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# “Stand With Us”: Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Must Not Be Forgotten in Our Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and Anti-Asian Racism

**Elene Lam**

**Elene Lam** is an activist, artist, community organizer, and educator. For over two decades, she has been a dedicated advocate for sex workers, migrants, and gender, labor, and racial justice. She is the founder of Butterfly, the Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network, and the co-author of *Not Your Rescue Project: Migrant Sex Workers Fighting for Justice*. Elene is a Sessional Assistant Professor in Critical Disability Studies at the School of Health Policy and Management, Faculty of Health, York University.

## **Introduction**

People all over the world have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, racialized, migrant, poor, criminalized, and otherwise marginalized people, including sex workers, have been disproportionately affected. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the inequality Asian sex workers continuously experience and how they have fallen through the cracks. The heavy economic, social, and mental impacts on them during the pandemic have exacerbated their exclusion from access to financial relief, social support, and health services. The stigma, discrimination, poverty, violence, harassment, surveillance, and repressive policing have also been intensified by government emergency measures. Despite the oppression and the challenges, sex workers' organizations all over the world have spoken out about their struggles, developed rapid responses to support their communities, and asked for support. In this grassroots community report, I illustrate the oppression and challenges Asian and migrant sex workers in Canada faced during the pandemic and examine how one Canadian sex worker organization, Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network), worked with workers, migrants, and racialized communities to support Asians and migrants and to build their resilience. Butterfly is a community-led organization that organizes over 5,000 Asian workers, including permanent residents, refugees, and non-status women, who work in massage parlours and the sex industry across Canada and provides them with crisis, social, health, and legal supports. Butterfly also builds the capacity and leadership of the workers, organizing them to fight for their rights. Butterfly is founded upon the belief that sex workers are entitled to respect and the acknowledgement of their human rights. In addition to the challenges faced by workers, including racism, classism, sexism, gender inequality, xenophobia, transphobia, language barriers, and other kinds of oppression, both undocumented and permitted workers have little to no

access to the health and social services needed to navigate their work safely, and they live in constant fear of being deported from Canada. They face surveillance, policing, and criminalization and, particularly, the harms done by the anti-trafficking movement.

## **Oppression and Challenges Faced by Asian and Migrant Sex Workers**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the Canadian government imposed a variety of emergency orders and restrictions, such as border control, travel bans, public health measures (e.g., vaccination, testing, and wearing masks), stay-at-home orders, and lockdowns, all of which worsened the vulnerability of Asian and migrant sex workers. With workplaces shut down, many Asian migrant workers in massage parlours and the sex industry were unable to work. The loss of income left them unable to afford basic needs and many even lost their homes. Some had to work in even more unsafe circumstances or go underground to avoid investigation. Travel bans and restrictions (including travel to other countries to work or back to their home countries) have adversely affected migrant sex workers because migration is an important way for them to obtain income, support, and resources.

[A survey by Butterfly](#) showed that over 80 percent of Asian and migrant workers in massage parlours and the sex industry lost their income as a result of the pandemic restrictions. In response to loss of income many experienced during the pandemic crisis, the federal government provided citizens with various forms of financial relief (Canada Emergency Response Benefit, Canada Recovery Benefit, Employment Insurance, etc.), but Asian and migrant massage parlour and sex workers either did not qualify or were afraid to apply. The twin requirements of immigration status and employment records exclude them because some of the workers are either undocumented or have precarious immigration status (Abji et al., 2020). Even those with immigration status are afraid to file their tax return and apply for the government fund because sex work is considered criminal (Amnesty International Canada, 2020; Lam, 2020a).

To support small businesses, the government provided funding in the form of, for instance, rental subsidies and government loans; however, again, sex workers could not apply because the sex industry is regarded as organized crime instead of legitimate business. Butterfly's survey indicated that more than 40 percent of respondents were either ineligible or too afraid to apply; furthermore, the language barrier and discrimination by the Canada Revenue Agency also prevented some non-English speaking workers from accessing the funds (Lam, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

## **Lack of Access to Information and Loss of Social Safety Nets**

Asian and migrant sex workers are also excluded from accessing formal social protection, including information, housing, social supports, and health care services. Asian and migrant sex workers, particularly those who are poor, unhoused, experiencing violence, and/or trying to cope with mental issues, often rely on public and social

support systems, such as harm reduction programs, shelters, victim support, and immigration services. Their vulnerability has increased their risk of being exposed to violence because they cannot access public services, health care providers, and social services organizations due to their reduced capacity, language barriers, stigma, discriminatory policies against migrants, fear of surveillance and policing, and other structural challenges (Benoit & Unsworth, 2021; Santini & Lam, 2017). Since many sex workers' support programs have been absorbed by the anti-trafficking program, many migrant sex workers are afraid to access those supports out of concerns about surveillance and profiling (Lam, 2020a, 2020b).

