

CEDAW 68th Session Stakeholders Report by Sex Workers in Singapore

“We just want equality.”



Authored by: Lisa Ja'ffar, Vanessa Ho, Michelle Lee, Sherry Sherqueshaa

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Laws on Sex Work in Singapore	4
Work Conditions for Licensed Sex Workers (articles 2, 9, 11, 12, 16).....	5
Work Conditions for Unlicensed Sex Workers (articles 2, 9, 11, 12)	7
<i>Police Violence and Misconduct</i>	7
<i>Direct violence:</i>	8
<i>Unfair or discriminatory arrest practices:</i>	8
<i>Fear of reporting violence to the police:</i>	9
<i>Media Portrayals (sex roles/ stereotyping)</i>	10
Issues specific to transgender sex workers (articles 2, 10, 11, 12)	11
<i>Employment:</i>	11
<i>Healthcare:</i>	12
<i>Police violence:</i>	12
Appendix A: Licensed Migrant Sex Workers Testimonies	13
Appendix B: Unlicensed Sex Workers’ Testimonies	14
Appendix C: Transgender Sex Workers Testimonies.....	15

About the Report

Established in 2008, Project X is the only non-governmental organization in Singapore devoted to advocating sex workers’ rights. Our core activities include conducting community outreach, sexual health programming, documenting human rights violations, capacity building for community leaders, and public education.

The key tool we use to document human rights violations is our Abuser Alert program. This program was formally set up in 2014 to firstly, enable sex workers to report violence against them to us, and secondly, to alert others to potential abusers. It was established because we realized over the years that many crimes against sex workers go unreported due to fear of arrest or consequences. Key findings from this program will be shared in this report.

In addition, this report was developed through focus group discussions with local and migrant sex workers in Singapore. It also includes key findings from the various research projects we have undertaken over the years.

Executive Summary

This report focuses on the various human rights abuses and discrimination against cisgender and transgender sex workers in Singapore. In particular, it will delineate the ambiguous legal framework governing sex work and the impact it has on women's lives. We argue that the continued criminalization and discrimination against sex workers undermine the State's efforts to ensure substantive equality for all women in Singapore.

This is the first time that sex workers' concerns are being brought to CEDAW. Key recommendations for the state as summarized are:

- Make the policy for licensed sex workers transparent and ensure that the terms of contracts are in line with national and international labour standards;
- Promote laws and policies that encourage or enable collectivization of sex workers. When sex workers are not themselves under threat of criminal penalties, sex workers and organizations can work to improve work conditions and work with law enforcement to combat exploitation and trafficking;
- Repeal the travel ban for sex workers and for people living with HIV (Immigration Act Section 8);
- Stop using condoms and lubricants as evidence of sex work;
- Make a concerted effort to educate sex workers about their rights and to encourage sex workers to report crimes against them, in collaboration with NGO partners;
- Work towards the full decriminalization of sex work, recognizing adult, consensual sex work as a form of work;
- Uphold rule of law and respect that people should be innocent until proven guilty;
- Respect sex workers' right to privacy;
- Establish anti-discrimination laws to protect transgender women against discrimination and violence, including discrimination by employers, healthcare providers, and law enforcement.

