



Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network)

UNDERSTANDING MIGRANT SEX WORKERS
MIGRATION + SEX WORK ≠ TRAFFICKING

UNDERSTANDING Migrant Sex Workers

Who Are Migrant Sex Workers?

Migrant sex workers* include anyone who:

- Moves from one place to another
- May cross state borders or remain within them
- May have various legal statuses
- Engages in any form of sexual or erotic service in exchange for money, food, shelter, resources, or safety

*We use this term to emphasize the human and labour rights of sex workers. Not everybody engages in sexual services identifies as a sex worker, especially as sex work is highly stigmatized and criminalized.

Complexity and Diversity of Sex Workers

Migrant sex workers' realities are unique and diverse. They may have different gender, class, race, ethnicity, and immigration statuses (e.g. permanent resident, temporary resident including international student, refugee claimant, or undocumented), which may affect their living and working conditions.

Decision-Making Regarding Involvement in Sex Work

Individuals make the decision to engage in sex work based on options available to them. Some engage in sex work to meet basic needs, maintain economic security, and/or resist other kinds of oppression*; some engage in it for economic advancement, or to pursue other personal goals and dreams.

*Sex work as a form of resistance to oppressions rather than oppression itself.



“Now, I can meet different people and learn more about Canada than I could working in a food company where I had a very low salary. I have money to support myself and my family. I am contributing to the economy and to society.”

— May, who works in an apartment

Issues Faced by Migrant Sex Workers

- Language barriers, social isolation, racism
- Criminalization of clients, third parties (i.e. manager), and sex workers
- Targeted by criminal laws, immigration laws, and municipal bylaws
- Violence from both law enforcement and perpetrators
- Abuse, racial profiling, and over-policing by law enforcement
- Frequent threat of fines, surveillance, arrest, detention, and deportation
- Personal agency is not recognized or respected; often labeled as victims
- Discrimination, stigmatization

Violence against migrant sex workers is a direct result of Canada's repressive laws and widespread climate of hatred towards migrant sex workers.

“They (the robbers) treated us like a money machine. We were robbed four times in one week. All the girls were afraid and some girls were injured. They came with weapons and they had a gun. We could not call the police, otherwise, we would have had more trouble. I told the police about this while I was detained, but they did not care. They just wanted to arrest us.”

— Dorothy

“A bylaw enforcement officer came by himself. He asked me to pull up my dress to show my underwear to him. I felt so insulted and embarrassed. I had no choice but to follow his instructions.”

— A Holistic Practitioner

The agency, dignity, safety and other rights of migrant sex workers should be respected and protected.

Migrant sex workers are oppressed, regulated, and marginalized by neoliberal political agendas, globalization, patriarchy, racism, and imperialist constructions of borders and citizenship.

The stigma, marginalization, and criminalization of sex work as well as anti-trafficking enforcement increase sex workers' vulnerability to violence, exploitation, inequality, and precarious working conditions. These challenges also prevent sex workers from accessing labour and employment protections as well as legal services that can advocate for their legal and human rights.

HARMFUL IMPACTS of the Criminalization of Sex Work

Criminalization of sex work not only perpetuates stigma and discrimination against sex workers, who are consequently denied access to vital health and social supports, **it also prevents sex workers from taking critical steps to protect their human rights and ensure their personal safety.**

Perpetrators target sex workers because they know that sex workers are less likely to report these crimes (e.g. robbery, assault, sexual assault, etc.), as sex workers are often avoiding police and other law enforcement for fears of abuse, detection, surveillance, apprehension, deportation, and/or losing custody of their children.

Immigration Prohibitions in Sex-Related Industry

Migrant sex workers without work permits (such as those without status and visitors) are not allowed to work legally in Canada.

However, even those who have open work permits, such as international students, refugee claimants, or those under sponsorship, are not allowed employment in the sex industry, despite the fact that the regulation claims to prevent risk of abuse and exploitation. The policy is being used against migrant sex workers and to remove their immigration status.

