

# Beyond Tales of Trafficking:

*A Needs Assessment of Asian  
Migrant Sex Workers in Toronto*



**Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex  
Workers Support Network) 2019**

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*A Needs Assessment of Asian Migrant Sex Workers in Toronto*

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CANADA

**Authors:** Anna Malla, Elene Lam,  
Emily van der Meulen, & Hsin-Yun Peng (Jaden)

**Editor:** Anna Malla

**Principal investigator:** Elene Lam

**Research Coordinator:** Hsin-Yun Peng (Jaden)

**Research interviewers:** Elene Lam, Cookie C., Hsin-Yun Peng,  
Lisa, Mary, Amy, and Community Research Assistants at Butterfly

**Research project and materials developed by:**  
Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network)

**Academic advisor:** Emily van der Meulen, PhD

**Graphic design:** Jenny Chan (whuulf)

Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network)  
cswbutterfly@gmail.com / 1-416-906-3098 / butterflysw.org

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**Recommendation #1:**

Challenge misunderstandings and misconceptions about Asian sex workers.

**Recommendation #2:**

Prioritize worker health, safety, and wellness within and across all sex industry sectors.

**Recommendation #3:**

Provide accessible community, health, legal, and social supports in a variety of languages.

**Recommendation #4:**

Arrange trainings for city and other employees, in consultation with sex worker-led organizations.

**Recommendation #5:**

Stop using a repressive approach toward sex workers and related businesses.

**Recommendation #6:**

Update municipal bylaws to promote workers' labour rights and protections.

**Recommendation #7:**

Ensure Toronto's "Access Without Fear" policy applies to those in the sex industry.

**Recommendation #8:**

Support the full decriminalization of sex work and related activities.

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# Introduction

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Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Worker Support Network) provides support to, and advocates for the rights of, Asian and migrant<sup>1</sup> sex workers. We are an organization founded upon the belief that sex workers are entitled to respect and human rights regardless of type of work, place of origin, or citizenship status. We engage in outreach to sexual service establishments, including apartments, hotels, massage parlours (which can include holistic centres and body rub parlours), and spas across the City of Toronto, meeting with hundreds of migrant Asian sex workers annually. We have found that the majority of the workers in the city's massage parlours and spas<sup>2</sup> are migrant women from Asian countries. They often face unique challenges based both on their work in the sex industry and their immigration status. Such challenges include sex work stigma, racial and gender-based discrimination, substandard working conditions, language barriers, gendered relations of power, surveillance by police, immigration, and bylaw enforcement officers, and precarious living arrangements. Asian sex workers also have to contend with dominant notions that deem them trafficked victims in need of “saving,” thus denying them agency in their decision making.

Adding to these challenges is a legal context in which sex workers' labour activities, their clients, and their business arrangements are criminalized and/or penalized through criminal and immigration laws, as well as municipal bylaws. In 2014, the federal government implemented the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA), which frames sex work as inherently exploitative and problematic. This national legislation imposes prohibitions on the purchase of sexual services, receiving a material benefit from the commercial exchange of those services, and sex work-related advertising, all while purporting to lift the restrictions on sex workers themselves. Thus, Canada's current criminal law framework targets clients as well as

third party managers, owners, and operators of sex industry establishments. However, sex workers are still being arrested, charged, prosecuted, stopped at borders, and harassed by police. Immigration laws and regulations further compound the situation for migrant sex workers, as temporary residents who are in Canada on work permits are barred from engaging in sex work or related industries, even in sexual-oriented workplaces that are municipally licensed. The City of Toronto, which licenses strip clubs, holistic centres, and body rub parlours, imposes many onerous rules and regulations, and city inspectors allocate fines and other penalties to workers.

While the nature of sex work criminalization and regulation has been extensively studied, resulting in an expanding body of literature in the growing field of sex work studies, as of yet, few researchers have systematically examined or adequately addressed the intersecting socio-legal issues faced by migrant Asian sex workers. There is thus limited knowledge or awareness of their specific experiences. In 2017, Butterfly undertook a peer-led process of surveying and interviewing Asian sex workers in the City of Toronto. The goal of our research was to better understand Asian sex workers' needs and to examine their challenges in accessing community, health, and social services, as well as in maintaining safe and just working conditions.

1 A migrant is anyone with landed immigrant or refugee status, or with a temporary work or student permit, or anyone who has moved from another country to Canada and is without immigration papers (often referred to as 'undocumented').

2 “Massage parlour” and “spa” are terms commonly used to describe establishments offering massage, body work, body rub, or holistic services including reiki, aromatherapy, and shiatsu. These establishments are governed in Toronto by municipal bylaws regulating “holistic health centres” and “body rub parlours.” Registered massage therapists are regulated by the Ontario College of Massage Therapy, and are therefore not required to obtain a licence with the City of Toronto. Practitioners in Toronto's massage parlours and spas offer various types of services, which may or may not include sexual services.

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**The needs assessment objectives were:**

- 1.** To assess the health and safety needs of migrant Asian sex workers in Toronto’s massage parlours, spas, apartments, and other indoor sex industry workplaces;
- 2.** To understand what barriers they may face when trying to access a range of health, social, and community supports; and
- 3.** To make the needs assessment findings widely available to policy-makers, the general public, and health and social service providers with the aim of increasing understanding and improving service provision.

This report presents a summary of our methods and findings from the interviews and surveys, as well as recommendations for advancing the human and labour rights of workers in this sector. The study received ethical approval from the Community Research Ethics Office (CREO) and was generously funded by the Access, Equity and Human Rights Community Funding Program of the City of Toronto.



# Summary of Key Findings

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## **Trafficking and debt bondage were not reasons for engaging in sex work.**

Contrary to popular narratives that represent most or all Asian migrant sex workers as victims of trafficking, none of the women in this study reported having experienced debt bondage or being trafficked. Participants described willfully deciding to move from mainstream employment (primarily restaurants and factories) to work in the sex industry. They indicated that sex work was preferable for them as it provides greater pay, has more flexible hours, and includes other social benefits.

## **Negative experiences with bylaw enforcement and police officers are common.**

The majority of the participants reported unpleasant or unsafe experiences with law enforcement officers, including feeling discriminated against and harassed in their workplaces, as well as receiving fines and tickets for questionable infractions. This has led to a significant lack of trust between law enforcement and Asian migrant sex workers in Toronto, and consequently a profound reluctance to call police when a crime has occurred. Even in cases of workplace violence, very few of the participants reported these incidents to the police. Most kept silent, tried to deal with it themselves, or informed friends, family, co-workers, or community organizations.

## **Language barriers are a significant obstacle to accessing services.**

Lack of fluency or proficiency in English was highlighted by the research participants as causing numerous problems in their daily lives, including their ability to have general conversations, to understand work-related terminology, and to fill out government or other paperwork. Language barriers were among the most commonly reported reasons for not accessing health, social, or community supports and services. Some admitted that they have never thought about seeking external supports because they did not know any service providers who speak their language.

## **Mental health issues are a major, unaddressed concern.**

Over half of the participants indicated that they had mental health concerns, however, only two women disclosed ever having accessed a mental health service. Lack of time, cultural beliefs, and the combined stigmas of having a mental health issue, working in the sex industry, and being a migrant were significant factors in women's lack of engagement with mental health supports. Many participants also said that they address their stress and anxiety issues on their own to avoid troubling others.

## **Fear of having to disclose sex work or immigration status prevents some women from accessing services altogether.**

Criminalization and stigma around sex work and immigration status were notable factors influencing many aspects of the research participants' lives, including whether or not they were comfortable seeking support from various community, social, and health services. One third of the participants indicated that they had never accessed a health service, while half of the participants reported never having accessed a social service. Among these women, the majority indicated their reasons for not accessing these services were not knowing how, or not wanting to have to disclose either their immigration status or their sex work identity.

# Methodology

## What did we do and what were the limitations?

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Between July and December 2017, Butterfly staff and peer community research assistants conducted 52 surveys and 10 in-depth interviews (between 30 minutes to 1.5 hours each) with Asian migrant women working in indoor sex industry settings in Toronto. Respondents were recruited during Butterfly's outreach activities, casework follow-up, and workshops, as well as through word-of-mouth and snowball sampling methods. Most of the respondents work in massage parlours or spas where Butterfly conducts outreach on a biweekly basis, while some work in apartments or other indoor locales. The eligibility requirements for study participation included a minimum age of 18, having migrated to Canada from an Asian country, and self-identification as having worked in a massage parlour, spa, apartment, or other indoor setting where sex work takes place.

The surveys and in-depth interviews were administered by trusted members of the Butterfly community who participated in the study as research assistants. These occurred either in respondents' workplaces for their convenience, or in community settings around the city. The audio recorded interviews were conducted in English, Cantonese, or Mandarin, and were transcribed and translated into English for data analysis. Butterfly obtained informed consent from all research participants, who were provided with TTC tokens for their travel to the interview location as well as a fifty dollar honorarium for being interviewed, or a twenty dollar honorarium for participating in the survey. This compensation recognizes the importance of their time and contribution to the study.