Laws on Sex Work in Singapore

1. The sex industry in Singapore exists in a legal grey area.¹ In summary, the industry is bifurcated – one segment operates somewhat “legally”, and the other operates “illegally”. Sex workers work either in traditional spaces like brothels or on the streets, or in various other establishments such as massage parlours, karaoke bars, and entertainment clubs. While the act of providing sexual services in exchange for money is in itself not criminalized,² many sex work-related activities are criminalized. A summary of the key statutes that are actively enforced and used to criminalize sex workers is as follows:
 - a. Soliciting in a public place for sex work is criminalized (Miscellaneous Offences Act, Article 19);
 - b. Persons living on or trading in prostitution (Women’s Charter, Article 146);
 - c. Owning a brothel (Women’s Charter, Article 148);
 - d. Additionally, migrant sex workers are defined to be “prohibited migrants” (Immigration Act, Article 8(e));
 - e. In 2016, two new amendments were made to Article 146 of the Women’s Charter to now criminalize the use of “remote communication services” to advertise sex work. This effectively criminalizes independent sex workers who run their own websites.
2. According to the Singapore Government, the “total number of women arrested for activities associated with vice has dropped from 4,886 in 2014 to 2,947 in 2016.”³
3. The Specialized Crime Branch (SCB) of the Singapore Police Force (SPF) is a unit dedicated to conducting raids, arresting, and investigation cases related to sex work.
4. Sex workers who are arrested face varying consequences. Singaporean sex workers who are caught for soliciting will be fined for the first two offences, and jailed for the subsequent ones. Migrant sex workers who are arrested will be deported and face a travel ban from returning to Singapore. If their pimp or manager was arrested, the sex worker will be made to remain in Singapore as prosecution witnesses.
5. That said, the government allows sex work to operate within Designated Red-Light Areas (DRA), in the form of brothels regulated and monitored by police *despite the law*.⁴ The state refuses to officially acknowledge the existence of this system, including in the State

¹ In 1999, during parliamentary debate on the “Policy on Prostitution” Member of Parliament JB Jeyaretnam questioned then Minister of Home Affairs Mr Wong Kan Seng. Mr Jeyaretnam highlighted that if the law criminalizes sex work but there is a lack of enforcement, it is tantamount to a “disrespect for the law”, and questioned if the Minister would consider legalizing the industry. To which Mr Wong said, “there is no need to legalize it but we can at the same time deal with the problem in a pragmatic way.” From “Policy on Prostitution”, *Singapore Parliament Reports*, 5 May 1999, https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic.jsp?currentTopicID=00066883-ZZ¤tPubID=00069832-ZZ&topicKey=00069832-ZZ.00066883-ZZ_1%2Bid008_19990505_S0004_T00121-oral-answer%2B, accessed on 27 September 2017.

² The Women’s Charter defines sex work as “the act of a female offering her body for sexual penetration for hire, whether in money or in kind”

³ CEDAW 68th Session, Singapore State Response to the List of Issues, para 55.

⁴ Shi Bin, Tan, & Alisha Gill (2013), “Containing Commercial Sex to Designated Red Light Areas: An idea past its prime?”. Singapore: Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, p. 2.

response to the CEDAW list of issues.⁵ Information provided in this report about this system is gathered from licensed sex workers themselves.

Work Conditions for Licensed Sex Workers (articles 2, 9, 11, 12, 16)

6. In Singapore, workers' rights are protected by the Employment Act, supplemented by the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act. In addition, Singapore has ratified 27 International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, 20 of which are still in force.
7. However, the Employment Act only protects certain professions. Vulnerable populations such as foreign domestic workers and sex workers are not covered.
8. There are strict criteria to be issued a permit (colloquially known as a "yellow card") to work in a licensed brothel under the Medical Surveillance Scheme (MSS).⁶ One has to be:
 - a. Aged between 21 and 35;
 - b. From one of these countries: China, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, or Singapore;
 - c. Legally recognized as female.
9. Based on interviews with licensed sex workers, here are the conditions of the licensed brothels:
 - a. Sex workers applying to work for a licensed brothel must undergo an interview with the police. Workers complain of discriminatory attitudes and verbal abuse during these interviews.⁷ If their application is approved, contracts are signed with the police. Licensed sex workers do not get to keep a copy of this contract.
 - b. Their passports are held by the police. Sex workers only get to keep a photocopy. This is in violation of the Passports Act, where it is an offence to keep or withhold any passport which does not belong to you.⁸
 - c. Sex workers are not allowed to date or marry a Singaporean man. Many sex workers and their partners feel that this regulation dehumanizes and discriminates against them.
 - d. Most licensed sex workers live in the brothels they are assigned to. Many face restrictions such as curfews, having to seek permission to leave brothels, prohibition on going to clubs and bars, and prohibition on working outside the brothel. Some sex workers face a fine of up to S\$500 for leaving the brothel without permission.

⁵ CEDAW 68th Session, Singapore State Response to the List of Issues, para 54-56.

