



Learn More About: Migrant and Immigrant Sex Workers

Who are migrant and immigrant sex workers?

Migrant and immigrant women who do sex work in Canada are a diverse group who vary in age, ethnicity, cultural background and circumstance. Racialized sex workers are often referred to as 'migrant sex workers' even if they are Permanent Residents or Canadian citizens, which reinforces racist understandings of who 'Canadians' can be.

Migrant sex workers experience unique barriers to rights, protections, and access to community services related to their immigration status, as they are not permitted to work in the sex industry. Since 2012, the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations have prohibited temporary residents from working "with an employer who, on a regular basis, offers striptease, erotic dance, escort services or erotic massages." Anyone who has a work permit, study permit or visitor's visa and carries temporary resident immigration status is captured by these provisions. **If sex work was decriminalized in Canada, migrant sex workers would still be criminalized under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations.**

Immigrant sex workers are legally permitted to work in Canada and therefore do not risk detention and deportation. However, despite having greater access to health and social services and legal protections than migrant sex workers, immigrant sex workers still experience sex work stigma, labour market barriers, and racism.



There are different legal realities for migrant and immigrant sex workers. Immigrant sex workers are legally permitted to work in Canada, but migrant sex workers are not and face unique barriers to accessing their rights and protections.

Issues Facing Im/migrant Sex Workers

Due to language barriers, work and study permit restrictions, and the non-recognition of education, professional qualifications and/or work experience acquired abroad, sex work can be a viable employment option for women who choose to avoid jobs that are dirty, dangerous, or demeaning ('3D' jobs), which are often the only employment options for newcomers. However, working in an informal labour sector such as sex work, coupled with multi-layered criminalization, means there are few labour or criminal justice protections available to migrant sex workers.

Taking advantage of systemic vulnerability, predators often target im/migrant sex workers, calculating that they will not report violence to authorities. Reporting violence can inadvertently incriminate im/migrant sex workers and lead to a trafficking investigation or deportation. Furthermore, the conflation of im/migrant sex work with human trafficking has led to punitive criminal and immigration laws, which in turn creates counterproductive policing strategies (like sting operations) that undermine im/migrant sex workers' safety and health. Criminalization - under the guise of trafficking 'rescue' - increases the risk of work-related violence and barriers to reporting violence to authorities.

A Misunderstood Community

Migrant and immigrant sex workers are often thought to be forced into the sex industry against their will due to the way they are (mis)represented in society. Narratives about traffickers luring women and girls to Canada with false job promises, confiscating their passports, and threatening their families are frequently repeated. The global, economic and systemic motivations as to why women migrate to do sex work are rarely considered and the personal agency of these women is dismissed. Racist stereotypes create victims who are seen to be duped into the sex industry.

According to the Centre for Gender and Sexual Health Equity, most migrant sex workers in Canada report no experience of trafficking and say that they willingly chose to do sex work.

If not represented as victims, migrant and immigrant sex workers are perceived as criminals. Regularly subjected to surveillance and enforcement by bylaws officers, police, and immigration authorities, women working at massage parlours and other indoor sex work sites are targeted for bylaw fines, workplace raids, arrests, detention, and deportation with little thought given to the consequences of surveillance and enforcement.

Effective Services and Supports

Due to stigma and criminalization, outreach services must meet im/migrant sex workers literally where they are at.

Multilingual and culturally-specific services, such as those provided by SWAN Vancouver, address barriers to mainstream health and social services. Services that use racial equity and intersectional lenses ensure im/migrant women's multiple identities are foregrounded and sex work stigma is lessened.

Resources:

- Lam, E. (2018). "Behind the Rescue: How Anti-Trafficking Investigations and Policies Harm Migrant Sex Workers".
- Mackenzie, K & Clancey, A.. (2020). "Im/Migrant Sex Workers, Myths & Misconceptions: Realities of the Anti-Trafficked." (2nd Ed.)
- Goldenberg, S.M., Krusi, A., Zhang, E., Chettier, J., & Shannon, K. (2017). "Structural Determinants of Health among Im/migrants in the Indoor Sex Industry." PLoS One, 1-19.

Living in Community is a unique initiative that brings together diverse stakeholders to collaboratively improve the health and safety of sex workers. We undertake public education, policy advocacy, and sharing of our unique model of collaboration with the goal of creating communities that are healthy and safe for everyone.

Learn more at: www.livingincommunity.ca