“Not valid for employment in businesses related to the sex trade such as strip clubs, massage parlours or escort services.”

— 185(b) Immigration and Refugee
Protection Regulations



MYTHS & MISCONCEPTIONS About Sex Work and Sex Workers

Sex work is not trafficking! Sex workers are not victims!

Sex work is often represented as a crime, a social nuisance, immoral, inherently wrong, sexual exploitation, and violence against women. The images of trafficked victims and rescuers presented in the media, or even in anti-trafficking trainings, have created a moral panic that induces the desire to rescue sex workers who are described as victims. In reality, anti-trafficking investigations are often racist, anti-sex work, and anti-migrant.

Harm of Anti-Trafficking Policies and Initiatives: The Rescue Model

Conflating human trafficking with sex work, or focusing solely on human trafficking and imposing this framework onto migrant sex workers, can have extremely harmful effects for migrant sex workers. Sex work is wrongly recognized as trafficking and third parties as traffickers.

An approach that assumes sex work is inherently exploitative limits the understanding of the diversity of migrant sex workers' lives and realities, and the complexities of their needs and concerns. When only sex itself is seen as exploitation, actual instances of exploitation in the workplace are not recognized, and workers are prevented from improving their working conditions and accessing labour protections.

Migrant sex workers are also targeted by surveillance and raids. It does not only obstruct migrant sex workers' access to safety, protection, and support, it also increases their vulnerability to violence and exploitation.

"Raid and Rescue" (e.g. Operation Northern Spotlight) is being used to "identify" and "rescue" victims by law enforcement. The aim of anti-trafficking initiatives is claimed to protect people who are exploited or trafficked. However, 23 migrant sex workers connected with Butterfly were arrested and deported as results of trafficking investigations. The report, *Behind the Rescue: How Anti-Trafficking Investigations and Polices Harm Migrant Sex Workers* (Lam, 2018), has documented some of their stories.



"Eleven massage workers face deportation: While it was run by the Human Trafficking Section, no human trafficking was found. Instead, they inspected 20 places and laid 11 bylaw fines."
— Ottawa Sun, May 11, 2015

"I was locked by chains and weights, on my wrists and legs... I felt like I was being treated as a murder suspect. They did not allow me to make a phone call or contact other people." (She is still not able to retrieve the \$10,000 earning that she had when she was arrested. The police told Butterfly that the money was seized because she worked illegally in Canada) — Mi

"The first night was incredibly cold since I only had my vest while sleeping on a board. I thought to myself, I have no clothes and I have no food, what did I do wrong? For a full week, I was not allowed to shower or change my clothes."
— Cookie

Problems of the Indicators Used to Identify Victims

“Indicators,” “red flags” and “checklists” were developed by law enforcement and social service organizations to identify trafficked victims in order to facilitate “rescuing of the victims” from exploitative and violent situations.

These indicators are problematic because they are based on assumptions, myths, and misconceptions related to trafficking and sex work. These faulty indicators increase surveillance of marginalized communities and create barriers for sex workers to be listened to, and to access supports and services.

Examples of Indicators:

- Fear or mistrust towards law enforcement and service providers
- Unable to speak English, does not have ID, and/or is a recent immigrant
- Does not appear to need assistance or is unaware of their rights
- Seems anxious, fearful or paranoid and avoids eye contact

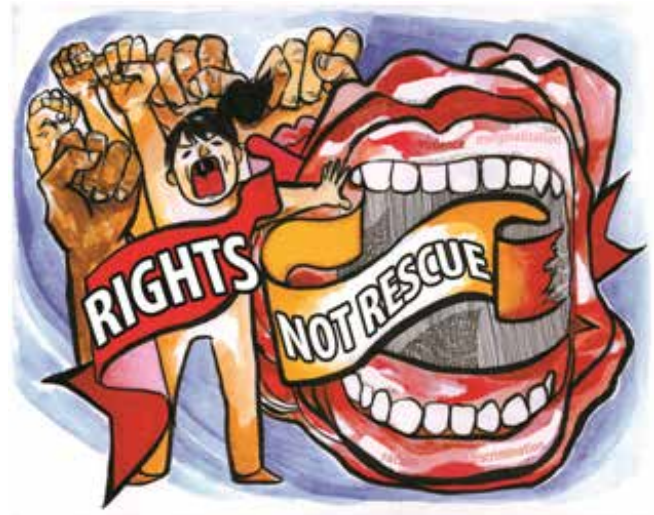
Potential Harms:

