



### **“We cannot tolerate it anymore!**

**Racist attacks being waged by some anti-trafficking organizations against  
Asian massage parlours and sex workers must end.”**

Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network)  
June, 2021

Asian and migrant workers in massage parlours, sex workers, and allies stand together to condemn racist attacks from some anti-trafficking organizations, which foster anti-Asian racial discrimination and anti-sex work hate and also conflate sex work with human trafficking for repressive aim. These pro-carceral anti-trafficking organizations must stop trying to shut down massage parlours/body rub parlours,<sup>1</sup> and stop advocating for the further criminalization of sex work — increasing surveillance, policing, investigations, and racial profiling of sex workers.

These organizations' attacks have led to the use of trafficking laws and policies as cover for continued investigation and harassment of Asian women engaged in sex work, including many migrant women who work in massage parlours who have been harassed, fined, charged, arrested, detained, and deported.<sup>2</sup> Repressive laws and policies push these women underground, and expose them to police and other violence, including physical violence, sexual violence, exploitation and even murder.<sup>3</sup> These organizations must take responsibility and immediately stop the harms they are causing to our communities through anti-trafficking rhetoric that aims to eliminate sex work<sup>4</sup>.

Many of the most prominent and active anti-trafficking organizations are anti-sex work, are/or tied to fundamentalist Christian groups or law enforcement which are rooted in white saviour ideals. They weaponize harmful anti-trafficking rhetoric to conceal their distinctly anti-migrant, anti-Asian, and anti-sex work agendas. Many of these organizations promote the idea that sexual services are sinful, immoral, a form of sexual exploitation and therefore should be ended. They knowingly and intentionally conflate sex work and human trafficking. In doing so, they promote widespread moral panic about human trafficking, as well as hate towards Asian communities,

<sup>1</sup> Depending on the municipality, massage parlours are called and licenced as body rub parlours, holistic centres or personal wellness centers.

<sup>2</sup> Lam, E. (2018) *How anti-trafficking investigation and policies harm migrant sex workers*. Butterfly. [https://576a91ec-4a76-459b-8d05-4ebbf42a0a7e.filesusr.com/ugd/5bd754\\_bbd71c0235c740e3a7d444956d95236b.pdf](https://576a91ec-4a76-459b-8d05-4ebbf42a0a7e.filesusr.com/ugd/5bd754_bbd71c0235c740e3a7d444956d95236b.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Lam, E. Gallant, C. & Wong, V. (March 23, 2021) One thing we can do to honour the women killed in Atlanta: All massage workers need stronger rights and less policing. <https://www.chatelaine.com/opinion/massage-workers-labour-protections/>

<sup>4</sup> Lam, E. (2021) *An institutional ethnography inquiry into policing and investigation of migrant sex workers in Canada*

migrant workers, massage parlours and sex workers, in order to achieve their goal of ending the sex industry.

The discriminatory anti-trafficking organizations that do this are not aligned with international organizations that recognize the critical need to distinguish between sex trafficking and sex work, as well as the importance of upholding the rights of sex workers.

## White Savior Agency



While these harmful anti-trafficking organizations claim to protect the rights of women in our communities, a close interrogation of their actions makes clear that they are not. The police and law enforcement have demonstrated time and again that sexism, homophobia, transphobia, whorephobia, racism, ableism and colonialism make them a real and present danger to the marginalized people they are supposed to serve and protect. When the perpetrators of abuse and violence towards sex workers have been the police and other law enforcement,<sup>5</sup> these organizations have been silent despite their mandates to support and protect us. White privilege and political power enable them to lobby governments to impose harmful policies and increase policing against Asian massage parlours and sex workers, preventing us from accessing supports, despite protests and resistance from the community.

<sup>5</sup> Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (2019) *The perils of “protection” sex workers’ experiences of law enforcement in Ontario*. Retrieved from <http://www.aidslaw.ca/site/the-perils-of-protection/?lang=en>

Thousands of Asian workers in massage parlours and in the sex industry have explicitly and repeatedly stated that they are not trafficked victims, and that they want to continue working in these industries under safe and fair working conditions. 300 workers from massage parlours have advocated for their rights in Toronto.<sup>6</sup> In spite of this, many discriminatory anti-trafficking organizations fan anti-Asian and anti-sex work animus by denying worker agency, erasing their subjectivities, experiences, playing on stereotypes of Asian women as having no voice, docile trafficked victims, labeling all massage parlours/body rub parlours as brothels, characterizing their work as illegal/illicit, and shutting down their businesses.<sup>7</sup>



