

Research finds law enforcement perceived as a risk among Chinese sex workers in Toronto



A community-based research project has found that law enforcement poses a threat for Chinese women sex workers in Toronto. Among the fifty women that were surveyed in Toronto, 46% of respondents reported experiencing punitive law enforcement measures or entrapment by law enforcement. All fifty women surveyed in Toronto stated that they would *not* contact law enforcement if they experienced abuse, violence or exploitation. Fear of law enforcement and/or fear of arrest were the most commonly reported reasons for not seeking assistance from law enforcement.

Although a substantial number of women reported experiences of punitive law enforcement, only a small number of women were ultimately arrested, charged or convicted. The wide discrepancy between commonly-reported experiences of punitive law enforcement and the relative lack of criminal justice outcomes raises questions about the intention and effectiveness of punitive law enforcement measures, such as: If arrests, charges and convictions are unlikely, is there another purpose for punitive police behavior other than enforcing the law? What do these findings suggest about the public resources expended in the scrutiny and punishment of sex workers, particularly Chinese sex workers?

Data for this project was collected prior to the introduction of Bill C-36 or the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act* (in December 2014), which purportedly decriminalizes the selling of sex. Yet it remains to be seen whether the new legislation will change law enforcement behaviors and attitudes towards sex workers. As research findings demonstrate, workers still experienced punitive law enforcement measures, even if the rate of arrest, charges and convictions remained relatively low.

The above findings are from a collaborative research project by SWAN in Vancouver, the Massage Parlour Outreach Project at Agincourt Community Services Association (ACSA) in Toronto and Ziteng in Hong Kong. Ziteng initiated this research for sex workers in Hong Kong that were interested in learning how to work safely and effectively in Canada. A total of 60 Chinese sex workers in Toronto and Vancouver were asked about: (1) their experiences migrating or travelling to Canada for work; (2) working conditions in Canada; (3) condom use with clients and access to healthcare; (4) experiences of violence, abuse, exploitation and punishment by law enforcement and customers; (5) knowledge of their legal rights in Canada; and (6) their opinions and advice on working in Canada.

The report also found that the importance of peer support networks (with other Chinese language-speaking sex workers) cannot be underestimated. Support from other workers remained one of the most important (and one of the few available) strategies for maintaining resilience in the face of punitive law enforcement and abusive customers (e.g. robbery, non-payment). Despite the risks and challenges, women maintained a positive opinion about working in Canada. Further exploration of the strategies workers use to maintain their resilience and optimism in a challenging environment can reveal important insights on how sex workers can be better supported by allied community organizations.

For more information, please contact SWAN Vancouver at info@swanvancouver.ca (or visit swanvancouver.ca) and Ziteng at ziteng@hkstar.com (or visit ziteng.org.hk).

The full report can be found at <http://swanvancouver.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Chinese-sex-workers-in-Toronto-amp-Vancouver-Ziteng-SWAN-amp-ACSA.pdf>