### Scope and Limitations

It is important to note that the needs assessment took place during a time in Toronto when inspections, raids, and overall bylaw enforcement and police surveillance had increased considerably. An atmosphere of fear and mistrust of social service providers and law enforcement, combined with ongoing societal stigma and shaming of sex workers, may have affected participant responses. Of significance, due to community fear surrounding immigration officer interventions and deportations, Butterfly research assistants refrained from asking participants about their immigration or citizenship status to avoid undue discomfort. Lack of data in this regard created limitations for our findings, for example, whether sex workers' fears were restricted only to police and bylaw enforcement, or if they also included Canadian Border Services Agency officials.

In terms of language considerations, outreach team members from Butterfly speak English, Mandarin, and Cantonese. The survey and interview samples were therefore limited to these three languages. Further, while the vast majority of indoor migrant Asian sex workers in Toronto's spas and parlours are cis-gendered women, we recognize that there are also Asian men as well as trans and gender-nonconforming workers in these sectors. While it would be valuable to examine their experiences, only cis-gendered women volunteered to participate in the study. Finally, based on Butterfly's observations and outreach activities, Asian women are much more likely to work in indoor sex establishments as compared to street-based contexts, and our recruitment criteria reflects this scope.



# Research Results

The following section presents quantitative findings from the 52 surveys conducted, with narrative segments drawn from the 10 qualitative interviews. We begin by highlighting participants' socio-demographic characteristics before discussing their sex industry working conditions and their access to health and social services.

## I. DEMOGRAPHICS: WHO DID WE TALK TO?

In order to get a sense of the study participants' backgrounds, we asked them questions about their age and gender, country of origin and immigration story, as well as relationship status, education history, and housing situation.

### Age and Gender

All of the survey respondents (n= 52) identified as female. Their ages ranged from 24 to 64, with roughly 10 percent (n= 5) between 25-34 years old, almost 35 percent (n= 18) aged 35-44, approximately 40 percent (n= 21) between the ages of 45-54; the remaining 15 percent (n= 8) were over 55 years old.

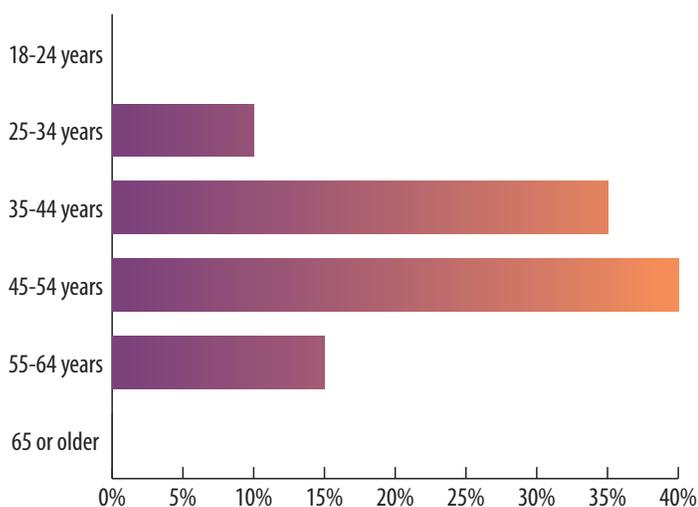


FIG 1: AGE GROUPS

### Country of Birth and Residency in Canada

Most of the survey respondents (n= 45) were born in mainland China, while 12 percent (n= 6) were from Hong Kong. One woman was born in Korea. Some of the participants had only recently moved to Canada, whereas others had been living here for many years.

Indeed, 8 percent (n= 4) noted that they immigrated less than 1 year ago; 31 percent (n= 16) had lived in Canada for 1-5 years; approximately 37 percent (n= 19) had been residents for 6-10 years; and 25 percent (n= 13) had been in the country for more than 10 years.

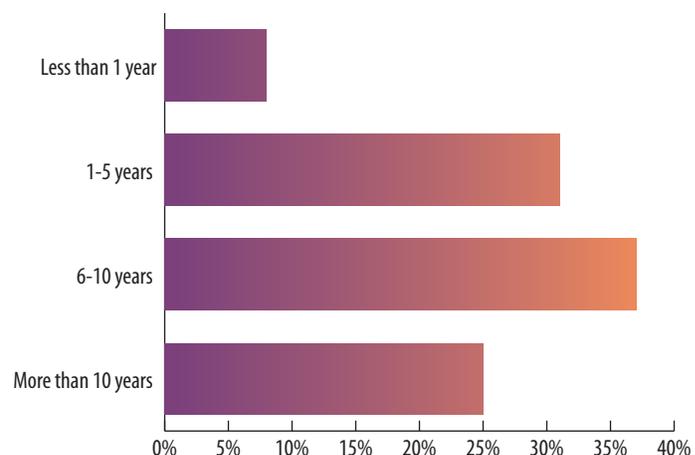


FIG 2: TIME IN CANADA

### Relationship Status

An almost equal number of participants were married (n= 19) versus single (n= 18). About one quarter of the women (n= 12) were divorced or separated. Only 6 percent (n= 3) reported being in a civil partnership, common law, or cohabitation relationship.

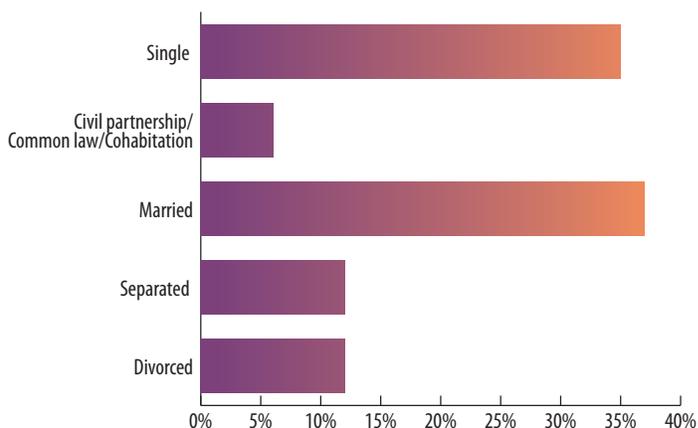


FIG 3: RELATIONSHIP STATUS

## Education Background

Participants' educational level ranged from no formal schooling (n= 1) to the completion of college or university (n= 9). About 40 percent had a high school diploma (n= 21) and 25 percent (n= 13) finished junior high school (up to grade 9). 15 percent (n= 8) ended their formal schooling after elementary school.

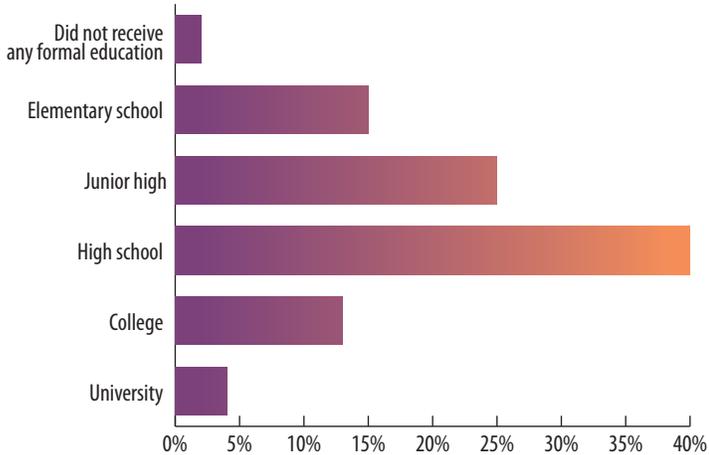


FIG 4: EDUCATION LEVEL

## Housing

Our findings indicate that just under half of the women lived alone at the time of the survey; 29 percent (n= 15) were living alone in a rented apartment or house and 19 percent (n= 10) reported owning their own condo or house. 35 percent of respondents (n= 18) were living with others in a rented apartment or house, while 13 percent (n= 7) reported being homeless or without a fixed address. Two of the women were living in their workplaces.

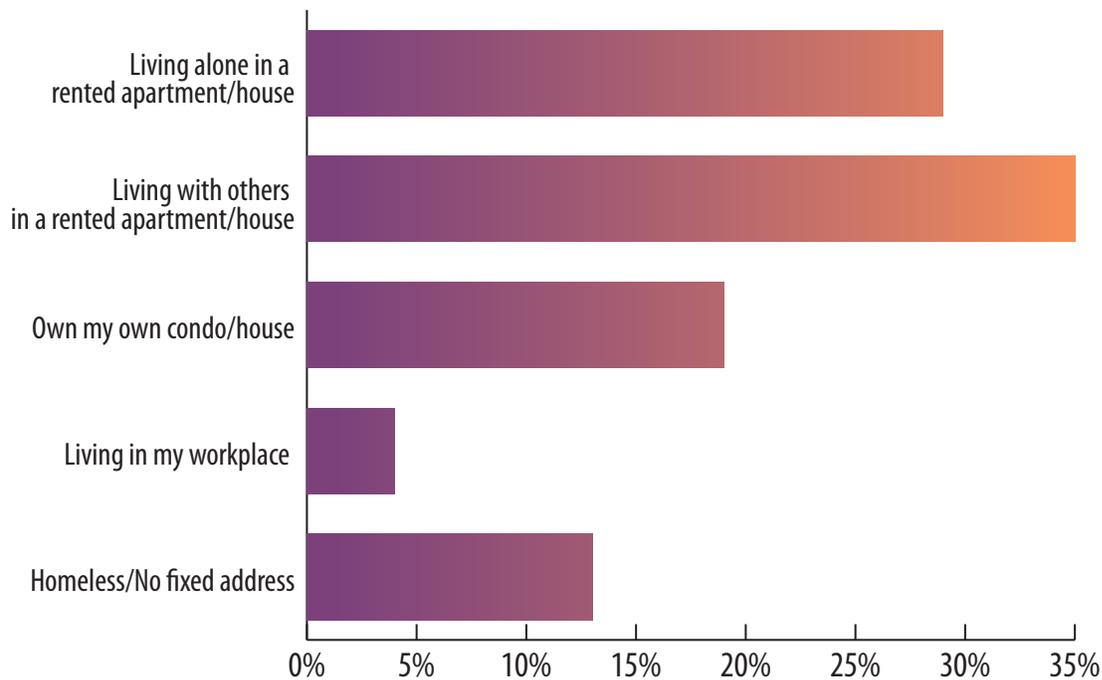


FIG 5: HOUSING STATUS



# Research Results Continued...

## II. WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES: WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS OF WORK?

