

## Sexuality and Social Work Conference 2016

### The Impact of Municipal Bylaws on the Vulnerability of Chinese Sex Workers Who Work in Massage Parlours

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The debate on the regulation of sex work in Canada has largely focused on the criminal law, and especially on how criminalizing sex work violates the human rights of sex workers and undermines their health and safety. By comparison research into and discussion of the impact of municipal laws has been limited. The research on which this paper is based explores how municipal bylaws affect the working situation and, particularly, exacerbates the vulnerability of Chinese sex workers employed in massage parlours.

Public debate on the laws and regulations pertaining to sex work has ensued since before living memory. The Macro-structural factors (such as laws and policy) which govern the operation and working condition of sex work is being recognized as an important determinant of their health and safety of sex workers (Anderson et al., 2015; Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 2005; Deering et al. 2014; Lewis, Maticka-Tynadle, Shaver, Schramm, 2005; Pivot Legal Society, 2009; NSWP, 2014; Shannon et al. 2008; Shannon & Csete, 2010,; Shannon, Deering & Strathdee, 2014; van der Meulen & Durisin, 2008). The main focus of the researches and discussions are primarily focused on the criminal aspects; municipal regulations and bylaws are seldom being studied and be part of policy-making discussion and debates. The research of Pivot Legal Society (2009) shows that there are more than tens of thousands of people who work in escort agencies, bawdy-houses, body-rub parlors, massage parlours, strip clubs and dating services which are the businesses which are registered as legitimate establishments across Canada.

Several research studies have been conducted about the municipal regulatory impact on escort companies, body rub centers and strip clubs in Canada. However, the Canadian public has very limited understanding on how sex work is regulated by municipal law in indoor non-adult entertainment of migrant, especially Chinese. The research will start from the lived experiences of the Chinese sex workers who work in massage parlors is being shaped by the municipal bylaws and police practice and how their health and safety are being affected.

The law and policy of sex work is being shaped by the political perspectives on the issue. Radical feminists describe the experiences of sex workers in terms of sexual violence and psychological harm, which are intrinsic to prostitution (Farley & Kelly, 2000; O'Neill, 2001). They advocate criminalizing the client and third parties in the sex trade, and see the provision of sexual services as a form of gender-based violence toward, and oppression and exploitation of, women (Coy, 2012; Jeal & Salisbury, 2007; Jeffreys, 2009). In Canada, the Conservative government pursued the course of abolition, and in 2014 introduced the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act*, which began the criminalization of the client in the sex trade, and continued to criminalize third parties, as well as most sex trade activities (L. Casavant & D. Valiquet, 2014; POWER & PIVOT, 2014), after the Supreme Court ruled on the three *Criminal Code* provisions (prohibitions on keeping a bawdy house and on living on the avails of, and communicating for the purposes, of prostitution) were unconstitutional in *Bedford v Canada(AG)*, because they violate the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

Sex workers, individually and in their alliances -- such as academic, public health, and human rights organizations,-- challenge the assumption that work in the sex industry is

inherently exploitative and the framing of sex workers as victims (Clamen, Gillies, and Salah, 2013). They rather argue for the decriminalization of the sex industry and for repealing all legislation that criminalizes sex work, because it is that criminalization that perpetuates stigma and discrimination against them and the violation of their human rights, and increases their physical, economic, and social vulnerability (Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 2005; Pivot Legal Society, 2009, NSWP, 2014; van der Meulen & Durisin, 2008). They also suggest that decriminalization is an important step: “a shift from the status quo, where sex workers are subject to extreme levels of violence and social marginalization, to a society where sex workers are empowered to create safe and dignified working conditions” (Pivot Legal Society, 2009, p.9), and where their labour rights can be protected (van der Meulen, 2012).

Emily van der Meulen and Elya Maria Durisin (2008) maintain that “the current Canadian municipal and federal regulations violate sex workers’ basic labour rights and contribute to [their] physical and economic vulnerability” (p.289). Sex workers are not only affected by the criminal laws; municipal laws and policies also affect their working conditions and risks to their health and safety (Anderson et al., 2015). Licensing is one of the important structural determinants of the working environment of sex workers, including “physical layout, safety measures, and manager-sex workers relations” (Anderson et al., 2015, p.836).

