

RED CANARY SONG -- Stories from Outreach

10 Myths About Trafficking in Chinese Migrant Community

1. Not all Chinese massage parlors provide sexual services. The majority of Chinese massage parlors are licensed businesses that also provide professional, non-sexual massage.
2. Most massage workers who are immigrating from China, and who gain visa and immigration help from intermediaries, are not coming to this country to work exclusively for massage businesses. The majority have also done domestic work, nail salon work, and/or restaurant work, but may find that massage pays better than other forms of work. Most workers choose massage out of a limited set of other employment options for immigrants who don't have American educational credentials or strong English language skills.
3. Whether they are doing this work by choice, circumstance, or coercion, all migrant massage parlor workers deserve basic human rights. According to Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the World Health Organization, criminalization of sexual services violates the basic human rights of sex workers, endangering their health and well-being. **Criminalization is a root cause of human trafficking.**
4. Due to criminalization, massage parlor workers can't trust police to protect them in the incidence of robbery or violent crime. In a broad-based North American study conducted by SWAN and Butterfly, 98% of Chinese massage workers interviewed said that they would not call the police when they are in trouble. **Distrust of police is a root cause of human trafficking.**
5. Police raids cause terror in the community. Providing social services only after arrest, and by court mandate, is a violent way of reaching people who need to be offered help in a manner that is **supportive, strengths-focused, and non-judgmental.**
6. Shame is a big source of psychological harm for workers. Organizations that shame immigrants for the work that they do to survive, including prostitution diversion programs that intervene after arrest, contribute to **psychological violence.**
7. Customers and workers very often have positive relationships. Many workers exit the industry when they marry a customer, and others have hopes of doing so. In cases of labor exploitation, a high percentage of those calling national human trafficking hotlines are customers. Criminalizing the purchase of sex dissuades people who have regular contact with massage workers from reporting labor exploitation when they see it in the workplace.

8. While many massage workers have limited working status, or are undocumented immigrants, there are also many workers who have alien residency status (green cards), or are citizens. Many of the workers who were arrested in Florida during the police raids on the Asian Orchid Day Spa were American citizens.
9. The average hourly rate for massage workers is about half the rate that customers pay, or about \$20-\$40 per hour. Thus, many workers make the majority of their income from tips of \$50 to \$200, on top of this \$20-\$40 split, which they negotiate with customers for “extra services.” Many massage workers that offer “extras” do not offer “full service” or sexual intercourse. Some are not aware that a hand job is illegal, or that it counts as sex work. There are also massage workers who choose not to offer any extras, while working in the same workspace as others that do. When asked by an outsider, almost every massage worker will deny that they offer any extras, because this is a private negotiation between them and their customer, and varies on a case-by-case basis. All massage workers interviewed by SWAN and Butterfly say they can refuse a customer if they do not want to provide specific services.
10. Massage workers often move from location to location because the nature of this work favors “new girls” who earn more money during their first few months on the job. This form of touring is not necessarily coercive. In WeChat discussions, many workers ask other workers for recommendations of where they can travel to, where there are more customers, so that they can make more money, privately sharing their experiences of bosses and customers to protect each other. Some workplaces offer to help workers find living spaces nearby, however, because workers are staying temporarily in each location, and are spending long hours at the workplace, many do not want to pay extra for separate housing arrangements, and prefer to pay lower living costs by staying in the rooms where they work. This arrangement is also not necessarily coercive. Customers ask to see workers at all hours of the day and night, and many workers stay on site because they don’t want to miss the chance to make more money.

Limited language skills and knowledge of American laws and customs make workers more vulnerable to labor exploitation by employers. Workers are more reliant on their employers for housing, transportation, and other basic needs because the stigma associated with this work also isolates them from the broader immigrant community.

To fight for regulated hours, better working conditions, healthier workspaces, and higher hourly wages, workers need the right to organize and advocate for themselves. This is impossible when sex work is criminalized.