In this section, we highlight what the women told us about their previous work backgrounds, why they chose to work in the sex industry, and the types of sexual services they provide. They also shared with us a range of unpleasant or unsafe experiences encountered, as well as how they dealt with these. Level of job satisfaction was a further topic discussed, as were both the positive and negative aspects of sex work. Participants were given the option to skip sensitive questions related to the provision of sexual services or other questions they may not want to answer.

### Previous Work Experiences

Several women indicated that they left jobs in non-sex industry sectors (e.g., factories or restaurants) due to substandard working conditions, workplace injuries, and low pay in order to start working in the sex industry. Two interviewees described:

*I broke my leg when I worked in the restaurant. I have no other choices, so I had work in this field [sex work] ... I thought about going back to restaurants, but I couldn't. (Interview 1)*

*I worked in the restaurant and I cut my finger when I worked there. It was tiring because I stood 14-15 hours a day and earned \$1500/month [...] I couldn't even afford to go to the supermarket. (Interview 4)*

These participants relate a frequent experience of racialized immigrants in Toronto: rigid hours, inadequate pay, and unsafe working conditions. According to a survey of 184 Chinese immigrants working in Toronto's restaurant industry, precarious and exploitative labour conditions are common:

The survey found widespread and persistent violations of workers' rights and entitlements under the Employment Standards Act, 2000 (ESA) and the Occupational Health and Safety Act, 1990 (OHSA). A significant number of workers were paid less than minimum wage, and were routinely denied overtime pay, holiday pay and vacation pay. Many workers reported they were owed wages by

employers, often in the range of several thousand dollars. Among those who lost their jobs, the majority were denied notice or pay in lieu of notice. [...] Workers also reported routine violations of the OHSA at their workplaces, ranging from lack of appropriate employer response to workplace accidents and injuries, use of intimidation and threats to prevent workers from filing a Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) claim, and use of delay tactics and false records to deny workers access to the full WSIB entitlement (Chen, Go, Wong, & Yau, 2016, p. 5).

Participants in our study likewise experienced highly problematic conditions in their non-sex industry workplaces, especially those with a high percentage of racialized and immigrant women:

*It was the agents who introduced us to the factory, the agent took commission from us. The agent charges fees for the shuttle bus that take us to work as well... It's \$7 per trip... We don't get a lot of money working there... The hourly wage was even less than \$14 [minimum wage]. (Interview 2)*

*5:00 am need to wake up, then come out to wait for the bus around 6:00 am, the bus takes you to the factory... You need to arrive early at the factory at 7:30 am. If you arrive past 8:00 am, you won't be allowed into the factory... Listening to people at the factory is suffering, manager bullies, foreman/boss bullies... The things are very annoying! (Interview 5)*

This last participant (Interview 5) told us that she earned only 7 dollars per hour. Indeed, difficulty finding a well-paying job with decent working conditions outside of the sex industry was a common theme among the participants. Other challenges included age discrimination, language barriers, lack of opportunities, and credentials not being recognized:

*Now that you are forty – fifty something even if you go to factories no one would want you, right! ... And you need me to pay rent. I need to spend money too, right! Go to the factory but it closed down, the factory just closed down! Now a lot of coworkers from the factory don't even have a job! Yes, before I worked at the restaurant but it closed down too! It's hard to look*

*for jobs! People don't like you when there's a language barrier, do you understand? (Interview 5)*

*I did handicrafts in China. It was painting...I brought them here. But no one here bought it because it was expensive. It was about 100 to 200 Canadian dollars. (Interview 4)*

### Areas of Sex Work and Types of Services Provided

Working in the sex industry, for many of the women in our study, provides a relatively stable source of employment and income. Participants spoke about economic empowerment, free time, and autonomy in sex work, which they were unable to access in their previous jobs in factories and restaurants. The women with whom we spoke generally expressed a high degree of control over the kinds of services they provide:

*We aren't stupid. If they don't have money then we don't do it. Usually they give \$20 tips for extra service, if you don't have money we don't do extra. (Interview 4)*

*I won't allow a client to touch me if I don't like him. I'll strictly say it... I usually ask my client to give me the tips when I do half of the job. I'll ask first if the guy is not good. I seldom ask for the money in the beginning. I felt he's a nice person and just went ahead to do the job. He said that he will give me \$100 after I have done it. (Interview 8)*

*I feel I am happy, and enjoy the job... I don't let them feel I really enjoy the sex though... Sometimes if I don't have the mood, I won't provide a good service. I will watch TV and have sex with the customer... I kicked him out less than 10 mins. (Interview 7)*

All of the research participants identified sex work as a viable option for them, especially as there is a range of workplaces within the industry in which one can find a job. Given this flexibility, it is common for women to work in more than one sex sector simultaneously and to provide different types of services. Among our survey participants, the majority (n= 46) indicated that they worked in massage parlours, spas, or body

rub parlours. Ten also reported working from an apartment or hotel providing in-call services (where the client goes to meet the worker), two as escorts doing outcall services (where the worker goes to meet the client), and one engaged in sex work at a Karaoke bar. About three-quarters of the women reported having a boss or manager at their worksite, while roughly one-quarter said they were self-employed.

When we asked what kinds of sexual services they provide to clients, almost all of the participants (n= 50) said they give massages. Many also reported engaging in other activities as well: 35 percent (n= 18) indicated providing hand jobs; 21 percent (n= 11) perform oral sex; and 17 percent (n= 9) will have vaginal sex. Additionally, around 10 percent of the women (n= 5) said that they practice or role-play bondage, dominance, and submission, and another 10 percent (n= 5) provide other services, such as kissing or going out for a date or dinner.

Type of Service Provided	# of Participants
Massage	50
Oral sex	18
Hand jobs	11
Vaginal sex	9
Dancing	0
Companionship	2
Anal sex	1
SM/Bondage/ Domination/Submission	5
Other	5

FIG 6: TYPES OF SERVICES PROVIDED

# Research Results Continued...

Not all of the research participants were comfortable disclosing the kinds of sexual services they provide. Some of the women were willing to speak with the Butterfly research assistants, with whom they have built long-term relationships of trust. However, they asked for this information to be kept confidential and for it not to be recorded. These women said they were fearful of being publicly identified as sex workers, as this could lead to increased surveillance by various law enforcement officers as well as increased social stigma toward massage parlours (including holistic centres and body rub parlours), spas, and other establishments where Asian women work. These fears have been actualized through raids, ticketing, frequent unannounced visits, and general intimidation from bylaw inspectors and police, as we will discuss later in this report.

## Reasons for Working in the Sex Industry

There were many reasons identified by participants as to why they engage in sex work. When given a variety of options from which to choose on the survey, the majority (58%; n= 30) indicated that flexible working hours was a key consideration for them. Economic or financial reasons were cited by 46 percent of the participants (n= 24), with 38 percent (n= 20) noting

the difficulty in finding another job. Some women also identified that the main reasons why they engage in sex work is because they enjoy the work, they like having a job with people who share the same language as them, they get to use their professional skills, they like helping people, they feel less isolated, and they get to expand their social networks.

Importantly, none of the respondents reported debt bondage or experiencing trafficking as reasons for why they are in the sex industry. Our data in this regard contradict the mainstream narrative that most or all Asian sex workers are exploited victims who have been trafficked. Participants in our study indicated that they willingly and freely moved from non-sex industry jobs where they were receiving less pay and working longer hours, into sexual labour contexts where they found more flexibility, economic incentives, and other social benefits

*If you want to make more money, you don't want to work in a factory. You will feel free when you do massage job. You don't have to work 8 hours straight like working in a factory, you can take a break if there's no customer. When I worked in the factory, the chicken piled up if your speed is not fast enough. It's a shame. (Interview 6)*



FIG 7: RESPONDENTS' MAIN REASONS FOR WORKING IN THE SEX INDUSTRY

*You only have to work for 1 or 2 hours at a time in this job and you get your own free time. You can do whatever you want [in the free time]... If you work in supermarkets and restaurants you will have to stand for 10 more hours, you can't do it. (Interview 1)*

*I worked in restaurant - a sushi restaurant... I earned \$7 per hour... 12 hours a day... I have high blood pressure with heart problem. I have a choice to start my massage job especially after I've decided to stay here [in Canada]. (Interview 8)*

Nearly half of the women (46%; n= 24) had never encountered an unpleasant or unsafe incident in their sex industry workplace, and indeed, the majority of respondents (59%; n= 31) said they were satisfied with their work, with another almost quarter (23%; n= 12) feeling neutral.