⁶ The Medical Surveillance Scheme was introduced in 1976. CL, Goh, & Roy Chan (1995), "Prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases among commercial sex workers in Singapore from 1977 to 1993: the effects of screening measures." *Ann Acad Med Singapore*, Jul;24(4): 500-4, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8849176>, accessed on 27 September 2017.

⁷ See Appendix A.

⁸ Ministry of Manpower, "Can an employer keep a worker's passport?", <http://www.mom.gov.sg/faq/work-pass-general/can-an-employer-keep-a-workers-passport>, accessed on 27 September 2017.

- e. Many licensed sex workers work six or seven days a week. They do not have medical leave and must compensate management for additional off-days taken.
 - f. Brothel managers take between 30% to 50% of the earnings of the sex workers.
 - g. At the end of their contracts, sex workers face a travel ban from re-entering Singapore. The length of this travel ban ranges from a couple of years to a lifetime ban; the ban seems arbitrary and the decision-making process is unclear and opaque. This ban unfortunately serves as a deterrent for some to leave the industry, as they are essentially not allowed to switch employers or occupation in Singapore.⁹
 - h. Licensed sex workers have to undergo mandatory monthly sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV test. Sex workers who test positive twice for STIs, or test positive for HIV will be deported immediately, with automatic imposition of a permanent travel ban.¹⁰ Section 8(3)(ba) of the Immigration Act classifies people living with HIV/AIDs as “prohibited immigrants,” and they are to be deported from Singapore.
 - i. Mandatory testing violates licensed sex workers’ “rights to control one’s health and bodies, including sexual and reproductive freedom, and the rights to be free from interference”.¹¹ It also does not tackle the root cause of vulnerability, which is often violence and discrimination.¹²
 - j. Lack of affordable and accessible voluntary services violate all sex workers right to the highest attainable standard of healthcare treatment.¹³ The CEDAW Committee has recommended that special attention to be given to the health rights of women belonging to the marginalized groups, which include “women in prostitution”.¹⁴
10. The regulations that govern these licensed brothels are not public information, and it is unclear if sex workers’ rights to health and safety are enshrined in these regulations.

Recommendations:

- Make the policy for licensed sex workers transparent and ensure that the terms of contracts are in line with national and international labour standards.
- Conduct consultations with sex workers and sex worker organizations to ensure fair working conditions. Repeal laws and policies that effectively prevent sex workers from choosing their own work conditions.
- Promote laws and policies that encourage collectivization of sex workers. When sex workers are not themselves under threat of criminal penalties, sex workers and

⁹ See Appendix A.

¹⁰ See Appendix A.

¹¹ Commission on Human Rights, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its cause and consequences: Economic and social policy impact and its impact on violence against women*, Ms. Radhika Coomarasawmy (2000).

¹² See Appendix A.

¹³ Currently, Singapore has only 10 STIs screening. Seven out of ten clinics provides semi-anonymous testing, two out of the ten clinics are operated by local NGOs.

¹⁴ Coomarasawmy (2000).

organizations can work to improve work conditions and work with law enforcement to combat exploitation and trafficking.

- Repeal the travel ban for sex workers and for people living with HIV.

Work Conditions for Unlicensed Sex Workers (articles 2, 9, 11, 12)

11. Unlicensed sex workers in Singapore operate either in brothels, on the streets, in hotels via the internet, in massage parlours, and at entertainment venues. Sex workers who do not qualify or choose not¹⁵ to operate under the licensing scheme are deemed to be working illegally. While the State insists that “prostitution per se is not a crime,”¹⁶ the laws detailed above effectively criminalize them. Unlicensed sex workers are subject to constant raids and entrapment and face mistreatment by police, abuse from clients and members of the public, and lack access to justice.¹⁷

Police Violence and Misconduct

12. According to the Abuser Alert reports collected in 2016, 24% of the abusers reported to Project X were law enforcement officers. This makes law enforcement officers the second most frequent perpetrators of abuse against sex workers, second to clients of sex workers (43%).