Although most sex workers (estimated at 80%) work indoors (Bungay et al., 2013; Hanger, 2006), most of the research to date has concentrated on street-based sex workers. Despite the fact that “there is an extensive indoor sex market that operates under the licensed business category that includes massage parlours, escort agencies, and exotic dance clubs” (Bungay et al., 2013, p.264), research relating to indoor sex workers is very limited, and little is known about their experiences (Lowman, 2000; Shaver, 2006; Bunga et al., 2013). Since most of the activities of the sex trade involving sex workers who work together or work with third parties indoors -- where the third parties, for instance, manage, assist, or procure sex services – are criminalized, it is almost impossible to open a business to offer direct exchange sexual services. The business has to pretend that their activities do not involve sexual services (van der Meulen & Durisin, 2008; Pivot Legal Society, 2009; ). Enforcement of municipal laws and related policing practices not only increase the risk to the health and safety of sex workers and exacerbate their physical and economic vulnerability; they are reluctant to report abuse to police, they also prevent the sex workers from protecting themselves, and thus subject them to human rights violations (Anderson et al., 2015; Craig, 2011; van der Meulen & Durisin, 2008).

In the hierarchy and diversity of sex work, gender, race, and class are the social forces impacting the workers’ experiences (Lewis et al., 2005). Most of the studies of how municipal laws relate to sex work have been concerned with those services recognized as adult entertainment, such as body rub parlours, escort agencies, and strip clubs. Sex services are also regulated by other municipal laws pertaining to other businesses, with such names as Health Enhancement Centre, Acupuncturist, Salon, Beauty and Wellness, and Holistic Centre.

Migration has an important social and structural determinant in shaping the working experiences and working condition of migrant sex workers, specially related to health and safety (Goldenberg et al., 2014; Platt et al, 2013). Researchers have found that migrant, especially Asian-born immigrant women in North America face more challenges and a greater risk of violence because of their citizenship, immigration status, social isolation, and the language barrier. They are less likely to use sexual/reproductive health services (Goldenbert et al., 2014). They also are more frequently working with third party, high level of workplace violence and the target of police harassment, abuse and raids (Brock et al., 2000; Bungay et al., 2012; Bungay et al., 2013; Goldenbert et al., 2014). A research in Vancouver showed that migrant concern about the “police harassment (17.18%) and raid at their workplace (10.4%), police abuse (including physical assault or coerced into sexual favours) (3.3%)” (Goldenbert et al., 2014, p.25).

The Chinese comprise the second largest group of immigrants (314,090 people) to have landed in Canada between 2005 and 2014 (Citizenship and Immigration, 2015), a research in Vancouver also showed that the Chinese are the greatest international migrants in indoor sex work (Goldenbert, et al., 2014). Despite the assertion by service providers and sex workers' organizations in Toronto that the number of Chinese female sex workers working indoors has increased in recent years, these sex workers remain hidden and marginalized in Canadian society by their isolation, immigration status, and race (Lam, 2014).

Canadian municipalities have power to have instituted a series of bylaws to regulate space and activities of sex work, such as zoning and licensing (van der Meulen & Durisin, 2014). The extent of the regulation and enforcement of municipal power is influenced by the local pressure and desire in different province or cities. They do not only control the number of licenses issued and develop the regulation and standard of the services, but may also carry out inspection of health and safety, consumer protection and control of nuisance. They are often aimed at controlling and limiting local sex industries although they are not allowed to do so (Hindle, Barnett & Casavant, 2011).

Massage parlours in Toronto are mainly regulated by two types of licences: the body rub and the holistic. Although only 25 body rub centres are allowed to operate in Toronto, 427 holistic centres operated there in 2015 (City of Toronto, 2015). Research studies of holistic licences in Toronto are few.

This research is informed by Institutional Ethnography (IE) approach to inquire and seeks to discover how the every day lives of Chinese sex workers who work in massage parlour are socially organized and coordinate. This paper will illustrate how the municipal and regulation impact their vulnerability on health and safety.

The experiences and daily sex work practices of Chinese sex work were the starting point and served as a point of entry for the investigation. The migrant sex workers were invited as the informants to describe their daily practice in massage parlors. The owners of massage parlors and health professionals were invited to be the extra-local informants to share about their relations with the daily lives of Chinese sex workers.

This qualitative study was conducted in Toronto in 2014. Four Chinese sex workers who work in a massage parlour, two owners of the massage parlour, and three social and public health services providers were recruited by the "snowball" method during the outreaching of a Chinese sex workers' support project. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Mandarin or English by the researcher at a location selected by the participant (a private room in their workplace or a quiet corner in a food court). Each interview lasted from 60 to 120 minutes, and began after the researcher had discussed the purpose and content of the research, gone over the consent form, and explained the issue of confidentiality. Some of the interviews were recorded in writing, and others were audio taped. The audio tapes were then transcribed. The notes and transcriptions in Chinese were translated into English. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their identities. The notes and transcripts were reviewed and code. They were discern a theme by grouping the data and establishing the linkages between different kinds of levels or data and analyzes what their connections and relations to between the actors and institutions.

