

## Stories of migrant sex workers 2019 Butterfly

### Ding Ding's Story

The long Canadian winter is undoubtedly annoying. This is my tenth year in Canada. I have seen such a heavy snow many times. Looking at the falling snow outside the window, I remembered that when I first came here, I never thought that one day I would be engaged in this type of work - sex work. Canada and my country of origin have different opinions and aspects about people who work in sex industry. Or I should say that the world's views on this job are similar everywhere. The longest and non-replaceable business in history will never be removed from this beautiful world as long as with the existence of same sex!

The government wants to manage and help the sisters in this industry. As a person who is engaged in this job, we are very grateful to the government's sincere intention, however, the process and means used is something that our sisters do not agree with. Some women might work in massage parlors and just doing some "masturbation" for clients was fine. Now the government is vigorously managing the massage parlor. If there is no legal identity and massage license, you can't work in the massage parlors. This is originally due to good intention but some of the sisters who have no legal status have been pushed to the dead corner. As a result, some of the lucky sisters ran to the other provinces where massage license is not required. Some of the sisters were forced to go to prostitution, just like a vicious circle. I used to work in a massage parlor, but because I found too much policing and too strict regulations, I had to go to a more intimate and secret locations to work.

Some of the sisters are scared to blame their bad bosses for their oppression because the boss would occasionally threaten them by saying they had no legal status. Some of the sisters did not dare to call the police when robbed because the police did not solve any problems. To add salt to injury, immigration bureau staff were brought in and they detained or even deported those victims. I have a sister who called police for being robbed. The police did not do the investigation. Instead, she was arrested and handed it over to the Immigration authority. She was finally released. To avoid being arrested again, she fled to other cities and be hostile environment with greatest risks.

At present, the government not only does not help these vulnerable groups in terms of policy, but instead allows the sisters to stay in the dangerous areas, just like the street mouse. I had a chance to chat with a very gentle Canadian customer and he asked, "Why can't you work for another job?" I said to myself: "Easy to say. I don't know English and have no education. I don't have any qualifications. Where can I find another job and who will hire me? What else can I do besides doing this? Survival is the most important!" I smiled to him and said that I have nothing but to sell my own body, and which is better than to receive government benefits. At least I am self-reliant. "The customer smiled and said, "Well, you are also a taxpayer and you should pay attention to your safety." Speaking of safety, I have been robbed several times in my own working time. Once I did an outcall in the town, I was almost suffocated by a perverted customer with a pillow. The driver outside gave me a call in time. So I had a chance to get out. . .

Every time I read news reporting that some missing people or some murder victims are Asian women, I am always instinctive to relate them as my sisters. Unfortunately, most of the victims are related to this work. It turns out that this job is really too dangerous. Most women in normal occupations and life will not encounter the risks that sex workers and sisters can encounter and the sisters have no place to complain. When the news media or online platform announced that these victims were found to be sex workers, the netizens who were watching would say that they were "deserve it" or even clapping their hands....

It's sad to say that the government management staff in this industry have not been able to understand more about the inside and nature of this particular industry. They simply follow their imagination to take the so-called "rescue the victimized women" action, which causes the sisters in the industry to pay more survival prices. Some of the bad guys use this government loophole to abuse and take advantage of some of the sisters. There are so many shocking stories here and they are too many to mention. I hope that my speech can give a little hint to the relevant government staff, and sometimes doing nothing is doing something big. It is necessary to manage the massage parlors, but how to manage it seems to us should be like that the police can't just stop and carding anyone on the street. If there is a problem, it means that there is an alarm. Only when the police ask girls nothing but the robbery related questions, and only when license bureau staff come in just to check if the owners pay taxes but not to check the girls' licenses, then it is the time that those girls dare to report to police a robbery or being harmed. The most important thing is that people are able to work in massage parlour or other place they feel better to work there. By doing so, the government and the police can really help and save the women who are engaged in sex work.

## Cookie's Story

I have been in Canada for more than 10 years. This is what I want to tell you .... As sex workers, we are using our bodies to work and earn our living. We may be women, men or trans. As a women sex workers, we are often being targeted. I do not rely on others. Everyone has different stories. I will use “two side not human (兩邊不是人)” to describe sex workers because no one in society, including everyday people and police, treat sex workers as human.

No matter the reason, sex workers choose to work in this industry. This is my work, I have a better income and I have better control of my time. I have more control of many things in my work and life. I have more flexibility over my schedule than at many other jobs. I have more time to take care of family. I want to study and I can pay for my school fees.

As a sex worker, I meet different clients: they may be men, women, or couples. I have a better understanding of society and people's stories because of this work. The clients share their stories with me, especially the problems they don't want their family to worry about. For example, people working in office cultures may also face pressures and oppression that other people don't know about. We are their counselors. I can be their counselor and listen to them. I can also help them to fulfill their desires and fantasies, particularly those that are not accepted by mainstream society.