13. Police misconduct can be split into two main categories:

- a. Directly inflicting abuse against sex workers
 - i. Physical
 - ii. Verbal
 - iii. Emotional
- b. Unfair or discriminatory arrest practices
 - i. Profiling
 - ii. Use of condoms as evidence
 - iii. Entrapment
 - iv. No access to counsel or translators

¹⁵ In 2014, Project X conducted a focus group discussion with diverse sex workers on their opinions of the yellow card system. Many refuse to join the system because (1) they would have to report their real names to the police and be monitored by them; (2) restricted areas that one can work in; (3) fixed working hours; (4) portion of earnings go to brothel manager; (5) restrictions on travel in future.

¹⁶ Singapore Government Replies to List of Issues and Questions in Relation to the Fifth Periodic Report, para 54-55.

¹⁷ See Appendix B.

Direct violence:

14. These cases included both physical abuse (throwing to the floor, slapping and kicking, spitting), and verbal and emotional abuse (slurs and humiliation).^{18,19} They occurred during police spot checks and raids.
15. During raids of unlicensed brothels, police utilise intimidation techniques and engage in unsafe practices.²⁰ Raids are conducted by breaking down brothel doors using battering rams and sledgehammers and involve threats using guns and tasers, shouting of profanities and insults, and grabbing women by their hair, generating fear and confusion.²¹ Project X has documented at least two women who jumped from the third floor, breaking their legs in order to escape arrest. Destruction of property is frequent, with air conditioners, furniture, and toilets being destroyed.²²
16. Statistics from our Abuser Alert have been presented to the police. The police urges us to help them by encouraging sex workers to report offending officers as well as other crimes against them. However, much more effort is needed to encourage sex workers to do so. Sex workers still fear arrest, prejudice, and deportation for reporting crimes against them to the police.
17. With the help of a community liaison in the police, Project X managed to make four official reports against offending police officers on behalf of seven sex workers. However, these reports have yielded no concrete results. In one case of physical abuse in 2016, the report against the officer closed as there was “no evidence to substantiate [the] allegations”. In that case, the sex worker had lubricant poured on her face and she was dragged around the interrogation room while her hands were cable tied, causing cuts, swelling, and numbness on her wrists.

Unfair or discriminatory arrest practices:

18. The police frequently profile women as being sex workers for two reasons: being transgender, and/ or carrying condoms. Gender identity and condoms, in conjunction with being in locations associated with sex work, are presented as evidence of sex work and used to charge women with solicitation. Profiling is often based on racist and xenophobic stereotypes and further fuels discrimination against marginalized women.
19. In one case, several migrant transgender women were stopped by officers while they were doing prayers outside their hostel. When the officer questioned the discordance between their physical appearance and gender identity marker on their passports, he jumped to the conclusion that since they are transgender, they must be sex workers. The women were arrested. Only with the assistance of Project X did they clear their names.
20. During our outreach activities, many migrant sex workers refuse to take condoms and lubricants from us. They say they are afraid of being arrested by the police – a fear that is

¹⁸ See Appendix B.

¹⁹ Allard K. Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic, Yale Law School, “*They Only Do This to Transgender Girls*”, 2015

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

not unfounded as many have been charged and fined for soliciting simply because they had condoms on them.²³ Clubs and bars also refuse to allow us to distribute within their premises as they are afraid of being seen as facilitating sex work, which is also against the law.²⁴ This puts sex workers in a vulnerable position and weakens their bargaining power when negotiating condom use with clients.

21. Use of condoms as evidence results in lower condom usage amongst unlicensed sex workers.²⁵ Low condom usage is even more prevalent amongst foreign entertainment workers who also offer sexual services, with only 51.9% regularly using condoms.²⁶ The use of condoms as evidence is not only discriminatory, but also harmful to public health.
22. Entrapment – where police officers impersonate clients – is a common strategy used by the police to arrest sex workers.
23. Deportation processes for unlicensed migrant sex workers violate international law. Upon arrest, sex workers are detained and forced to admit to having done sex work. Some of the strategies used by the police include threatening to call one’s family members to expose them as sex workers; or threatening a (baseless) jail sentence. Translators are not always present during interrogations and the women are not allowed to make phone calls. Without presenting evidence to a prosecutor, the women are required to leave the country within 48 hours and face a travel ban of at least 3 years.
24. Finally, sex workers whose managers are arrested alongside them are made to stay in Singapore as prosecution witnesses. They are given a “Special Pass” and prohibited from leaving the country until the case closes. However, the “Special Pass” does not give permission to work, making continuing doing unlicensed sex work the only way to survive. In 2017, we assisted four women who were on Special Pass for a year, and were not allowed to go home, despite family emergencies.