### **Anti-Asian Racism, Anti-Sex Work Sentiment, and Xenophobia**

Asian communities have been especially scapegoated for COVID-19; the pandemic has fuelled the rise of racism and hate against Asians and migrants, particularly Chinese people. In Canada, over 1,150 racist attacks targeting Chinese people were reported between March 2020 and February 2021 (Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter, 2021). There has, however, been very little attention paid to discriminatory policies against Chinese and other Asian sex workers.

Since the Atlanta shooting in which six Asian women who worked in spas were murdered, concerns over anti-Asian racism have grown and, as a result, Stop Asian Hate campaigns have been organized in Canada and the US. However, the Asian women were murdered not only because of anti-Asian hatred but also because of the hatred of sex workers. Together, these racist and sexist conceptions about Asian and migrant sex workers result in them being seen as illegal, disreputable, and dangerous. Anti-immigration sentiment and discriminatory enforcement continue to lead to unequal and harmful outcomes for the racialized community.

A report prepared by Butterfly and other sex worker advocates states:

*This violence is not isolated and stems from a long history of fetishizing, hypersexualizing and marginalizing Asian women. Anti-migrant and anti-sex worker legislation promote and encourage hate towards Asian migrant sex workers, labelling them as undeserving and unworthy of rights and protection. (Butterfly et al., 2021)*

We believe that an in-depth analysis of the multiple forms of systemic injustice Asian massage parlour and sex workers face is needed.

### **Surveillance and Punitive Crackdowns**

Racist acts against and attitudes towards Asian women not only undermine their safety, leading to physical violence against them, but they are also used to support raids, racist attacks, and the general targeting of Asians who work in massage parlours and the sex industry (Butterfly, 2021; Lam, 2018a, 2018b). During the COVID-19 pandemic,

instead of improving access to support during a difficult time, the extraordinary powers of the police and law enforcement were expanded and used to target racialized and migrant workers and sex workers, intensifying the stigma, discrimination, harassment, surveillance, racial profiling, and repressive policing (Lam et al., 2021; NSWP, 2021). For example, the Ontario government imposed regulations on social distancing and sharing of personal space and required proof of vaccination, negative tests, and IDs, all of which create a huge barrier for workers with precarious immigration status as merely producing an ID can have negative immigration consequences (Lam et al., 2020). Massage parlours and sex workers were disproportionately targeted by these regulations. One Asian worker in a massage parlour received five tickets for not complying with the stay home order despite the fact that she was staying at the spa not to run her business but to maintain social distancing from her parents, whom she lived with in a small apartment, because she was sick. A holistic centre in Toronto was charged with violating the stay home order, despite they were allowed to reopen her business at that time during end of pandemic (Lam, 2020a). When businesses reopened, the Ontario government required written documents outlining safety measures. Ten massage parlours in the York Region received tickets when the language barrier prevented them from providing written proof of safety measures.

According to the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, some anti-trafficking organizations have seized the pandemic as an opportunity to advance punitive anti-trafficking policies that isolate sex workers and drive them further underground (GAATW, 2021). The lockdown did not stop anti-trafficking investigations and anti-sex-work raids. In addition to the emergency order, government and law enforcement continued to use criminal, immigration, and provincial laws and municipal bylaws to target sex workers and massage parlours, particularly those run by Asians and migrants. In Ontario, their workplaces were investigated and raided in the police operation Project Crediton, which resulted in 32 criminal charges being laid against seven people who are being identified as an organized crime ring; the workers were intimidated, harassed, and arrested despite the police maintaining that they were helping the victims. Their money and personal property were seized, even though some were not charged (Davis, 2021; Kovach, 2021).

## **The Resistance and Resilience of Butterflies**

Asian sex workers are marginalized, criminalized, and stigmatized. However, sex workers have been resilient and resourceful and quick to create a community. As marginalized people, instead of relying on the government, the community has started to develop their own response and show their resistance and resilience. Since January 2020, Butterfly has worked with community members to set up an emergency fund with Maggie's, a sex worker organization in Toronto, providing income support and helping workers' pay for rent, food, and other basic and essential needs. We have also developed mutual aid programs and other effective community responses to reduce the impact of the pandemic and address the challenges they face.

