

Current Journalistic Representation: Assessment & Suggestions from Im/migrant Women Engaged in Indoor Sex Work

** Important note: Not everyone from the community that SWAN supports identifies as a sex worker. The language in this document - im/migrant women engaged in indoor sex work - is meant to reflect that most of the women SWAN serves work in massage businesses or private apartments, but may include people who do not self-ID as a sex worker.

“[A] noble single mother
struggles to support a daughter to study well here.
From an immigrant to a worker here. Right?
Why don't you report about these [stories]?”

As a journalist, you have the ability to influence how the public
perceives im/migrant women engaged in indoor sex work.

Im/migrant women engaged in indoor sex work
or working in massage businesses are reluctant to speak with you
because of safety concerns and stigma.

However, these women also state that journalists can
give them a voice and provide support
for them as they try to access their basic human rights.

Journalists can, and should, work to improve the representation of
im/migrant women engaged in indoor sex work to help elevate their
voices and experiences without causing them harm.

Here are some of the things im/migrant women working in massage
businesses and private apartments want you to know about current
journalistic representation of sex work:

DEMEANING & MANIPULATIVE LANGUAGE

Often, businesses where sex work may take place are referred to as 'dodgy' or 'dirty'

“I want to ask why you wrote ‘men going in and out of the place?’... In a day, we may have regular customers in the spa, both males and females.”

“You’ve already labeled us. This is infuriating.”

And selective descriptions of massage businesses or their clientele play to a biased, narrow narrative

“I have many regular customers who only want a massage. And some places close very early... so they can’t find any other places and make advance booking[s] with us.”

SEX WORK VS SEX TRAFFICKING

“The women who work here are not forced to do anything... if they want to leave, they can leave anytime... if something crops up or they feel unwell or have something urgent to attend to, they can leave anytime.”

Consensual adult sex work is regularly conflated with sex trafficking, child exploitation, or other forms of criminality, but this is not accurate

“...[F]emale minors working in massage parlors, there’s no such thing.”

“I’ve never seen any human or drug trafficking, insurance fraud, or money laundering...”

REPERCUSSIONS & THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Many articles cover the political controversy over licensing massage businesses and ‘condoning sexual exploitation’, but the women who work in these businesses understand the realities and downsides to revoking licenses in the name of harm reduction. Driving sex workers out of legitimate businesses will only cause harm

“If you want me to [work] underground, would I dare to report [violence] to the police?”

“I don’t quite understand the part where licensing gives people the impression of women and girls abuse. I don’t understand why they say this.”

WOMEN'S PREFERRED PORTRAYAL

When asked what they would tell a journalist, if given the chance, the women had many suggestions for how they would prefer to be portrayed in the news

“You can look at the [women] in this industry. They’re very bright and capable. On the outside, others see me as a very positive person... I supported my daughter, and she’s now supporting Canada... Why don’t you report about this? Please report it. Right? How a noble single mother struggles to support a daughter to study well here. From an immigrant to a worker here. Right? Why don’t you report about these [stories]? Right? I’m thankful I have this job. It won’t allow me to be controlled or abused by men... There are many cases like that. Why didn’t I hear about this kind of news? Right?”

“I feel that the article [about sex work] is humiliating... words like “dodgy business”, “brothel”...“Brothel” would mean that women who work in this industry are all prostitutes. These words are already very disrespectful to the people in this industry. The government is allowing them to work in this industry. They didn’t ban it. Therefore, you shouldn’t use such words and disrespect these women.”

The women also mentioned the following realities that they wish journalists would pay attention to:

- [Language matters](#) - don't refer to women as 'prostitutes' or victims; this has a great impact on public perception and creates barriers for these women to access services or public resources
- Many of the women we spoke to, though they are working willingly in this industry, previously **struggled to find employment** in their field of study or expertise, despite having professional skills
 - This speaks to the barriers to regularization and meaningful employment that exist for im/migrants and could be a topic that journalists can pay attention to
- Journalists can advocate for reducing barriers to legal status so im/migrant women engaged in sex work can **work safely and access services** like medical care and vocational training
- Journalists should raise awareness about the ways **current laws** put im/migrant women engaged in sex work at risk (e.g., the risk of deportation if they report violence)
- Treat im/migrant women engaged in sex work and everyone working in the sex industry with **empathy** - they are regular people and "a job is a job"

For additional resources for journalists, visit ResponsibleReporting.ca



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