Fear of reporting violence to the police:

25. Through our Abuser Alert program, we received 82 reports of abuse against sex workers in 2016, up from 72 reports in 2015.²⁷
26. These cases involved:
 - a. Physical assault (19.5%), e.g. punching, slapping, or strangling by clients;
 - b. Financial violence/exploitation (18.3%), e.g. refusal to pay, theft, or blackmail;

²³ Allard K. Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic, Yale Law School, “*They Only Do This to Transgender Girls*”, 2015

²⁴ Women’s Charter Article 147(2).

²⁵ Wong, Mee-Lian, et al. “Sexually Transmitted Diseases and Condom Use Among Female Freelance and Brothel-Based Sex Workers in Singapore.” *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, vol. 26, no. 10, 1999, pp. 593–600., doi:10.1097/00007435-199911000-00010.

²⁶ Wong, Mee-Lian et al. “Sex Work and Risky Sexual Behaviors among Foreign Entertainment Workers in Urban Singapore: Findings from Mystery Client Survey.” *Journal of Urban Health : Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 89.6 (2012): 1031–1044. *PMC*. Web. 22 Aug. 2017.

²⁷ Reports through our Abuser Alert program represent a small portion of the abuse sex workers in Singapore face. The actual number of incidents is likely to be much higher, as these numbers rely on sex workers to self-report cases of violence.

- c. Verbal harassment (12.2%), e.g. threats or insults based on nationality, dress, or gender identity;
 - d. Sexual violence/rape (8.54%), e.g. forced sex, unprotected penetration without consent. The latter includes “stealth” removal of the condom during intercourse or purposely puncture condoms in order to spread infection as a fetish.²⁸
27. However, sex workers do not report due to police violence and discriminatory practices. This leaves sex workers vulnerable to violence from other sources. Nearly all victims who made Abuser Alert reports in 2016 did not make police reports, with the most common reason given being fear of arrest.
28. Sex workers who attempted to make police reports in the past have been told that they will be investigated for soliciting if they pursued the case. Rather than be charged for soliciting, sex workers will usually choose to drop the case.
29. Violence against sex workers continues to be prevalent. While the Singapore Women’s Charter was ostensibly established to protect and advance women’s rights in Singapore,²⁹ sex workers are unable to rely on the police, creating a barrier to justice.

Recommendations

- Make a concerted effort to educate sex workers about their rights and to encourage sex workers to report crimes against them by law enforcers and others, in collaboration with NGO partners;
- Repeal laws and policies that prevent sex workers from reporting crimes against them;
- Do not force sex workers to remain in Singapore as prosecution witnesses.
- The State should work towards the full decriminalization of sex work, recognizing adult, consensual sex work as a form of work.

Media Portrayals (sex roles/ stereotyping)

30. The media frequently covers police raids on unlicensed workers. In 2017 alone, at least 26 news pieces were written about raids.
31. Articles that cover raids typically run photos of the arrested sex workers alongside the article.^{30,31,32} The arrested sex workers are made to pose in groups with their faces hidden,

²⁸ Dutta, Mohan J, and Raksha Mahtani, “Relocating the Health of Transgender Sex Workers from the Margins: A Culture-Centered Approach”. vol. 1, *CARE White Paper Series* (2017)

²⁹ CEDAW 68th Session, Singapore State Response to the List of Issues, para 4.

³⁰ “Three women arrested in Jurong West anti-vice raid”, *Straits Times*, 12 July 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/three-women-arrested-in-jurong-west-anti-vice-raid>, accessed on 27 September 2017.

³¹ “Vice ring busted after 6½-hour raid, 24 arrested”, *The New Paper*, 18 May 2017, <http://www.tnp.sg/news/singapore/vice-ring-busted-after-612-hour-raid-24-arrested>, accessed on 27 September 2017.