Nine participants were interviewed in two month: four sex workers, two owners, and three social and public health services providers. All of the sex workers and owners had immigrated from China; one of the owners is male, and the other participants self-identified as female.

All the participants recognized the diversity of services provided in massage parlours. It includes regular massage, erotic massage, hand job and full sex services. The work practice is also various between workers, shaped by their interaction and relationship with clients and law enforcement. The research found that their experiences with law enforcement affects their health and safety.

All the participants realized that the massage centre needed to be registered and licensed, and the massage practitioners licensed to work in a massage parlour. As the

owners and practitioners have limited English skills, none of them had read the municipal code on licensing. They mainly learned about the municipal laws and regulations from their trainers, owners, or co-workers, as well as from law enforcement (licensing officers or police).

#### *Knowledge of the Municipal Laws and Regulations*

Both the workers and owner stated that they have only limited knowledge related to the laws and regulation because of the language barrier. The worker learnt about the regulations and rules mainly from the trainings of their owners. They told them about the may get fine and their licence would be revoked if the massage parlour was caught breaking the rules. Their licence would be revoked. Regarding the regulation of licensing, they were told about the prohibition of sex services and covering the private part of client's body. Some of them also mentioned that they have obtained the information by being told by police, licensing inspectors, or staff at licensing office, such as requiring to lock the door or not allowing offer sexual services.

Candy stated that Erotic services aren't allowed in massage parlours, and for those who offer sexual services a \$100 fine will be charged, and the fine to the massage parlour is \$500. It may led to not able renew massage licence. (Candy, Worker)

#### *Enforcement*

The municipal code regarding holistic centres is enforced by municipal bylaw enforcement officers (the workers and owners call them "license") and the Toronto Police Service (TPS). They do so by inspection and other forms of investigation, such as entrapment. All the workers and owners were convinced that other than the inspection of the operation and the facilities of the holistic centre, the prohibition of sexual services is the main purpose of their enforcing the law. They found that the law enforcement have double standard of the violation of the bylaws. The enforcement is focusing on investigation of sexual services or related activities, such as searching condom or inspection of erotic activities by entrapment or opening the door of message room. The investigation of sexual services in their holistic massage centre also increased the risk to their personal health and safety as the sex service becomes underground and cannot share the information with other workers, they are difficult to negotiate their services with clients.

Bonnie (Worker) stated that the 'license' [municipal bylaw enforcement officers] walked around to see if there are lockers, if the massage beds are in good condition, etc. They gave her a warning, and wrote it down, when they found that a massage bed was broken. They said it should be changed, and they would come again to check.

"They target more the shop [holistic centre], which offers other [sexual] services. They seldom come to this place, as we only offer regular massage services." (Gary, Owner)

#### *Inspection by Opening the Door of a Massage Room and Searching for a Condom*

The participants said that they had experience of municipal bylaw enforcement and the TPS carrying out their inspection of sexual activities and adherence to the regulations regarding touching and covering of specific body parts. Both the owners and the practitioners felt that both the clients' and their own rights to privacy were infringed upon. It also undermined their sense of their own safety, because they cannot protect themselves by locking the door. They felt obliged to obey the instructions of the law enforcement personnel. (None, however, was shown a search warrant, and they didn't know whether they had the right under the terms of the municipal bylaw governing holistic licences to lock the door when they work .

Dora reported that she could do nothing as she was ordered to stand. She said that the police can do what ever they want to search. They left our place a mess. As they can't speak English, and they can't explain. They have to do what they say to avoid any trouble. (Dora, Worker)

Annie said that It's very dangerous when they can't lock the door. A robber might come into the massage centre and threaten them. (Annie, Worker)

Apart from opening the massage room door, both the sex workers and owners said, the municipal bylaw enforcement people and the police sometimes search for a condom, and if they find one, they will give them a ticket.

Gary stated that they do not keep any condom and the law enforcement search everywhere: each room, the toilet, the drawers, and bags, looking for a condom. They would have a big problem if they found one. (Gary, Owner)

#### Entrapment by Police

The owners and workers realized that the police use entrapment to collect evidence with which to charge the owners and practitioners, although only a few of them have had the experience. Dora and Annie said they are afraid of the police, and they have to be careful because they may entrap them. Annie shared her experience of a police officer pretending to be a client and asking her if she gave hand jobs. Although, she emphasized, she did not answer him, the policeman still issued her with a ticket (offence notice), requiring her to attend a court hearing.