We are helping a lot of clients, sexually and psychologically. However, it is not only one-way. Some of the clients understand us, they know we work hard and this is not an easy job. They respect us and take care of us. They may buy small gifts (like chocolate) for my birthday or other celebrations. I feel so happy as I feel that I have someone taking care of me and who understands us. However, some clients are bad. I call them the “bad eggs.” These bad guys may rob us or rape us. They do not treat us as human beings. They do it because they know that the police and neighbours won't protect us. It is really hurtful. They hurt us a lot and the level of harm can be huge. It is so difficult to find support. We have to worry every day as we don't know if people are coming to us as a client, robber, or police .

The police does not come to protect us and that's why most sex workers do not call police. They discriminate against us. I have to say, they are worse than a thief or robber. They put a gun on the table and ask a sex worker to do whatever they want. They may ask sex workers to take off their clothes, to dance or offer sexual services without paying.

It is a myth to say that sex workers are trafficked. There are many reasons a sex worker may not want to tell the truth to the client. They may tell their client that they have debts or they are being controlled. I have to protect myself and have boundaries with my client. I don't want to waste my time to go out on dates with them. I have to tell them that I need to pay off my debt so that they will not expect to have sex with me without payment , they will not ask me to go out on dates all the time, or try and hurt us as they know I have a boss behind me!

Some organizations claim that they are helping us. They are asking the police to come to us, to shut down our workplace, take away our job and make it so we cannot work anymore. They force us to work underground. It is more dangerous, there is more harassment and more oppression. They are not helping us. They are putting salt in our wounds.

Many sex workers do not want to tell anyone, “I am a sex worker” because of discrimination. They will not even tell their friends or family because they will be discriminated against too. I have to tell the government, doctors or social workers that I am a victim because I don't want their discrimination. If I do not present myself as a victim, I am not able to get services. We always need to be careful because we need to protect ourselves. We don't want to get into trouble with police. We don't want any opportunity to get into trouble.

When someone tells you that they are in needed. they really need your support. I have the ability to support myself. I use my body in exchange for money and a better life. Sex work gives me my livelihood, gives me better control of my life and gives me dignity. For many sex workers, sex work is a safer space to them. Being sex workers means we can have control over our lives. We can have our dignity.

Sex workers need respect from everyone and to be treated as full human beings.

## Stephanie's Story

My name is Stephanie. I came to Canada without knowing anyone in this country. My Canadian friends praise me as a brave girl. For that reason, I am telling some of my Canadian stories, as a brave woman.

I remember that I found a job in a bakery shortly after I arrived in Toronto. The boss is a self-employed young man. I always worked with him every day, I felt very tired, taking the minimum wage of \$6/hour. At the workplace, he often harassed me. Sometimes I resisted and refused. He deducted my time. I was very upset. Instead of being so annoyed of him, I'd better to work somewhere else.

Opening newspapers, I saw that most of the ads were recruiting massage women. One of the advertisements about a private club attracted me, and the reward was \$2,000/week. One evening after my one-week work, I happened to witness an incident: three co-workers were threatened by two guests who are armed with knives. I was screaming, but in return I was slapped on face by one of them. Other co-workers dare not speak out and help me, but only surrender the belongings. My second job ended in such a hurry.

Afterwards, I applied for a work permit, and got a massage license, and went to work in a spa. During my work, I often met my female boss coming to work with a cane. After asking her, I learned that her husband had broken one of her legs. Because he didn't like her to work touching other people's bodies. Although she had subsidized him to buy a house and a car, he suspected that her money was not clean... After a little long while, I often felt the air dignified there: the pressure of survival, the competition of work, and the public view of the industry makes some workers feel guilty and skeptical. One worker was rude and often tempered to fight against others. Police was often called to investigate the issues, but most of time they ignored to protect the beaten ones. With these incidents happening, I need to stay away from this industry that touches men's body, and go back to an office job which I am used to doing.

After reading an online advertisement for hiring an office clerk, I went to the site for interview, where I saw most applicants were young and educated women, and they were also new immigrants like me... I wasn't sure if my qualifications back from home country were recognized or about other reasons, eventually I was hired for probation. I was secretly complacent of myself several days and decided to work hard to keep the job. The boss was a mid-aged man with a family. While working, I was often asked by the boss to work overtime until very tired during some late evenings. When I was alone with him, he stripped himself off naked, and asked me to do a body massage on him until he released. I was always angry because I was not permanent resident yet, and he owed me the initiating deposit and part of my salary. I felt very helpless but only could obey him. Until a long time later, I found on a website that there had been more victims like me!