³² “‘High-class’ Russian vice ring busted; 4 women arrested”, *Channel News Asia*, 5 May 2017, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/high-class-russian-vice-ring-busted-4-women-arrested-8821026>, accessed 27 September 2017.

often bent over, in a way which dehumanizes them. Words such as “sleazy” and “vice” are often used. Sex workers are always portrayed as criminals, even before being proven guilty in a court of law. Furthermore, photos of condoms are often used to allege that those arrested are sex workers, an extension of police use of condoms as evidence.³³

32. Their sensationalistic portrayal of sex workers demeans and dehumanizes them, encouraging public prejudice, further feeding the stigma that causes social ostracization, employment discrimination, and violence.

Recommendations:

- Uphold rule of law and respect that people should be innocent until proven guilty.
- Respect sex workers’ right to privacy.

Issues specific to transgender sex workers (articles 2, 10, 11, 12)

33. In the 2012 Concluding Observations of the CEDAW Committee,³⁴ the State was asked to: “Put in place, without delay, a comprehensive strategy to modify or eliminate patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes that discriminate against women, **including those based on sexual orientation and gender identity**, in conformity with the provisions of the Convention.” However, the State has done nothing to protect transgender women from discrimination.

34. Transgender female sex workers are an acutely vulnerable population. Many issues they face stem from the lack of gender recognition. In Singapore, a transgender person who undergoes full sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) will be legally recognized by their reassigned gender. However, 39% of respondents in one local survey said they have no plans to go through SRS.³⁵ Self-identification beyond the rigid male-female categories should be adopted for identity documents which are often required in daily life, as misgendering can expose transgender people to discrimination and violence.

35. Key issues faced by transgender sex workers in Singapore are:

- a. Employment discrimination
- b. Healthcare
- c. Police violence

Employment:

36. Many transgender women turn to the sex industry due to a lack of alternative employment opportunities. Transgender sex workers report that they have significant difficulties

³³ See Appendix B.

³⁴ UN CEDAW Committee (2012), *op. cit.*, (see note 3).

³⁵ SherQueShaa, S., Ho, V., & Zheng, D. (2016), “The Forced Sterilization of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People in Singapore”, *LGBTQ Policy Journal at the Harvard Kennedy School*, VI. Available online <http://theprojectx.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2016-LGBTQ-full-journal.pdf>, accessed 27 September 2017.

finding employment due to discrimination in hiring or on the job.³⁶ 10% of all the cases handled by Project X in 2016 related to employment issues.

37. The Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices (TAFEP) was established to promote non-discrimination on the basis of age, race, gender, religion, family status or disability,³⁷ however, TAFEP's definition of gender does not explicitly include transgender individuals. Past complaints to TAFEP by transgender sex workers have not led to any action, as a result, transgender women do not see a point in reporting.
38. Moreover, many transgender sex workers leave school at a young age due to bullying in schools and/or a lack of family support, further limiting their employment opportunities.³⁸

Healthcare:

39. Many transgender sex workers are not able to confidently access public health services due to fear of stigma, misgendering, and lack of sensitivity to their specific needs. This is true for both sexual health needs as well as mental health needs.³⁹

Police violence:

40. Transgender women are often profiled by the police as sex workers, and mocked and ridiculed during arrest for their appearance or gender identity. They are also targeted for random urine testing for drugs. In a 2017 case handled by Project X, two transgender women were arrested by undercover officers while waiting to eat dinner, even though they were dressed in conservative traditional clothing and were not soliciting.
41. Transgender women who are not legally recognized as women further face invasive body searches by male officers, being placed in prison cells that do not align with their gender identity, and being called slurs such as "catamite" and "bapok".⁴⁰

Recommendations:

- The State should establish laws to protect transgender women against discrimination and violence, including by employers, healthcare providers, and law enforcement.
- Sensitivity training for healthcare providers and law enforcement should be conducted.

³⁶ Dutta and Mahtani (2017).

³⁷ TAFEP, "Fair Employment Practices", <https://www.tafep.sg/fair-employment-practices>, accessed 27 September 2017.