- Conflating trafficking with sex work, migration and other oppressions
- Ignoring the agency and decisions of sex workers
- Distorting stories of sex workers, does not address their concerns and needs
- Involuntary involvement of law enforcement negatively impacts sex workers
- Compromising the trust and relationships between sex workers and social agencies, thus creating barriers for sex workers to access support



“Sex workers who are targeted in anti-trafficking investigations are labeled as victims but treated as criminals.”

— Canadian Alliance of Sex Work Law Reform & Pivot Legal Society, 2016, p.9



RIGHTS Not Rescue

Current laws and policies regulating sex work have had led to human rights violations against sex workers, increasing their vulnerability to violence and preventing them from seeking help.

An effective anti-trafficking strategy should use the “Rights not Rescue” approach, which prioritizes the rights of, and support for, people at risk or those who wish to seek help, rather than relying on anti-trafficking investigations by law enforcement.

Sex-worker-led organizations are best positioned to provide supports and services that are safe, relevant, and accessible to other sex workers, particularly those who are vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and trafficking.



VOICES OF MIGRANT SEX WORKERS

“I’m a sex worker because I’m good at working with people, an underestimated skill required in this field. I find this work more fulfilling than previous jobs.”

— Pearl, 2016



“Just like other people, I have to do what I need to do everyday.”

— Lily, 2016

“To engage in sex work was my decision, which was made in the same moment when I decided to be free and fight against gender oppression, transphobia, exclusion, discrimination and the possibility to lose important relationships.”

— Betty, 2015



WHO ARE WE? Butterfly (Asian & Migrant Sex Workers Support Network)

We are: Migrants, sex workers, and allies including social workers, legal professionals, and healthcare professionals.

We believe: Sex work is work. Sex workers are entitled to safety, dignity, equality, and justice.

Our Mission: Butterfly's work is about building community with migrant sex workers: a place where we can share love, care, laughter, and tears. Our community is what gives us the strength to support each other, resist oppression, grow together, and actualize our dreams.

Our Goals:

- Promoting safety and dignity
- Building leadership, growing support networks, and promoting solidarity
- Enhancing access to legal rights, health, social, and labour services
- Promoting equality and eliminating racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, stigma, and discrimination against Asians, migrants, and sex workers
- Facilitating the voices of sex workers being heard
- Advocating for legal and policy change (e.g. decriminalization of sex work and abolishing the immigration prohibition of sex work policy)

What We Do:

- Outreach and hotline services
- Leadership-building, trainings, and networking
- Emotional, social, health, and legal information, services, and support
- Emergency and crisis support (e.g. violence, arrest, or detention)
- Research, publications, and public education
- Lobbying and advocacy

Contact: butterflysw.org / +1-416-906-3098 / cswbutterfly@gmail.com

Donations:

Interact E-transfer: cswbutterfly@gmail.com
PayPal: <https://www.butterflysw.org/donate>



WHAT Can You Do?

- Understand the realities of migrant sex workers
- Respect the self-determination and agency of migrant sex workers
- Differentiate between sex work and human trafficking
- Support decriminalization of sex work
- Advocate for related migrant justice and anti-racism issues
- Advocate for access to health, social, and legal services for criminalized and migrant communities
- Reflect on your own biases and assumptions about sex work
- Share this information with others!

**Take action!
Support us!**





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**Butterfly Voices* is an arts-based project co-facilitated by Alvis Choi and Elene Lam.