Intermittently I went for several date meetings, but unfortunately those dates from some dating ADs just wanted to get free sexes, even if I refused, it was hard, almost in vain. Owing commonly to women's shame, shyness and self-blaming, even if I thought of reporting to get help, I never dare to take a step. My thoughts hovering: Why do others help me? In case of being deported, isn't it worse? Who else can I trust? Is it rational to let them happen, since I heard the law is weaker in Canada? Also, I didn't like those traumatic flashbacks by inquiries.

Personally, my experiences tell me that sex work is not different from any other, for the boundary between each other is very vague. Any job or industry that engages in earning a living, sometimes due to the pressure from the boss or other reasons, a woman becomes a worker who is forced into free sex without her consent, and is innocently invaded, without knowing how to make a voice; in fact, on the other hand the so-called sex workers clearly mark their prices, by providing professional sexual services, contrarily making the perpetrator discouraged, think twice before behaving. Some women chose to suppress themselves, and remain silence; sex work is discriminated, but there's income for survival. Which one is worse than another?

Now working in a holistic center, I met my clients, most of whom are respectful and understanding, and they are willing to pay me tips. I increased my income, so that I can buy my daughter anything she likes to own. I enjoy the self-respect and independence that money brings to me. Although, some people still despise me for my job. However, at least I can lead my daughter to a decent life and win back the dignity that we deserve.

## Niki's Story

I am a holistic practitioner with over ten years of experience. I would like to share my experiences of being a victim of robbery. Due to the poor state of the business, I was only one practitioner in the spa. Around ten in the morning, not long after the spa opened, a man came in and chose the forty dollar massage. I started the massage, and when I almost finished, he suddenly got up and pressed me to the massage table. He tore off my clothes until I was almost naked, and then he tried to rape me. It took all my effort to get out and run outside. I ran to the convenience store next to the spa. Since I had nothing with me, I asked the store owner to help me call 911, but he was afraid of getting in trouble. He didn't want his business to be affected, so he refused. After I begged him, he finally let me use his phone to call my friend. I asked my friend to call 911 for me right away. While I was waiting for the police, that man came in and asked me to return the payment because I hadn't finished the massage. When the police arrived, they confronted the man. Now I had to face the other nightmare that I never expected. The female police officer who was on duty hinted to me in Chinese that I should give up and withdraw my case, as the odds were against me in the sense that the judge would not believe or sympathize with my words because I was a holistic practitioner. Later on, I heard that the man was released the next day. Additionally, I received a ticket for not being properly dressed in public. Even when I explained the reason why, no one believed me. It is evident from this situation that the heavy discrimination against my profession by law enforcement officers makes me reluctant and afraid to call the police even when I am in danger.

The second time also happened after the spa opened in the morning. A man with a backpack showed up. As I was already wary from the last time I was robbed, I told the man to go into the treatment room first, and I asked him to choose the service from outside. After he chose the service he wanted, he said he would like to pay with credit card. When we were almost at the reception desk, he pulled me into a headlock from behind and dragged me back to the treatment room. He pressed my face up hard on the massage table and quickly grabbed the tape from his backpack and tied me tightly to the massage bed. He used a wire cutter to cut off the telephone lines and the CCTV cables. He locked the store from inside, and he went through my purse and took my phone and all my money. Just at that moment, there was another customer who rang the doorbell. He covered my mouth right away, and he used a knife to threaten me to keep quiet. I could tell he had experience, and this was not his first time doing this. He said the customer would leave if no one answered the door. There was no sound after a while. The customer left. Then, he put on a pair of gloves which used for construction and proceeded to use his fingers to poke my vagina and anus. I wished for nothing but death in those terrifying, awful moments. With my eyes closed, I suddenly thought about my children. I couldn't die. Who would take care of them if I died? I could only endure his disgusting actions. When he was finally done, I desperately begged him not to hurt or kill me. I was only a single mom, an ordinary worker who didn't even own a car. I swore to him I would not call the police. I begged him for almost 3 hours until he let me go. He dragged me to the basement and locked me in there before he left. After a couple of hours, the owner found me locked in the basement and released me. After that, I couldn't sleep and I had nightmares for a long period of time. I want to lose my memory, but it is impossible to forget. Every day I live in horror. If we have the right to lock the door, then we could choose the customer. Then, perhaps these things wouldn't happen. I tried to quit this job, and I looked for new job opportunities but my attempts ended in failure as I was not competent. I hid my fears and continued to work as a practitioner for my kids and family. I don't want to become a burden to society. I only hope that the city would carefully consider giving us the right to work, as I want to work with my hands and contribute to the society.

**Please listen to the voices of migrant sex workers ...**

Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network)  
butterflysw.org