³⁸ SherQueShaa et al, (2016).

³⁹ See Appendix C.

⁴⁰ A local derogatory term used to refer to transgender women.

Appendix A: Licensed Migrant Sex Workers Testimonies

On police:

Angel: “The boss can call the police. Helen had no boss, therefore when she was chopped to death nobody knew. I knew Helen, we were friends. People only knew about her death when the blood flowed out from under the door. That’s why you need a boss present now. If there’s no boss, they go out for a while, it’s alright, close for a while, until they come back.

Other prostitutes, the government will catch you. Not us. If anything happens, fights, etc., we can call the police. Or rather, the boss reports. If anything happens usually the boss will be the figurehead. This boss helps us. If anything happens, if somebody dies, what will happen? We must call the police.”

Eva: “The police look down on us migrants. The police treated us like dogs.”

On health checks:

Eva: “Licensed sex workers are afraid of falling sick (i.e. contracting STIs). In the past, sex workers would only be deported upon contracting STI for the fourth time during their stay in Singapore. However, I think that now we will be deported after just twice contracting STIs. I am uncertain of this ruling and worry that it might change again. I am afraid of health check-ups for fear of being deported if found to be sick. It’s not sex workers’ fault that they fall sick. The customers... sometimes the condoms slip off but they just continue and don’t tell me. Once the condom was stuck inside me and I had to pull it out. We insist on wearing condoms all the time, but it is the customers who do not do anything when condoms slip off or break. Furthermore, condoms are not 100% fool proof against STIs.

The police refuse to listen to the sex workers, and will always accuse us of not using condoms. The nurses at the clinic believes us, but the police refuse to listen or understand our situation.”

Angel: “A lot of girls had it, they took it as a sign of STI infection and would send you back if you get it twice. I get it once already. If I get it again, they will ask us to prepare all our belongings and they’ll send us home. And we won’t be able to return in 3 years.”

On travel ban:

Angel: “I wish there will not be such a restriction. I wanted to come back. Yes the law will be the same for my entire lifetime, it won’t change. That is the way it is. We just hope, after 3 years, give us freedom. Like if we have stopped doing this, let us come back for a few weeks to a month. It’s not for profit. Like we want to come back when we have time to visit our relatives.

We’re asking for this to be abolished. Sometimes I want to come back to Singapore to see my relatives. I’m worried in the future I might not do this [sex work] anymore. If I stop, and I am sent back home, it will be troublesome to come back.”

Sophie: “Still, we stay in Singapore, what we never give? We follow the rules and regulations. We go for proper medical check up. Ok. We are helping some people. Even my boss, a Singaporean, she’s also living with our money. Everybody can live with our money, but we cannot stay here after all they use everything because of the travel ban. Like throw us you know, like a dustbin.

With our money, my boss will take care of her son, her grandchildren, everybody is using our money right?

And then the house which they rent, they’re paying the rental, she’s renting the house, she paying the rental, the person who rent the house to the brothel, he also contribute the money with so many people right? With this prostitute money right? Then? Right? How much of help we already help them out?

Why ah? Why is our life like that? A big question mark. Sometimes ah, I regret. Why I come and choose this life of a prostitute. Because I cannot do anything else mah. Other than prostitute I cannot do another job. I get ban. With my permit I cannot go and work other places also. Because the whole thing is travel ban. I cannot even work other places.”

Appendix B: Unlicensed Sex Workers’ Testimonies

On licensing:

Jing Jing (migrant, street-based worker): “But with yellow card, there is no freedom. You are restricted. You can’t do anything you want. I hear them say you are stuck inside the shop all day, not able to go out and walk. That is what I hear them say. But my overall understanding is that how they operate in Singapore is that there is a designated time for them to work, and a designated time for them to get off work. But from what I hear from them is that they are just stuck in the shop all day. When you want to go out you have to be accompanied by someone, and that is very troublesome... [For me] when I feel like working, I work. When I do not feel like working, I don’t. I get to do what I want.”