#### Hidden Nature of Sex Services

All of the participants asserted that the services offered in massage parlours are various. Some employees only give massages, while others provide hand jobs or full sex (intercourse). The sex services, however, are hidden from the owners, the co-workers and, even, the health and social services providers. They have to pretend that no sexual services are available, and the owners need to take the initiative in preventing the workers performing them, even though they understand that they may do so in reality. They are unable to discuss it, and they cannot take the necessary measures to protect their health and safety, thus causing harm to the workers.

“The hiddenness of the massage parlours, the hiddenness of sexual activities, is doing a lot of harm... We can't teach, we can't educate. People are less likely to come out to some kind of health event or accept information from us. People are isolated.” (Mary, Health Services Provider)

#### Unable to Develop Measures to Protect Health and Safety

All of the owners and workers said that they are not allowed to keep condoms at the massage parlours, even for personal use. It is for that reason they reject condoms and, even, any information about sex services from the community health workers. They are unable to develop and implement measures (such as the use of condoms) to protect their workers.

Dora said that she can't take the condoms because her boss doesn't allow her to do so. She will lose her licence and be fine if she is caught. (Dora, Worker)

“In addressing HIV/Aids prevention, the barrier -- which is very strong -- is the criminalization of condoms. ...If condoms are found, by the police or the municipal bylaw enforcement officer, as evidence of sex work, it means that only condoms are criminalized... So, outside the massage parlours, condoms are perfectly legal; inside the massage parlours, they are illegal... That is shocking to everybody...” (Mary, Services Provider)

They are unable to get information and to develop means and instruments – such as condoms -- to protect the workers.

#### Inability to Negotiate with Clients Increases the Risk of Physical and Sexual Violence

As addressed by the participants, the workers in massage parlours offer a variety of services, including massage, oral sex, hand jobs, and full sex. Different workers may offer different services. The hidden nature of sexual services, however, interferes with their ability to negotiate with clients. Dora, Worker. Said that she was not able to discuss the sexual services at the beginning of services openly because of the fear of entrapment of police and she was sexually assaulted by her client.

#### Racial Discrimination by and Violence from Law Enforcement

Most of the sex workers and owners had had different types of bad experience, including violence and, even, sexual assault by the police. They found that some of the municipal bylaw enforcement people and police officers are racist and do not respect them, for example, Gary(Owner) stated that they were being discriminated as they could not speak English and non-white.. The workers expressed high levels of anxiety and distress because of their experiences or their fear of inspection and of being charged, especially through entrapment. Both Annie (worker), Helen (owner), Dora (worker) and Gary (owner) stated that the law enforcement would visit their working

place frequently or being issued tickets if they are not cooperate, tried to challenge them.

#### Unable to Seek Help or Get Support from the Police

All of the sex workers and owners said that they would not seek help when they are in danger or experiencing violence, because they feel that they are the ones that will be arrested, rather than protected. After the experiences they have had, they do not trust the police. They also afraid that reporting crimes will draw more police attention and harm their business. The study also found that the participants have had unpleasant encounters with police, making them reluctant to seek their help. Instead of receiving protection from them, the workers had negative experiences with law enforcement. They felt that their visits, inspections, and investigations are threats to them, and harm them.

Annie said that she has experienced the client do not pay after receiving sexual services and violence from Client. However, she was not able to seek help from employer or from police as she did not want to be found offering sexual services. Annie(Worker)

Candy (Workers) had different experiences that she able to seek help from her boss before. The employer taught her about the work and safety and she could seek help when she had problems with clients. However, she could not do it now because a lot of inspections recently. The employer cannot do so.

As suggested by Bungay (2011) and Anderson (2015), the health and safety of sex workers is affected by laws and regulations, which are important socio-structural factors. The experiences of the sex workers and owners also showed that municipal licensing has negative impacts on their working environment, especially on their health and safety, and creates hardship for them. The findings are thus similar to those by other researchers (Anderson, et al., 2015; Bungay, et al., 2012; van der Meulen and Durisin, 2008).

The sex services are hidden in massage parlours because the municipal laws are designed to regulate and prohibit them. Holistic massage parlours are regulated differently than other businesses, and are more often targets of inspection and investigation. Their services are hidden not only from law enforcement, but also from their owners, co-workers, community health and social services organization, and other services providers, in order to reduce their risk of being charged. It increases the workers' isolation, leaving them unable to share information and safety protections and to get help from other workers.