For those who reported having a problematic experience, the most common were discrimination, being robbed, receiving a ticket, and feeling harassed by police or bylaw officers:

*It happened around the time I just open my shop. The police... he came to check my shop every day. Our shop was not in his jurisdiction. I had a fight with him... I offended one of the cops, and he checks on me all the time. I knew he is a police when he came to my shop, he requested an extra, such as blow job. I refused. Then he got pissed off. So this guy began to check up on me all the time. I asked him, "Why you come check my shop so often? I didn't break any laws. My shop is not in your jurisdiction, you can have other police to check this." After that, he came back three more times. (Interview 6)*

### Unpleasant/Unsafe Experiences in the Workplace

While trafficking was not identified by any of the respondents, many did disclose a range of unpleasant and/or unsafe workplace experiences, as well as other negative aspects of their work. Women who participated in the survey were presented with a list of various potential topics that they could indicate they had experienced (for example: abuse, arrest, sexual assault, violence, threats, non-payment of wages, etc.).

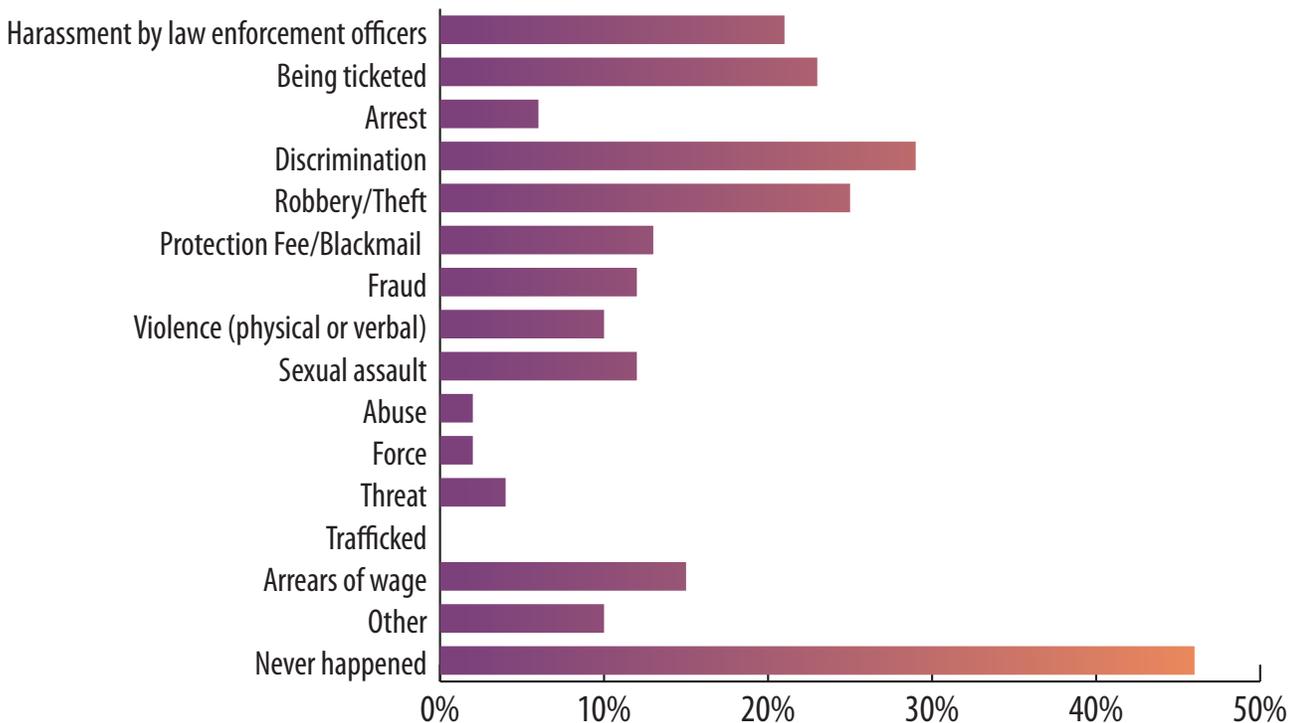


FIG 8: UNPLEASANT/UNSAFE EXPERIENCES

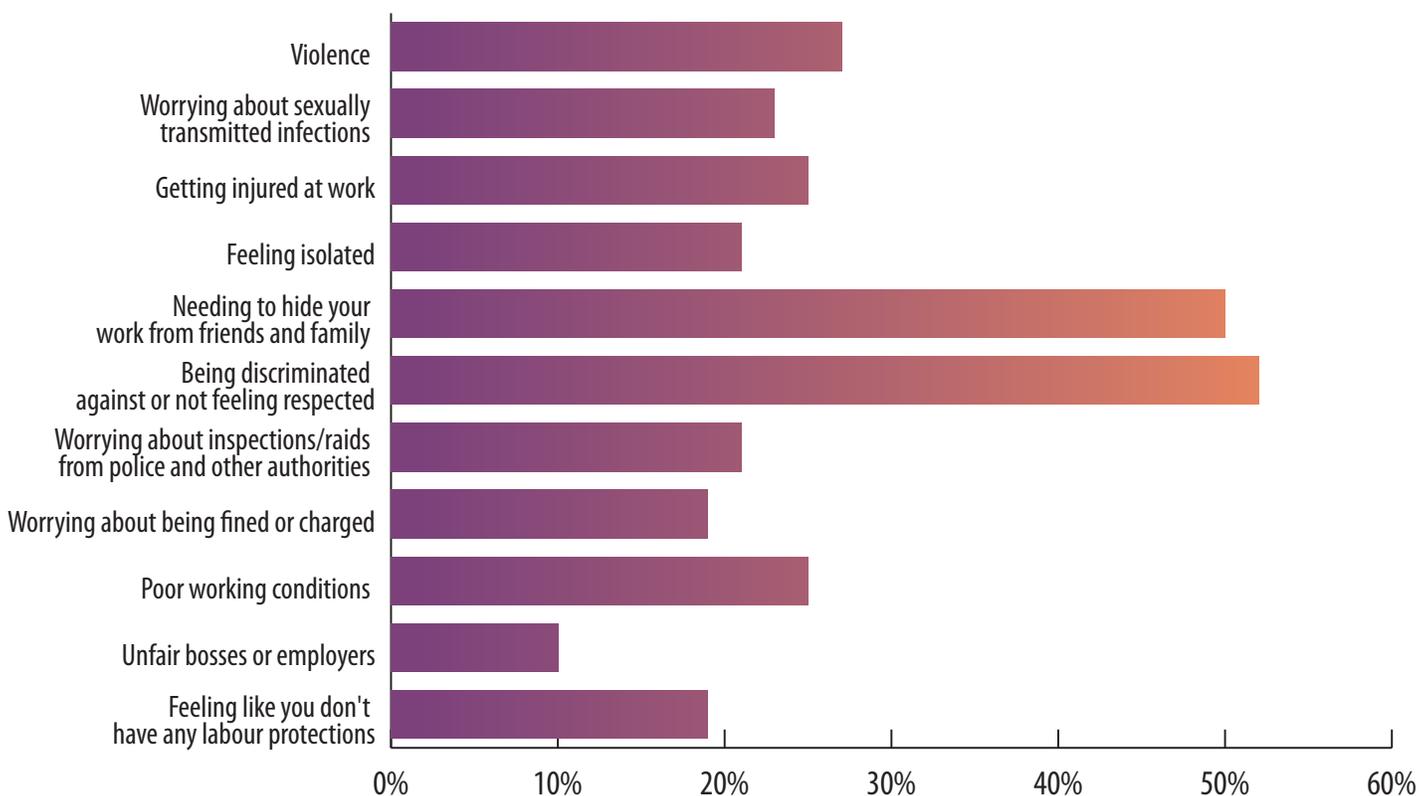
# Research Results Continued...

*The [officers] told us that we didn't have license at noon and told us we couldn't work. I said I know. He said, "I'll give you tickets when I come here next time, but not this time." We said, "thank you thank you!" We were freaked out. It's always 3-4 tickets when they come here. I still have two tickets in my hand, I am going to the court... All of them were about the wearing [unprofessional clothing]<sup>3</sup>. I wore them underneath but didn't wear a robe outside. I had 10 tickets before... I paid \$4000 for the first time and paid for \$2000 [for a lawyer] for the second time... It's not easy to make the money... but they still come every day... fuck... We are all afraid of license officers. (Interview 4)*

*To be honest the police suddenly come to give me ticket saying I wear shorts and tank tops, don't do work, just sit here and they give me a ticket. That is not very correct for doing this, right?... They said we are sexy, wearing too sexy. I said a lot of people on the streets also wear shorts, we all wear shorts, right? (Interview 5)*



3 Licensed practitioners in Toronto's holistic centres are required by municipal bylaws to "dress in a professional manner" (see City of Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 545). They can be charged or ticketed if a bylaw enforcement or police officer finds their clothing to be "unprofessional."



