



POLICING OF ASIAN MIGRANT SEX WORKERS

Summary

- Australia's border control and anti-trafficking interventions disproportionately impact the human rights of Asian migrant sex workers.
- Raids on sex industry workplaces are often framed as efforts to detect and deter exploitation and trafficking, but instead result in targeting Asian migrant sex workers for visa checks, visa cancellations, detention and deportation.
- It is well established by experts both domestically and internationally that raids are not an appropriate mechanism to address worker exploitation. Raids negatively impact peer support, safety and the health and wellbeing of sex workers.¹
- Current practices do not support Asian migrant sex workers to address work health and safety issues, or other workplace issues, and sex workers identified as working without a valid work visa are not afforded appropriate support.

Recommendations

- End raids on the workplaces of Asian migrant sex workers and stop targeted sex worker profiling at the border.
- Expand legal migration pathways to enable migrant sex workers to travel to Australia and work lawfully.
- Direct resources to fund a national peer-led Asian migrant sex worker project to provide peer education, support and information on Australia's migration system, including lawful migration pathways, addressing workplace issues, accessing legal support and expert lived-experience policy advice.
- Establish meaningful, regular and genuine communication pathways with the Department of Home Affairs in matters pertaining to racial profiling at the border, visa cancellation of Asian migrant sex workers, decisions to detain and deport, and other related policies.

Background

The marginalisation of migrant sex workers by economic, immigration and justice systems is not new. In 1986, the World Congress of the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights resolved:

"Women who choose to migrate as [sex workers] should not be punished or assumed to be victims of abuse. They should enjoy the same rights as other immigrants. For many women, female migration through [sex work] is an escape from an economically and socially impossible situation in one country to hopes for a better situation in another."

and

"Women who are transported under conditions of deceit or force should be granted compensation and choice of refugee status or return to their country of origin."²

In 1994, a Commonwealth Department of Health and Human Services-funded project led for and by Asian migrant sex workers in Australia noted:

“recognition of international sex workers as legitimate workers with all due protections is what is missing from our current approach.”³

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Australian response to trafficking included mass indiscriminate raids on sex industry workplaces, causing alarm and concern at a national level.⁴ These raids were funded by a 2003 \$20m investment in AFP anti-trafficking work, with a further \$38m boost in 2007.⁵

Lack of access to appropriate visas

Lack of access to appropriate visas is a primary factor driving Asian migrant sex workers travelling to Australia to engage expensive migration brokers, incur substantial debts, and travel on insecure visas.^{3,4,6} Research highlights that many migrant sex workers from Asia face significant barriers to Australia’s visa framework, leading them to rely on third-party agents who charge excessive fees for visa procurement and travel arrangements. These migration-related debts are frequently financed through informal lenders, resulting in financial precarity and heightened vulnerability to exploitation.⁷⁻¹¹

Additionally, many migrant sex workers lack access to accurate in-language information about their visa conditions, work rights, and entitlements, leaving them exposed to misinformation and legal risks. Sex workers often arrive in Australia unaware of what activities their visa permits, or whether sex work is lawful in their jurisdiction, particularly when they are on tourist or student visas. This combination of restrictive migration policy, costly and opaque brokerage systems, and limited access to legal information creates a structural vulnerability that undermines the safety, autonomy, and rights of migrant sex workers.

Asian migrant sex workers

Research from 1993 and 2003 showed Asian migrant women sex workers in Australia are likely to have travelled previously and have a higher level of education than is average for women in their home country. Around half are Australian citizens or intend to become so, and around half are here to work temporarily.¹² A survey of Chinese language background migrant workers in 2006 and 2007 found that roughly one quarter are single parents and the majority are aged 30 or older.¹³

Research conducted in 2010, the largest survey of Asian migrant sex workers in Australia to date, reported that 26% of Asian migrant sex workers arranged their own visa, whilst a further 27% were assisted by their partner and 26% used a broker or agent. Using a broker or agent had higher associated costs than organising migration oneself, or having a known person (e.g., a relative, friend and/or partner) arrange it.¹⁴

Operation Inglenook

Australian Border Force (ABF) established Operation Inglenook in November 2022, directly following a series of media reports that conflated migrant sex workers with exploitation and trafficking.^{15,16}