Butterfly helps community members access information, services, and support, including testing and vaccination. More importantly, the community members have come together with other allied organizations to express their demands to the government and advocate for income for all, rights for all, and rent relief and to fight racism and policing. Butterfly is using different tactics to build the resilience of the migrant sex workers, build the networks and power of the community, and organize the Asian migrant sex workers to advocate for their rights. These tactics include outreach, financial aid, and community advocacy.

## **Outreach, Accessing Information, and Building a Support Network**

As a result of the pandemic, many Asian migrant sex workers were isolated, but the Butterfly team contacted the community members by phone and social media to give them information and visited people in person to provide supplies. Butterfly also maintains a 24/7 hotline where the workers can share their concerns and seek help and information. In one week, the hotline received more than 500 calls and text messages. To overcome the barrier of accessing information, Butterfly translated information on COVID-19 and government policies to ensure the community had up-to-date information. Butterfly and Maggie's also produced "[Sex Work and COVID-19: Guidelines for Sex Workers, Clients, Third Parties, and Allies](#)," which was intended to help sex workers develop health and safety measures they can use to protect themselves. With the increased policing and power of law enforcement, Butterfly promptly developed a training on policing and COVID-19 to help the workers know about their rights. Butterfly has also supported its community members, particularly those with language barriers and those with precarious immigration status, in accessing health services and protective supplies, such as masks.

Through a community support network, community members support each other by sharing information, concerns, ideas, and resources. Butterfly has developed chat groups to facilitate that process. Community members also help to share information and support other members in accessing resources and help. Some get help from their employers or clients, who are important sources of support at this difficult moment.

## **Financial and Crisis Supports**

Most of workers were not able to work during the pandemic and faced a lack of income, food insecurity, and housing issues. However, in some cases, community members, particularly those who worked in massage parlours, were eligible to apply for various government funds, social assistance, and community resources so Butterfly provided accessible information and recruited volunteers to help community members apply for those funds and resources.

Since the majority of the migrant sex workers were not able or were afraid to access funding, Butterfly and Maggie's set up an emergency fund to put cash in the hands

of sex workers, particularly queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, and racialized workers. Migrants with precarious immigration status were also prioritized. Butterfly has provided crisis and emergency support to workers and their families who face violence, housing insecurity, and physical and mental health issues and has supported workers who are harassed, arrested, and detained. Butterfly also worked with a number of community organizations to support vaccination and testing.

## **Community Mobilization and Advocacy**

To challenge systematic oppression and injustice, community members mobilize to convey their demands to governments. They sign petitions, write letters to the government, and share their stories, and they also work with allied organizations to argue for their rights and for justice and equality. For example, workers in massage parlours and sex workers speak to the public through the media about their situation and concerns, especially about the harms of the anti-trafficking movement. Despite the underrepresentation and undervaluing of Asian voices, some workers have also participated, with their allies, in city council meetings to fight for their rights.

Asian and migrant sex workers have taken different actions to advocate for their rights, such as launching a petition against policing and advocating for the decriminalization of sex work, stopping the harmful anti-trafficking movement, and eliminating the immigration prohibition against working in the sex-work-related industry. Butterfly has built an allyship with social justice migrant and sex worker organizations to advocate for income for all and health for all and to urge the provincial government to provide incomes to migrant and sex workers, as well as advocating for sex workers' and migrants' rights and fighting racism. Asian workers have also participated in the rallies and the campaign to Stop Asian Hate, for labour rights and migrant rights, and to call for support for status for all, health for all, and income for all!

## **Conclusion**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian and migrant workers who work in massage parlours and the sex industry were excluded from government relief and other crucial social supports, increasing oppression and inequalities and widening the cracks in the social system. While it is important to support the Asian and migrant sex worker community in addressing the current crisis and meeting their immediate needs, there is also an urgent need to take action to end systemic oppression, including poverty, inadequate social assistance, racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and the criminalization of sex work, and to bring social justice.

Despite the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant sex workers have organized to show their resistance and resilience. Using the experiences and skills gained through previous pandemics, including, for example, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Asian, migrant, and sex workers not only survived this difficult time but

also built a powerful movement to fight against injustice and advocate for their rights, joining the long struggle to build a more just world.

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