**FIG 9: ADDITIONAL NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF RESPONDENTS' WORK**

These women describe both a fear of law enforcement and experiences of discrimination with regard to regulations about women’s appearance and clothing in municipally licensed establishments (see City of Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 545; Lam, 2018a). Other participants also indicated arrears of wages, being blackmailed or needing to pay a protection fee, fraud, sexual assault, and physical or verbal violence:

*I once met a customer who rushed into the room and hit me... He rushed into the room to do massage, and so I went to the room as well. But then as soon as I entered the room, he hit me... He slap me in the face twice. (Interview 2)*

*One time I worked for an hour – and I was furious – the customer said he didn’t have cash, he needed to withdraw money from a bank... I saw him run over to the bank to withdraw money. And then once he got cash he ran away. (Interview 2)*

In addition to discussing specific problematic workplace incidents, we also asked women more generally about the negative aspects of their work. Here we see that roughly half of the respondents indicated social discrimination or not feeling respected as well as needing to hide their work from family and friends. Violence, workplace injuries, poor working conditions, and worrying about STIs were also noted, among other issues:

*Because traditional people think it is not ok to work in the spa, so I will not tell anyone what I am doing. I don’t wanna tell the lie but...because it’s like, I don’t want to tell people what I am really doing in my work. Don’t want misunderstanding. (Interview 10)*

*You don’t get respect and you face discrimination. (Interview 4)*

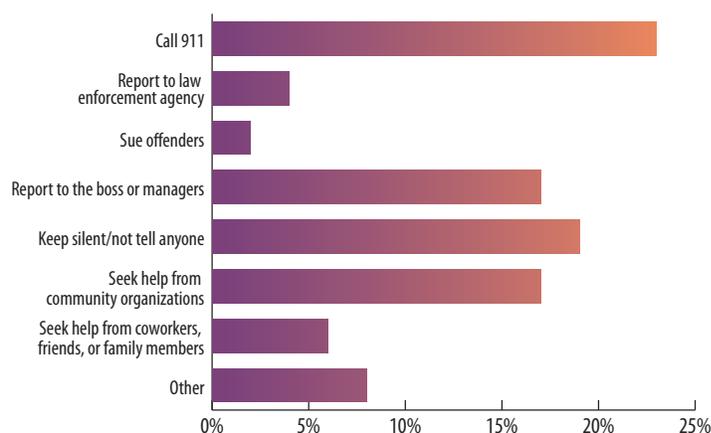
*Since you are in the business, you have to think positive, no matter what people say. You just need to have the bottom line of your moral standard, and you feel comfortable of what you are doing. That’s it. Sometimes people say bad words to me, I feel upset and angry, but what can you do about it? It’s a job. (Interview 6)*

## Strategies for Dealing with Unpleasant/Unsafe Experiences

When respondents encountered unpleasant or unsafe experiences, only roughly one-quarter (23%; n= 12) said they called 911 for assistance. Other strategies to deal with these experiences included reporting the incident to a boss or manager (n= 9), seeking help from coworkers, friends, or family members (n= 5), or going to a community organization (n= 9). Participants told the research assistants that the only organization they had approached is Butterfly. Of significance is that a number of the women (n= 10) said they kept silent and never told anyone about their unpleasant/unsafe encounter in the workplace.

While it was a less common approach, one of the interview participants described her friend’s experience attempting to take someone to court who had assaulted her at work:

*I have a friend who was like that. She didn’t want to give up so she went to the court to sue them. Do you know what people said to her? They said to her, “What job are you doing? And what job is the customer doing? The customer works in a bank, they are normal, his status is different than yours, how would people going to believe you? People are going to believe him instead of you because you are working at the lowest-status job.” (Interview 1)*



**FIG 10: STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH UNPLEASANT/ UNSAFE EXPERIENCES**

For most participants, calling 911 or trying to achieve reparations through the criminal justice system was not a viable option. Three-quarters of respondents reported not seeking help from law enforcement.

# Research Results Continued...

Butterfly heard repeatedly from the women in our study that they do not and cannot rely on police officers or other state agents for support or protection. Women listed language barriers, previous negative experiences with law enforcement, and fear of discrimination as reasons why they would not call 911. Others reported intimidation, disrespect, aggression, and fear tactics which have resulted in a deep mistrust of police services:

*Calling the police is useless. They don't help us. Did you know that?... The police didn't even want to talk to us, they only talked to the customer... Our English aren't good, we could do nothing... I'm afraid they [the police] come and investigate. I am always worried, sometimes they will be like 'bang' and they come in. They give us even more trouble if they come, so they better don't come. (Interview 1)*

*Who dares to call the police? ... When you call the police... the police won't care about you, they don't*

*care! Police just come to give you troubles, and they just check this and check that, it is very annoying! Who dares to call the police? Out of 10 massage parlours there are 9 that don't dare to call the police, I tell you. We just keep things inside/silent for many times just like when things are stolen we wouldn't say anything. (Interview 5)*

*At this line of work, even you don't call the police, they show anytime. Once you call them, they will come more... I dare not to do it. We all are scared. In fact, it's not a crime for what I do. Just scared in general. Just tensed up! Extremely tensed! Scared to death. I feel these police are seeing us as the worse and unforgiving criminals – just this feeling! Just feeling this way! They said, "Sit down! Sit down! Sit down!" They told us to line up in rows. "Do not move! Stand still! Don't move!" I got so scared the first time. I never saw anything like this before. I ran away at the second time. (Interview 3)*

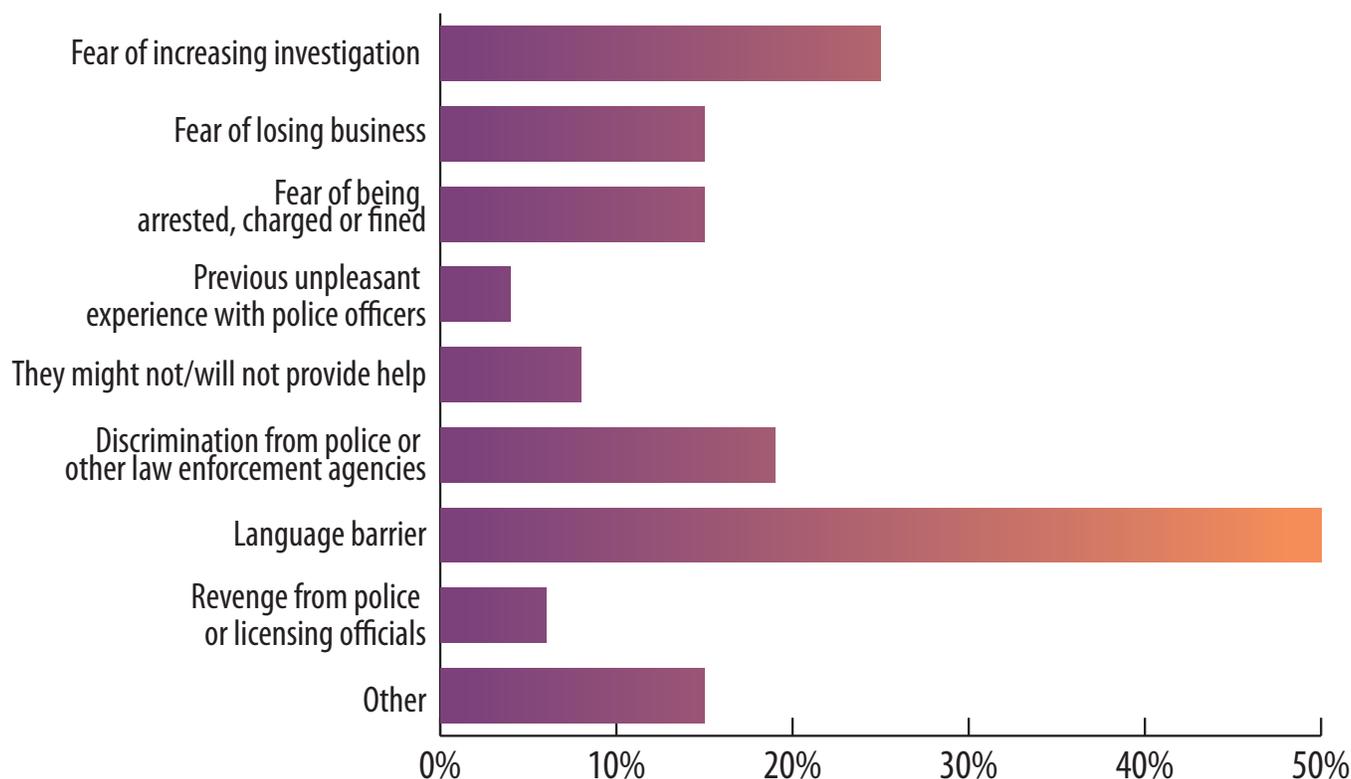


FIG 11: REASONS FOR NOT REPORTING UNPLEASANT/UNSAFE EXPERIENCES

When asked on the surveys to indicate the specific reasons why they would not report an unpleasant or unsafe workplace experience to law enforcement, half of the women reported language as a significant barrier (n= 26). A quarter also noted concern over increasing the number of investigations to which they would be subjected (n= 13). Discrimination from police or other law enforcement agencies was another reason why some would not file a report (n= 10), as was worrying about loss of clients or business (n= 8) and worrying about being arrested, charged, or fined (n= 8).

