouth" – they go out to find punters, sell sex and buy drugs. Some could move in and out of their shelters and go up and down the road all night for as little as £20.

Sex workers, migrant or British, Eleana says, "are suffering because they might be homeless, sexually abused or they are living with mental health issues or drug dependency. They face different but complex needs, most often enhanced by discrimination and social exclusion." Sex workers are closely watched by their pimps, sitting in the car parked on the road, which is called "the beat" – a street area punters and sex workers exchange money for sexual services. If Eleana stays too long to chat to a sex worker, the man would summon her. Eleana knows very well, when that happens, she and her colleague need to leave, so that they would not interfere with the woman who needed to be constantly on the move (not chatting).

During the pandemic, the service that Eleana works at, "increased the number of weekly outreach hours so that they could reach out to as many sex workers as possible to provide updates on COVID-19, the kind of symptoms they should watch out for, and liaise with shelter services to offer housing to the homeless women. Surprisingly, we met women in greater number than before the pandemic, and many were new faces. We helped them to find (temporary) accommodation to reduce their chances of contamination. Despite the increase in the street sex workers, the pandemic forced us to change the way we work, by reducing vital face-to-face support versus phone

contacts.

Anxiety: what does the future hold?

A bar manager, Bernie works on late evening shifts. He was furloughed during the national lockdown, but went back to work in July. In normal circumstances he works on average between 40-50 hours weekly, mostly on evening shifts.

"I work most hours in the evenings, and the hours are very unpredictable. A lot of us start at 4-5 pm and work till midnight (changed to 10 pm as per new social distancing measures). In terms of returning to work, once the lockdown was over, I was very nervous. Extremely anxious. I realised that I needed the social contact. I needed to return back to work. However, it was almost like starting a new job. I knew it all – how to serve, and all that. But running it, getting back into the flow was very difficult.

I felt that returning back to work after the national lockdown ended was the right thing. It was difficult, but after a few weeks, despite all the extra responsibilities, it was hugely beneficial for my mental state to work and see everyone else I knew before the lockdown. I don't think the government did a good job getting people back into the bars. I think the timing was poor. It would have been far better for staff, if they let people come into the bars on a Wednesday, not on a Saturday when we have the busiest shifts. But how will people cope with the second wave of the pandemic? ... We have spikes; I think it will come back, and that's a big uncertainty".

Bernie articulates very explicitly the uncertainty experienced by many in his work sector. As we brace for the second wave of the pandemic, some nightworkers will be put under even more stress as essential workers, others will be stopped from working, and yet others, like sex workers, are likely to carry on with their work with heightened risks but even with less visibility than before.

This guest blog is part of the [COMPAS Coronavirus and Mobility Forum](#). Special thanks to its editor, Professo Biao Xiang for his insightful comments on previous drafts.

Dr Julius-Cezar MacQuarie writes on nightwork, and embodied precariousness. He founded the [Nightworkshop](#), a laboratory to research nightwork in cities (Budapest, Istanbul, London, Milan, Moscow, Prague and Sofia). MacQuarie carried out one-year night ethnography in London's New Spitalfields fruit, vegetable and flower market, between 2014 and 2015, where he laboured next to his co-nightworkers, some of which appear in this photo montage: [Invisible Faces of the Nocturnal Market](#).

Dr Shirley Martin is a Social Policy Lecturer at University College Cork and is currently conducting research in the areas of migrant integration and engagement in civic society through volunteerism. In addition, she is the Irish Primary Investigator for the European Commission Horizon2020 Project IMMERSE (Integration mapping of Refugee and Migrant Children in Schools in Europe).