For instance, some harmful anti-trafficking organizations are now lobbying for repressive bylaws, more prosecutions<sup>8</sup>, and to “clean up” and “shut down” massage parlours,<sup>9</sup> particularly those run by Asian people in Toronto,<sup>10</sup> Newmarket, Markham and other cities. In order to protect predominantly white massage businesses, these organizations are also advocating for changes to requirements around professional training and credentials (e.g. RMT and training from accredited colleges) so as to exclude non-English speaking, Asian and migrant workers from being licenced. This will undoubtedly have huge economic impacts on Asian massage

<sup>6</sup> Our Right to work- A Joint statement from Holistic Practitioners in Toronto <https://www.butterflysw.org/campaign>

<sup>7</sup> Bridgenorth (2021) “BridgeNorth has helped the Town of Newmarket to take a stand against allowing erotic massage in the municipality. On Monday, May 3, 2021 Town Councillors heard deputations, including statements from Casandra Diamond, that led to an unanimous councillor vote to direct staff to entirely scrap the body rub parlour definition and replace it with a new “personal wellness centre” classification. Language was added to the motion to include a full prohibition on any business related to sexual activity”. <https://bridgenorth.org/advocacy/our-achievements/>

<sup>8</sup> Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking and Defend Dignity asked for repressive bylaws and more prosecution in City of Toronto. <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.GL5.2>

<sup>9</sup> Depending on the municipality, massage parlours are called and licenced as body rub parlours, holistic centres or personal wellness centers.

<sup>10</sup> Lam, E. & Dumaresque, R. (May 21, 2018) Overpolicing holistic practitioners- who are predominantly immigrant women- pushes their work underground and make violence more likely. *ricochet* <https://ricochet.media/en/2623/human-trafficking-rhetoric-is-driving-torontos-review-of-holistic-centre-licensing>

workers. One evangelical anti-trafficking organization even developed a guide for churches on how to lobby municipal governments to raid and eliminate massage parlours.<sup>11</sup>

To be clear, not all massage parlours or body rub parlours provide sexual services. It is both racist and sexist to fetishize massage workers, particularly those of Asian descent, by assuming that all of them provide sexual services. However, Asian massage workers' rights must be protected and respected whether or not they provide sexual services.

A reliance on policing, surveillance and increased enforcement does not protect marginalized people, and instead creates more harm. However, many pro-carceral anti-trafficking organizations are advocating for the further criminalization of sex work, as well as increased surveillance, policing, investigations, and racial profiling of sex workers. For example, the new proposed Ontario anti-trafficking law (Bill 251) — which is supported by some pro-carceral anti-trafficking organizations — would massively expand the powers of law enforcement and create new surveillance infrastructures to target sex workers, ramming over the concerns of directly affected communities.<sup>12</sup> By increasing police powers, Bill 251 will lead to increased surveillance and criminalization of youth, LGBTQ2S+, migrant, Black, Indigenous, Asian and racialized people, many of whom made submissions to the Ontario government denouncing the Bill.<sup>13</sup>

These anti-trafficking organizations have significantly harmed the Asian community by taking away jobs, shutting down businesses, increasing policing, and inviting greater state violence against the most vulnerable in our community. They violate the agency of Asian women by imposing a moralistic agenda while increasing the state's power to exert control over Asian women's bodies.

As we saw in March 2021, eight people were brutally murdered in a spa in Atlanta because of anti-Asian racism, hatred towards massage parlours, and anti-sex work sentiment.<sup>14</sup> However, the attack against Asian massage workers is not isolated to this incident of deadly violence. When pro-carceral anti-trafficking organizations call to "shut down" or "clean up" massage parlours and to "end the sex trade," this reinforces the very same logics of the murderer who believed he had the right to "eliminate" those massage parlour workers in Atlanta.

Any strategy to combat exploitation and trafficking must be one that centers human, labour, and migrant rights, and addresses structural and systemic barriers. The justice and protections that marginalized people need lie in increased investments in community-based services, affordable and safe housing, access to anti-oppressive education, accessible health care, childcare, legal services and supports, labour rights, fair wages and more.