### III. ACCESSING HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES: WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

Examining Asian sex workers’ range of workplace experiences and conditions, including both positive and negative, is vital to developing recommendations for improvements. So too is understanding the challenges and barriers that these women may face when accessing community, health, and social services. As such, in this section we present the results of the survey and interview questions that focused on why migrant Asian sex workers do or do not seek various social supports in the City of Toronto. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we found that stigma and discrimination are major factors in this regard, and present distinct challenges to sex workers’ safety and dignity. We also found that language barriers along with a lack of culturally appropriate and relevant health and social services or easily accessible information negatively affects women’s overall health and wellbeing.

#### Health Conditions and Concerns

When participants were asked if they had any concerns about their health, 71 percent (n= 37) indicated a range of issues. Of those respondents, 24 noted mental health concerns, such as insomnia, depression, headaches, stress, and anxiety. Also prominent were physical health issues (n= 20) and gynecological health issues (n= 18).

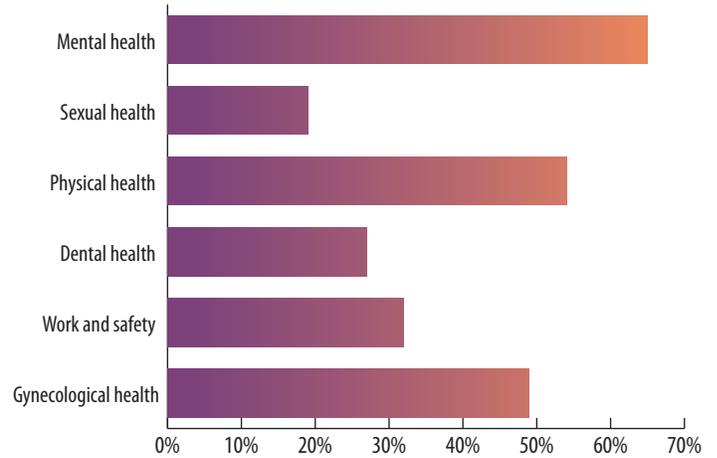


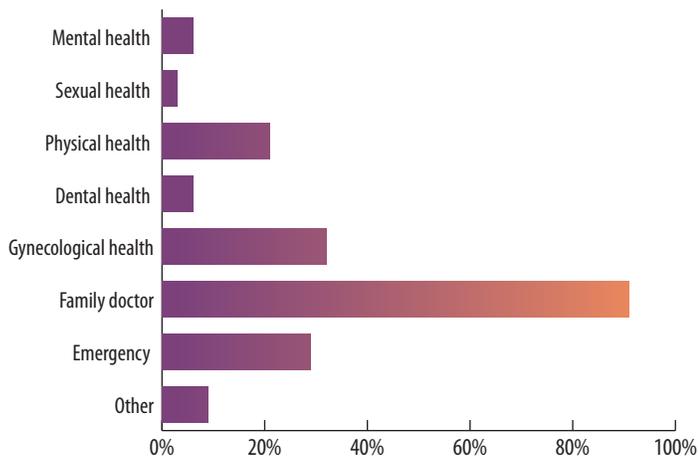
FIG 12: HEALTH CONCERNS, AS INDICATED BY 37 RESPONDENTS

#### Health Services

In total, approximately one-third of the participants (n= 17) indicated that they had never used a health service. Among the nearly two-thirds (n= 34) who reported accessing health services before, most (n= 31) had sought support from a family doctor. Some of the women also received gynecological health services (n= 11) and/or emergency services (n= 10), among other supports. One woman did not answer this question.

While 46 percent (n= 24) of the participants indicated that they had concerns about their mental health, as noted above, only 2 women reported ever accessing a mental health service. Based on our interviews and observations from the research assistants, there are many reasons why migrant Asian women do not seek mental health supports, including communication barriers, cultural beliefs, and stigma related to having a mental health issue, being a sex worker, and/or regarding immigration status. Many of the participants also expressed a belief that they should address stress or anxiety issues independently and avoid troubling others. Some suggested that they had never thought about seeking counseling or therapy because they don’t know any service providers who speak their language, and don’t believe anyone can help.

# Research Results Continued...

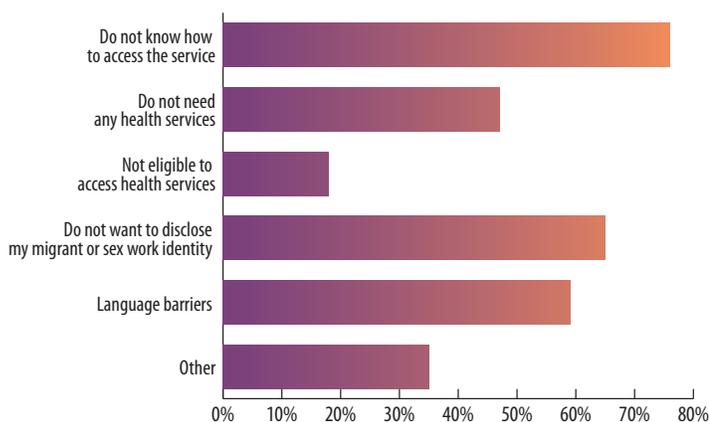


**FIG 13: HEALTH SERVICE ACCESS, AS INDICATED BY 34 RESPONDENTS**

## Reasons for Not Accessing Health Services

When we asked the 17 women about the reasons why they had never accessed a health service, the three main reasons were not knowing how (n= 13), not wanting to disclose immigration status or sex work identity (n= 11), and language barriers (n= 10). Participants also spoke about the general lack of accessible and confidential information that is printed in their own languages, as well as discrimination, fear, and mistrust.

Eight of the 17 women replied that there was “no need” for them to access a health service, with some suggesting to the research assistants that their health concerns were not serious enough to warrant intervention and that they could “live with it.” Six participants reported that they did not have time to access health services.



**FIG 14: REASONS FOR NOT ACCESSING HEALTH SERVICES, AS INDICATED BY 17 RESPONDENTS**

## General Social Needs and Issues

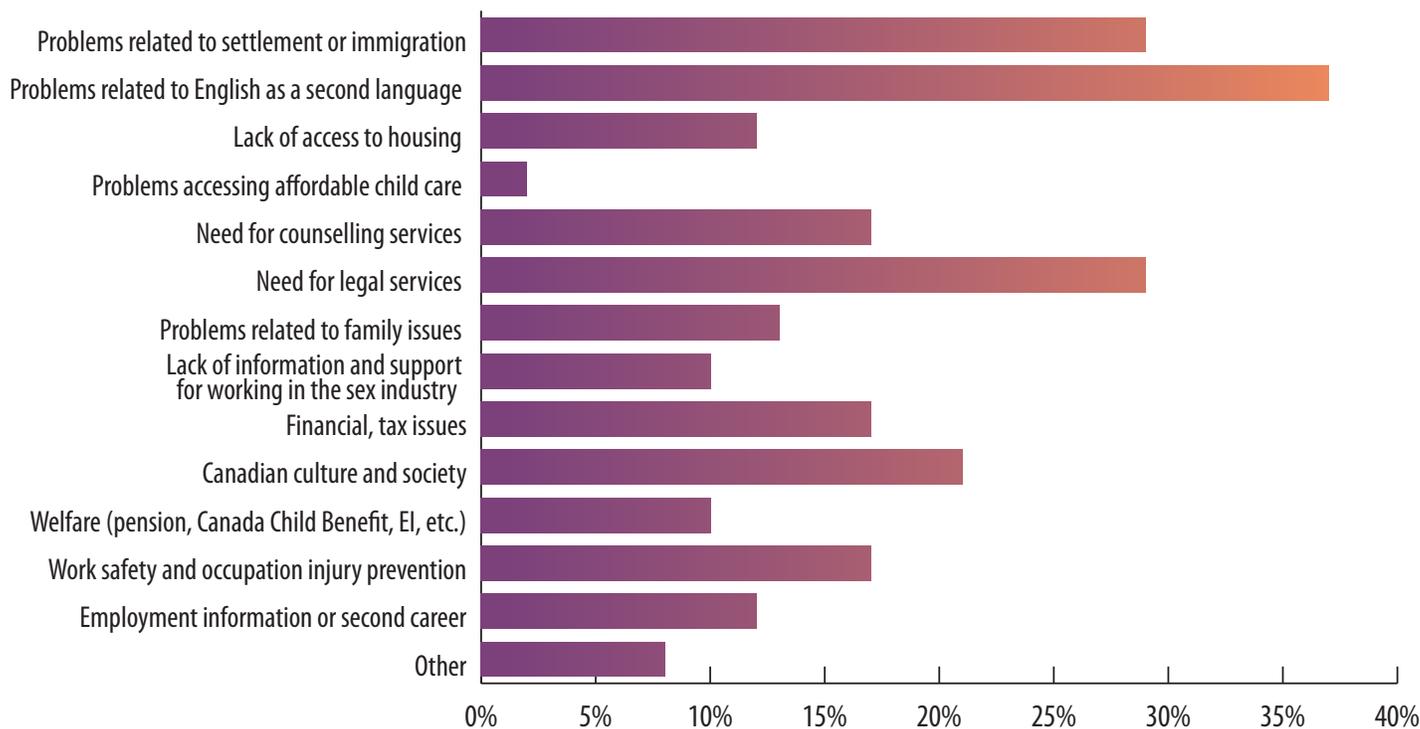
In addition to soliciting information about participants’ experiences accessing health services, we also asked them about their general social needs and issues. Almost all of the participants (n= 50) named at least one social issue, while two did not indicate anything. Given a range of options from which they could check all that apply, we can see that the main social issue was related to English as a second language (n= 19), with women noting that language barriers caused regular challenges in their daily lives. In our interviews, women said they wanted to improve their English skills and continue to attend language classes, in particular to improve their conversational skills and learn more work-related terminology.