On media portrayal:

Jenny (migrant, street-based worker): “I do feel that the photos they feature on the newspaper are very vulgar and explicit. When people see it they won’t feel good. But I feel that if they have to do it, they should contact the sex workers and ask for consent before such pictures are printed in the newspapers. Prostitution in Singapore is not illegal. But we are caught because we do not have documentation. But if I do not have documentation, why can’t they enable me to apply for it?”

On violence and access to justice:

Ruby (Singaporean, independent worker): “What we do is something that has been around for ages. I find that if we don’t do what we do, there will be a lot of rape case. That is for sure, but when we do we are being discriminated. The police come down is because of things the girls do - the bad things. If not the police won’t come down.

Customer choked this one woman. Because he wants to do another round but he didn't want to pay. She was picked on because of her petite size. No report to the police because she knows they won't be bothered and she might be blamed instead."

Jasmine (Singaporean, independent worker): "Everybody needs to earn a living. The law encourage everybody to work but not everybody got education and good background. I need to face my problem myself. If the world cannot accept us, where can we go? The police won't help us, they will take long time to come because I said I do sex work. We don't feel protected and we don't have equality.

I got one customer, Singaporean, he take out the condom secretly. Firstly he will play love and sweet talk. He will try to take it out and do it without condoms. Many girls encountered the same thing. 3 out 10 customes don't use condom. Some of them will force.

Police officers are not polite and always question why we are here. With this, I hesitate to approach them for help. Female officers use vulgarities and humiliate the female workers."

Rose (migrant, unlicensed brothel-based worker): "The pimps help sometimes. We ask help from the pimps if we have arguments with customer. If we go to the police, the police will question us back why we work this. So pimps really help me when it comes to customer issues."

Appendix C: Transgender Sex Workers Testimonies

Bella (migrant): "They [the police] treat us like terrorist, destroy our room [during raids]. We don't like to be treated like that, like we are criminals. They come disturb us, but don't give us license or provide jobs in Singapore. We want license, but the process is not easy. Some jobs also require us to cut hair and be like a man. That is why we do sex work."

Angelina (Singaporean):

On access to justice:

When faced with abuse by clients, basically I voice out to my friends, complain to them as they face the same issue. I know what I'm doing is wrong, don't want to be charged with soliciting thus I don't want to involve the police. The fear is there. Approaching the higher authority might make me get into trouble. Asking for a saviour when the saviour is the one that is killing me. My friends and I face different issues that why I keep it to myself, as much as I want to voice out. Project X is here they can help us with our issues with sex work, another platform for us. There is someone I can share with. If beyond control I will go to the police, be it right or wrong because I believe the police know what they are doing but at the same time hopefully nothing happen to us as a sex worker. We want to avoid getting into trouble.

The pimp is there but why only us that got screened? They could be trafficking sex workers. When we report a case to them it takes longer than the one made by cisgender women. I'm the victim but I've been handcuffed too. And they will take their own sweet time to address

transgender women's case/report. But when client accused me of stealing, they will come immediately.

That said, I don't want to be in a licensed brothel. There I will have no choice but to take all clients and also abide to the regulations. They will restrict my movement.

On emotional support for transgender sex workers:

In sex work industry, everyone struggles. I don't go see psychiatrist. Yes, I do have emotional support at home. But friends and colleague some are not supportive because we all are facing the same thing. We need to raise funds for the senior transgender who need financial assistance. We can't depend on Project X and The T Project⁴¹ solely. For the younger ones, I believe we know where to seek help although some are resistant to open up about their issues. We need to emphasize more on having a representative on each community. Someone who is brave enough and open to do it.

We need to have someone who would understand our choice and situation. Go to social worker or counsellor, for those who are not open to their family. Really discreet. I want to talk about my sex work life with my brother, which is not comfortable. We have to talk to someone who understand. To have a transgender counsellor will be nice, like can understand the industry, it will be helpful for us. Someone that can relate to our situation and understand, to keep our mind of it. Else we will just suffer in silence.

On gender recognition:

If my gender marker state F but I'm not operated it will lead to violence. It will create chaos. If T for gender, I will say yes. And people don't question me if I am a boy or girl because its stated T unless I did the surgery then I will change to F.

⁴¹ The T Project runs a shelter for homeless transgender people.