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<sup>11</sup> Defend Dignity (2020) Guide for Churches to End Sexual Exploitation in Canadian Body Rub Centres. "Tools to Stop Operations:... there is another goal to use the bylaws as the tools/reason to audit/raid the body rub centres, with the goal of shutting them down. This is done by creating fines for every infraction, with the goal of trying to make it unfeasible for the body rub centres to operate economically, or to remove their license due to too many infractions. If the bylaws are written in a way to be quite detailed and onerous, this may also prevent body rub centres from operating since they do not want to follow such strict bylaws" (p,3) . <https://defenddignity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/guide-for-churches-to-end-sexual-exploitation-in-canada.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Stopping Bill 251- Ford's Covert Expansion of Policing <https://www.butterflysw.org/stop-bill-251>

<sup>13</sup> Communications from concern groups to Executive Committee on motion of Denouncing Bill 251 (City of Toronto ) <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2021.EX24.11>

<sup>14</sup> Shih, E. (March 26, 2021) How to Protect Massage Workers

Policing and criminalization of sex work hurts massage workers, even when they aren't sex workers.

We therefore call on these harmful anti-trafficking organizations to immediately stop anti-Asian racism, discrimination, and state-sanctioned violence against Asian massage parlours and Asian sex workers. They must not conflate sex work with human trafficking.

Further, we call on all human rights, gender-based violence and anti-trafficking organizations to stand with us to support women's rights to control over our bodies, and our right to equal protection and to be free of gender and racial discrimination and harassment. We further call on these organizations to recognize that sex work is work, to support the full decriminalization of sex work<sup>15</sup>, and to join Asian massage parlour workers and sex workers to fight for full dignity and security, as well as labour, migrant, gender, and racial justice<sup>16</sup>.

Quotes from Asian massage workers and Asian sex workers:

*"I am not a trafficked victim. I just want to work. I am using my own hand and my own body to earn a living to support myself and my family. When they arrested me, they searched all my stuff and took my money. The \$7,000 the police took was the income I earned from two months. Why did they arrest me and take my money when the police said they are protecting me?" Lin Chan*

*"I am not trafficked victim. I use my hand to support myself and family. Please stop shutting down our business and bringing more policing into our lives. Please stop imposing your moralistic, colonial, and religious ideas on me." Ching Li*

*"This is extremely racist when you said we are trafficked victim when we speak little English" Lili*

*"We have too many sisters being arrested, detained and deported. Please stop your harm against us!" Mary Chan*

*"The Atlanta incident is very emotional for every Asian. Our sisters who work in massage parlour and the sex industry are targeted. Racism, sexism, and whore-phobia harm our sisters!" Lisa*

*"I cannot meet the English requirement and cannot pay for the training fee of the college. I have worked in massage business for 10 years. What can I do when my massage parlours shut down? " Mani*

*"It doesn't matter whether I work in the massage parlour or do sex work; we are all human beings. We all work for our living, every job should be equal." Lucy*

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<sup>15</sup> Canadian Alliance of Sex Work Law Reform (2017) Safety, Dignity and Equality: Recommendations for Sex Work Law Reform in Canada. <http://sexworklawreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/CASWLR-Final-Report-1.6MB.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Butterfly (2021) Statement to Justice for Support Migrant Sex Workers (#CallsForJustice) <https://www.butterflysw.org/8callsforjustice>

*“Some people say that they want the body rub parlours shut down because workers are being sexually assaulted, abused, and trafficked there. Similar to other industries, some of us may face bad bosses or experience violence at our workplaces. Human trafficking and sexual violence happen to many workers, e.g. caregivers, farm workers, restaurant workers. Violence can also occur in universities, churches, or marital relationships; however, we do not call for shutting them down or criminalizing them.*

*Even though I am a victim of domestic violence and think that the institution of heterosexual marriage is the most exploitative system to women in the world, I still do not have the right to advocate for the criminalization of your marriage. That’s why we need to build our community to help each other, like Butterfly does, to protect our rights, improve our working conditions, and stop the exploitation and violence against us.*

*However, we need recognize that our experiences are unique, and we do not have the power to impose one narrative of our experiences on each other. You may not want work in massage parlours or the sex industry, but you need to respect my decision and my right to work. You should not use your power to take away my job.” Fong Fong.*

*“I was working as a caregiver when I first came to Canada. My boss sexually assaulted me. However, I was afraid to leave because I would not have enough time to apply for permanent residency if I changed my employer then. My boss rejected my request to renew the work permit even though I was still working for him. I could not tolerate any further and left my employer. As a result, I became non-status. I tried to earn money to pay for my lawyer fee. I started working in a hotel. One day, a police officer pretended to be a client and set up a date with me. When I opened the door, more police arrived with him. They asked me if I had a boss or if someone took my money. They asked if I was being trafficked. I said “no.” After that, they asked me for my passport. They also forced me to unlock my phone and looked through my messages and photos. The police called CBSA, and I was arrested and deported after being detained for one month.” Wendy Liu.*

### Safety, Dignity & Justice

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