*The job I look for were all basic jobs. I don't speak English well, and I can't look for better jobs. (Interview 2)*

*I didn't talk to any clients since I could not speak English very well at that time. I didn't realize the technical terms mostly. I did learn English back home but not like these. These are all technical terms. I don't quite understand. (Interview 3)*

*She said at the [job] interview, what can she do, you don't even know Mandarin and English! Even if they have a job position they don't hire you, they think you are an illegal worker. People don't like you when there's a language barrier, do you understand? (Interview 4)*

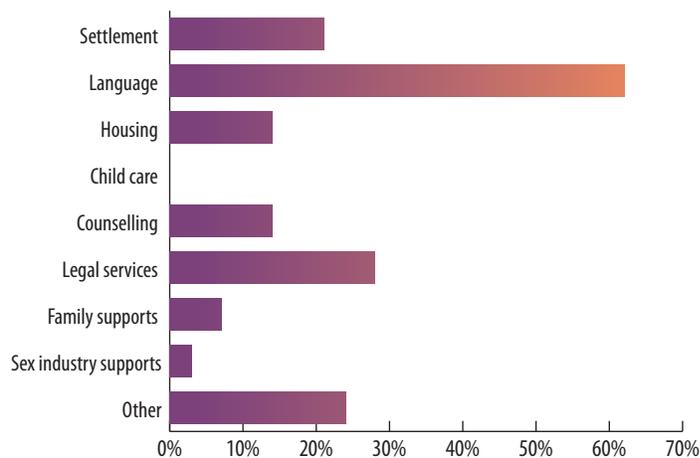
Other general problems related to settlement or immigration issues (n= 15) and the need for legal services (n= 15). Regarding the latter, many participants reported requiring legal advice for tickets received from law enforcement officers, immigration issues, or marriage and relationship problems. Interviewees also reported needing an interpreter in order to access these legal supports.



**FIG 15: GENERAL SOCIAL NEEDS AND ISSUES AMONG ALL SURVEY PARTICIPANTS**

### Types of Community or Social Services Accessed

While participants noted a diverse range of social needs and issues, only 29 women indicated ever accessing a community or social service, with the most common by far being language services (62%; n= 18). Legal services were also availed by some of the participants (28%; n= 8), as were ‘other’ supports (24%; n= 7), which included permanent resident card renewal, accompaniment to court or a sexual health clinic, labour rights advocacy and support, and networking provided by Butterfly.



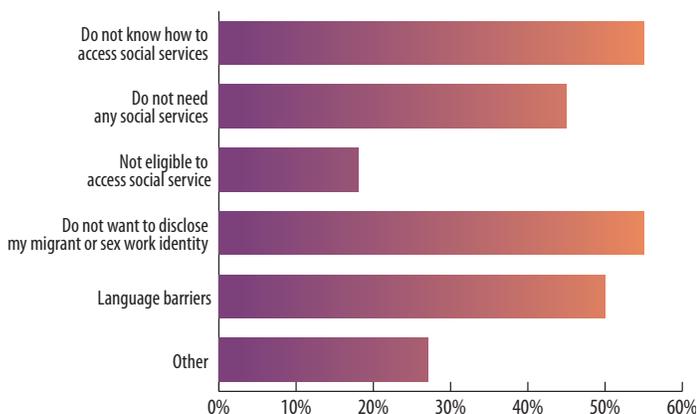
**FIG 16: TYPES OF COMMUNITY OR SOCIAL SERVICES ACCESSED, AS INDICATED BY 29 RESPONDENTS**



# Research Results Continued...

## Reasons for Not Accessing Community or Social Services

A total of 22 women indicated that they had never accessed a community organization or a social service other than Butterfly. Similar to the reasons provided by the 17 women above about why they had never accessed a health service, the most common reasons why these 22 women had never sought community or social supports include not knowing how (55%; n= 12), not wanting to disclose immigration or sex work identity (55%; n= 12), and language barriers (50%; n= 11). A significant number (45%; n= 10) also reported that they did not need these kinds of services, while others believed they were not eligible to access them (18%; n= 4).

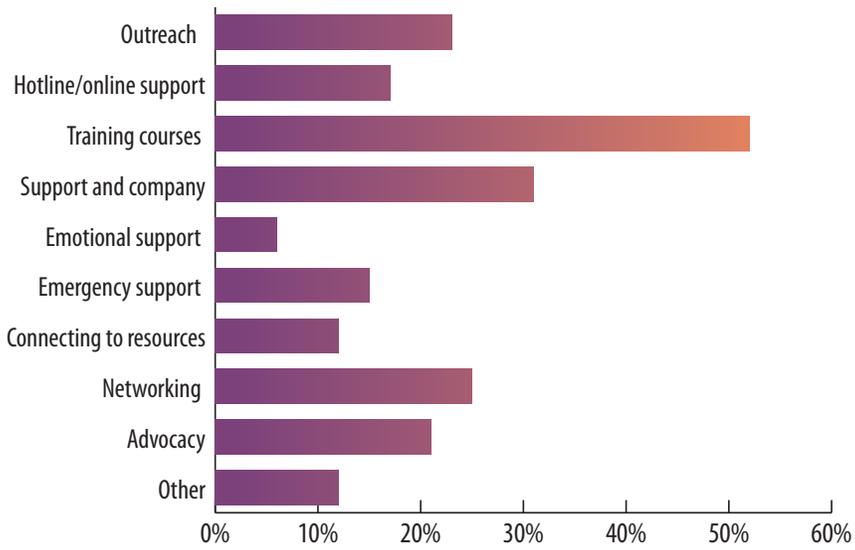


**FIG 17: THE REASONS FOR NOT ACCESSING COMMUNITY OR SOCIAL SERVICES, AS INDICATED BY 22 RESPONDENTS**

## Services Participants Would Like to Receive from Butterfly

Finally, we asked the survey participants about what kinds of services they would most like to receive from Butterfly, so that we can continue to improve our supports and advocacy for migrant Asian sex workers' rights. Given a range of options from which to choose, the most commonly desired service was training courses (52%; n= 27). When asked what kinds of training would be most beneficial, women specified occupational instruction, ESL classes, legal information, and/or health workshops that relate to their work, daily lives, or immigration status. Participants also noted an eagerness to receive support and accompaniment when attending court, accessing health services, or receiving immigration information (31%; n= 16), networking to meet new friends or for traveling (25%; n= 13), and outreach (23%; n= 12), among other services.





**FIG 18: DESIRES FOR FUTURE SERVICES FROM BUTTERFLY AMONG ALL SURVEY PARTICIPANTS**



# Discussion

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It is well documented that racialized migrants are more likely than the general population to be precariously employed, work longer hours, earn lower incomes, live in poverty, and experience social isolation (Chen et al., 2016; City of Toronto, 2017; Colour of Poverty, 2019; Mojtehdzadeh, 2018). When it comes to racialized migrant women in particular, “compared to any other group, immigrant women... continue to experience the worst labour market conditions and outcomes” (Premji, Shakya, Spasevski, Merolli, Athar, & Immigrant Women and Precarious Employment Core Research Group, 2014, p. 123). For many Asian women, these conditions are compounded and exacerbated by language barriers, discrimination, non-recognition of credentials, and issues related to immigration status.

As Butterfly members regularly profess, and as the results of this needs assessment show, working in the sex industry can present a viable, stable, and lucrative alternative to mainstream employment. Women who participated in our surveys and interviews, all of whom were Asian migrants, indicated that their employment in massage parlours, spas, apartments, and other indoor settings where sex work takes place is critically important for their own and their family’s economic security. In contrast to their previous non-sex industry jobs, such as at factories and in restaurants, many participants described greater freedom with flexible working hours, higher pay, and more autonomy. These benefits, however, were also accompanied by various workplace challenges and hardships, including problematic bylaw enforcement and policing practices. In Toronto, Asian sex workers have reported an increase in repressive policing measures, often under the guise of protecting and rescuing them (Butterfly, 2016; Lam, 2018b). This victimization framework – that is, seeing migrant Asian women as victims in the sex trade, unable to make informed decisions on their own behalf – has negated their agency and paints all women’s experiences with the same brush. These kinds of policing activities, along with anti-sex work and anti-immigrant stigma and discrimination, have eroded migrant Asian women’s trust in police, bylaw enforcement officers, and other state officials (see Chu, Clamen, Santini, 2019).