While the ABF described the operation as “a multi-agency operation to actively identify, deter and disrupt high-risk facilitators and their associates involved in trafficking and/or modern slavery practices within the sex industry,”¹⁶ after a year of operation (November 2022 – November 2023), fewer than five individuals were referred to Australia’s Support for Trafficked People Program by Operation Inglenook.¹⁷ However, the operation generated a significant number of visa cancellations and deportations.¹⁸⁻²⁰

The operation’s activities involved both “compliance visits” to the workplaces of migrant sex workers, and “detection” at the border. ABF data indicates that Operation Inglenook engaged in systemic racial and gendered profiling, disproportionately targeting Asian migrant women suspected of traveling to Australia for sex work.^{19,20}



Scarlet Alliance has been informed the operation formally ended 31 December 2024. However, ongoing compliance activities, including raids of migrant sex workers' workplaces and profiling at the border, continue to result in visa cancellation, detention and deportation.²¹

Raids fail to address migrant workplace rights

Raids conducted by ABF and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) have proven ineffective in addressing workplace exploitation, trafficking, or visa issues within the sex industry. Evidence from both Australia and internationally shows that such operations rarely result in the identification of traffickers or successful prosecutions. In the UK, nearly 70% of police raids in the sex industry failed to identify or refer any trafficking victims for support.²² In Australia, hundreds of referrals to the AFP for trafficking and exploitation have led to only a small number of successful prosecutions.²³ Research by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women found migrant sex workers are more likely to tolerate unsafe or risky work conditions when threat of exposure and deportation exists.²⁴ Expert bodies and independent reviews have called for the end of punitive enforcement strategies in favour of models grounded in labour rights, peer-led outreach, and visa pathways that allow workers to report abuse without fear of retaliation.^{24-26,32} The evidence demonstrates raids increase vulnerability, rather than preventing harm, and should be replaced by approaches that enhance sex workers' agency and safety.

Raids foster anti-authority sentiment and mistrust among migrant workers

The recent raids by ABF has created fear of immigration and other authorities among Asian migrant sex workers.²⁷ Fear-driven avoidance of government and authorities is a rational response to a policy environment that facilitates "differential inclusion"—where migrant workers are essential to the economy but denied basic protections.²⁸ ABF raids on migrant workplaces undermines the protective benefits of sex work decriminalisation, workplace health and safety and programs such as the Workplace Justice Visa pilot.

Raids are traumatising and dehumanising

Raids are traumatising for migrant sex workers, regardless of whether or not they are in breach of their visa conditions.^{24,27,29} While Australian authorities use terms such as "workplace visits" and "compliance checks", sex workers experience ABF and AFP presence in their workplaces as raids. Sex workers describe their intimidating behaviour, carrying weapons, and using militarised tactics such as surrounding the building; with one raid including 25 officers including four armed police. Footage published by news.com.au demonstrates the military-style uniforms of ABF, worn as they enter sex worker workplaces.³⁰

Sex workers subjected to these raids are often from migrant and refugee backgrounds, are separated and questioned without interpreters, and asked to sign documents they do not understand. Questions by ABF personnel are intrusive, stigmatising, and migrant sex workers fear that the information collected will be used against them in the future, impacting upon future migration and work opportunities. One migrant sex worker present during an ABF raid in March 2025 reports that "lawful migrants, residents and citizens are caught up in these actions, traumatised, standing in the workplace in lingerie for two hours or more, sometimes partially naked while questioned, not permitted to use their phone or have a friend with them while Border Force isolate them into different rooms on the premises."

Raids deter help seeking behaviours

In practice, immigration and anti-trafficking raids drive workers underground.^{6-11,27} Police and immigration raids on migrant sex work venues have been shown to fracture community support and restrict access to services, with clear health harms. For example, a systematic review found that police repression "displaced sex workers into isolated work locations, disrupting peer support networks and service access," discouraged sex workers from carrying condoms, and outreach programs



reported enforcement “restricts workers’ access to condoms and HIV/STI testing,” undermining prevention efforts.³¹ In Canada and the UK, such raids have led to the arrest or deportation of migrant women – even though selling sex itself was legal – on grounds that their work was not “legitimate employment.”^{33,34} By pushing migrant sex workers into more hidden and precarious situations, these raids increase risks of violence and hamper safer sex practices, compounding the very risks that public health programs aim to mitigate.^{31,33,34}

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