The UNFPA, WHO, UNAIDS, and other health organizations have stated that condoms are essential for preventing HIV transmission and other sexually transmitted infections (STI), and are effective for preventing unintended pregnancies. They have urged governments to stop using condoms as evidence in the cause of harassing sex workers or proving involvement in sex work (Open Society Foundations, 2012; UNAIDS, 2015). The study showed, however, that condoms are still being searched for in massage parlours, and used as evidence proving sexual activities. They also cannot access condoms from the public health services providers, and cannot keep condoms in their work place, even for their personal which endanger their own protection. This circumstance not only discriminates against and violates the human rights of the workers; it also increases the risks to them.

The hidden nature of sexual services increases the risk of violence to the workers from the clients, as they cannot negotiate their services or condom use. It also, therefore, increases the risk of conflict between workers and clients. It is similar to the finding in other research (Handlovsky, Bugay & Kolar, 2012). Migrant are more likely to work with third party (such as manager or owner) who are important to the safety and health of the workers (Anderson et al., 2015; Burkert & Law, 2012; Goldenberg et al., 2014) The owners are forced to become "willfully blind" about sexual services and they are not able to provide information, protection or provide safer working condition.

The study shows that language barriers mean that the workers and owners have limited knowledge of municipal regulations. Most of them get their information from the

business owners and co-workers. Neither can they communicate well with law enforcement. Attempting to do so may increase the likelihood of their experiencing abuses or human rights violations at the hands of law enforcement. Participants said, for example, that they have had the experience of law enforcement opening the door of the massage room while they were rendering their services, but none of them knew that the law enforcement individuals had violated their rights.

Even when they do realize the racism and human rights violations they are subjected to by law enforcement, such as verbal and sexual assault, they are unable to stop it or, even, challenge it. One of the participants tried to defend her case in court, but the police got their revenge by giving her more “tickets.” The licensing regulations create opportunities and bestow the power for municipal law enforcement to use them against, and to harass and abuse, the sex workers. Their experiences with law enforcement prevent sex workers seeking help from the police.

The finding of this research was that the municipal bylaws governing holistic centres and their practitioners are being used to prohibit and regulate sexual services in massage parlours, even though it is something the municipality is not entitled to do. Although the regulations do not explicitly prohibit sexual services in the municipal code, the report of City of Toronto Council states that the objective of holistic licensing is “controlling body rub parlours without impacting on the complementary therapy disciplines...” (City of Toronto, 1988). The study showed that the regulation and prohibition of sex services constitutes the primary focus of the municipal bylaw enforcement. However, it may violate the law as Municipalities are not allowed to prohibit sex work because Canadian criminal laws are under federal jurisdiction, as evidenced in *International Escort Services Inc. v Vancouver (City)*, *Siemens v. Manitoba (Attorney General)*, and *Vaughan (City) v. Tsui*. Nevertheless.

Although the City of Toronto policy paper on holistic licensing (City of Toronto, 1998) states that one of the main purposes of the licensing of holistic centres is to protect the health and safety of workers, the punitive approach to regulating and prohibiting sex work in massage parlours has created hardships for sex workers, and negatively affects their health and safety.

This research has explored how the lived experiences of Chinese sex workers are affected by policy of municipal laws. It has provided some important information of how their practice of health and safety is being affected. However, as it is not designed to have in-depth investigation about their health and safety, further studies are needed to explore the relationship between the law, race, immigration status and their health and safety.

As with other adult industries, licensing massage parlours cannot improve the health and safety of the workers. The control, regulation, and prohibition of sexual services by municipal law not only decrease their autonomy and ability to control their working environment; they also increase the surveillance of sex workers and the threat to their health and safety, as well as infringing on their human rights. They exacerbate abuse by police, and worsen the obstacles confronting sex workers when they seek help from them (Anderson et al., 2015; Bungay et al., 2011; Craig, 2011; Lewis et al. 2005; van der Meulen & Durisin, 2008 ). Like other non-Canadian-born sex workers, Chinese sex workers encounter additional challenges when they deal with law enforcement because of racism, their immigration status, and language barriers.

This study was conducted before the new criminal laws (*Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act*) were introduced, and when the municipal bylaw was enforced by itself. Recent reports show, however, that the municipal bylaw is being enforced, along with criminal laws (sex work related laws and anti-trafficking laws) and immigration laws (Ottawa Sun, 2015; Lam, 2015). It gives great power to law enforcement to investigate and arrest the people who work in the sex industry through cooperation between the municipal police, the Canada Border Services Agency, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Despite the fact that decriminalization is very important for the sex workers’ rights movement to improve the working conditions and ensure observation of the human rights of sex workers (Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal

Network, 2005; Pivot Legal Society, 2009, NSWP, 2014; van der Meulen & Durisin, 2008), attention should be given to, and more research should be done on, the impact of municipal laws, as well as how they are enforced, along with other laws pertaining to sex workers.

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