Toronto City Council adopted an “Access Without Fear” policy in 2013, which provides a mandate for migrants to receive essential services such as health care, social services, and legal supports without fear of detention or deportation. While in theory this policy instructs bylaw enforcement and police officers not to collaborate with the Canada Border Services Agency when they are inspecting a sex work establishment, we know from Butterfly members that this does, in fact, continue to happen. Further, the number of inspections of Asian sexually-oriented businesses has increased dramatically since the “Access Without Fear” policy passed. According to city data, bylaw investigations aimed at holistic practitioners increased from 611 in 2013 to 2,585 in 2016. The city’s licensing and standards division laid 1,604 charges against holistic centres and practitioners for being “non-compliant” with bylaws between 2014 and 2017.<sup>4</sup> Some of these practitioners were charged for carrying out measures necessary to protect their own safety, such as locking the door or installing a camera for security and privacy reasons, as well as for wearing items of clothing that violate the highly discretionary bylaw standards, like a tank top and shorts. In 2017, the city’s Auditor General reported that there were 410 holistic centres, which decreased to 389 in 2019 (City of Toronto, 2019c) as holistic centres are being shut down.

As part of its on-going support work, Butterfly regularly accompanies women to court appearances when they are fighting a ticket or fine imposed by a bylaw enforcement or police officers. While ticketing and charging Asian women who work in sexual service businesses is common, Butterfly’s observations are that the actual conviction rates for non-compliance and other minor infractions is very low. The reality of the resulting inflated statistics—in other words, the high numbers of charges but low numbers of conviction—are rarely discussed, leading to a common misconception that crime is a frequent occurrence in indoor Asian sex industry workplaces, in turn feeding a pre-existing stigmatizing perception of women working in this sector.

Through our examination of the survey and interview data, we can deduce that this atmosphere of legal repression has made workers feel less safe. Our results

4 These data come from the Access and Privacy unit, City Clerk’s Office of Toronto, in response to an Access to Information request submitted by Butterfly in 2018.

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demonstrate that even when workers experience violence or need support, they are unlikely to call 911 or otherwise contact Toronto police. Indeed, our needs assessment shows that Asian sex workers not only avoid police, many also avoid health and social services. Some agencies, especially those that employ a ‘rescue’ model that sees sex workers as victims as opposed to a rights-based framework that recognizes sex workers’ agency, have contributed to a further fragmentation of trust in community organizations and the services they provide.

It’s not uncommon for anti-trafficking and anti-sex work proponents to suggest that the best way to end trafficking is to eradicate the sex industry, typically under the guise of rescuing and protecting women. These narratives rely on paternalistic and racist notions about racialized women in need of saving. We know empirically that increasing barriers to work makes already-marginalized people more precarious, not less (Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform, 2019). We also know that repressive law enforcement measures increase danger for sex workers (Chu, Clamen, Santini, 2019). A study about safety and violence prevention in indoor sex work establishments in British Columbia, for example, shows that “police raids deter clients, cause lost revenue, and ultimately result in the closing of many safer indoor work environments” (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 3; see also SWAN Vancouver Society, 2017). Even the City of Toronto (2019b) has reported that “sex workers, sex workers’ advocates and researchers stress that the stigmatization and criminalization of consensual sex work and enforcement conducted by police and municipal Bylaw enforcement officers increases the vulnerability of sex workers and undermines their safety, well-being and human rights” (p. 6).

Sensational claims of Asian women being trafficked into the sex industry have been used to justify unwarranted and unwanted police raids, and have given a false impression to policymakers and the public about the prevalence of trafficking in this sector. Avoiding the conflation of sex work and human trafficking is critical so that sex workers are not further surveilled, stigmatized, criminalized and, consequently, forced underground, resulting

in greater marginalization and isolation. The more socially and physically isolated sex workers are, the more vulnerable they are to violence and exploitation. Instead of attempting to ‘rescue’ women who neither need nor want that kind of intervention, “an approach based on social justice and human rights should be adopted to support migrant sex workers and promote their rights” (Lam, 2018c, p. 11).

Our needs assessment with 52 migrant Asian women in Toronto, in conjunction with other Butterfly research (see Lam, 2018a, 2018b), demonstrates that the best way to reduce problematic labour conditions, improve workplace rights and protections, and contribute to sex workers’ safety and dignity is to ensure that all workers are protected under provincial labour laws, that resources are available to employers and workers in their own languages, and that women are aware of services and supports they can access should they face any problems.

# Recommendations

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The following recommendations are based on the needs assessment survey and interview data, as well as the combined lived experience, knowledge, and decades of research and community advocacy of the report's authors. We contend that migrant Asian women who work in Toronto's massage parlours, spas, apartments, and other indoor sex industry workplaces have a right to safe and just working conditions, and should have barrier-free access to health, community, and social services.

We recommend that the City of Toronto, in collaboration with the provincial and federal governments, as well as with local service providers and community organizations, do the following:

## **I. CHALLENGE MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ASIAN SEX WORKERS.**

There is a strong public perception that Asian-run massage parlours and spas are hubs of trafficking. However, the link between trafficking and indoor sex work venues where migrant Asian women work is unsupported by evidence. Repressive laws and aggressive anti-trafficking campaigns that include punitive investigations and ticketing feed this misconception. Such campaigns also erode sex workers' trust in police, thereby increasing their vulnerability as they are less likely to seek support if needed. One of the best way to prevent labour exploitation, including trafficking, is to ensure equitable access to safe and dignified work.

## **II. PRIORITIZE WORKER HEALTH, SAFETY, AND WELLNESS WITHIN AND ACROSS ALL SEX INDUSTRY SECTORS.**

This includes recognizing the diversity of workers and the range of spaces where sexual services are exchanged for remuneration. All workers, regardless of whether they are engaged in sex work, are entitled to safe work, proper pay, decent working conditions, and labour protections. Employers and employees should be knowledgeable about their responsibilities and rights pursuant to worker's legislation such as Ontario's Employment Standards Act and Occupational Health and Safety Act. Sex workers are valuable contributors to the economic, cultural, and social fabric of the city.

## **III. PROVIDE ACCESSIBLE COMMUNITY, HEALTH, LEGAL, AND SOCIAL SUPPORTS IN A VARIETY OF LANGUAGES.**

The City of Toronto and the Province should work with service providers and local community organizations to remove language barriers that prevent many migrant Asian women from accessing services. Greater funding should be provided to organizations so that they can develop resources (e.g., pamphlets, posters, websites, videos, etc.) in a variety of languages. Efforts are especially required within the health sector to ensure migrant Asian women are aware of the mental health supports they can access.

## **IV. ARRANGE TRAININGS FOR CITY AND OTHER EMPLOYEES, IN CONSULTATION WITH SEX WORKER-LED ORGANIZATIONS.**

Meaningful and competent training on sex workers' and migrants' rights and realities should be provided to bylaw enforcement and police officers. These kinds of trainings already exist and have been created by sex workers and allied organizations, who should be consulted and compensated. Similar trainings should occur across social, health, and community sectors to increase awareness among front line service providers about how to address ongoing anti-sex work and anti-immigrant stigma and discrimination, which is impacting sex workers' comfort in accessing services.

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## **V. STOP USING A REPRESSIVE APPROACH TOWARD SEX WORKERS AND RELATED BUSINESSES.**

The city should not engage in measures that push sexual-oriented businesses underground, as these measures increase the vulnerability of gendered and racialized workers, and for many, strip them of their livelihood. Toronto police and bylaw inspectors must put an end to excessive and unwarranted investigations, prosecutions, and harassment of both licensed and unlicensed establishments, and should instead uphold its anti-trafficking policy, passed in 2019, mandating that the city “avoid [...] increasing the vulnerability of people engaged in consensual sex work” (City of Toronto, 2019a).

## **VI. UPDATE MUNICIPAL BYLAWS TO PROMOTE WORKERS’ LABOUR RIGHTS AND PROTECTIONS.**

The City of Toronto should modify their overly onerous bylaws regarding holistic centres and body rub parlours. Bylaws should not impose unnecessary rules or restrictions on sexual-oriented establishments, especially requirements that violate workers’ rights, privacy, or safety. These include regulations on clothing, locking doors, or installing video cameras. Licensing requirements should be in accessible language for migrant and non-English speaking communities. The city must also remove barriers to obtaining a license, such as the prohibitive cost. Any and all changes to municipal laws or policies on sex work should be guided by sex workers.

## **VII. ENSURE TORONTO’S “ACCESS WITHOUT FEAR” POLICY APPLIES TO THOSE IN THE SEX INDUSTRY.**

The Access Without Fear policy, passed by Toronto City Council in 2013, allows migrants to receive essential services and supports without fear of deportation. The City of Toronto should re-affirm its commitment to ensuring that all residents have access to municipal services without concern of reprisal with respect to immigration status. Bylaw enforcement and Toronto police services must not collaborate with the Canada Border Services Agency if and when they are inspecting a sex work establishment or speaking with a sex worker, or any other migrant worker.

## **VIII. SUPPORT THE FULL DECRIMINALIZATION OF SEX WORK AND RELATED ACTIVITIES.**

The repeal of all sex work-specific criminal laws (i.e., those that prohibit purchasing sexual services, advertising, and receiving a material benefit) and the elimination of immigration regulations that forbid migrants from engaging in sexual or erotic labour are necessary for improving rights and protections. The City of Toronto should uphold and re-affirm the motion passed by its Board of Health in 1995 in support of decriminalization. Sex work is a form of work. Sex workers, their clients, family members, and loved ones should not be criminalized for engaging in or supporting sex work-related activities.

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## **Butterfly (Asian and 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.

### **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

### **Contacts:**

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





butterfly

Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network

**Safety, Dignity, Justice**  
**Support Migrant Sex Workers' Rights**