

“Migrant Sex Workers Research in Australia”

**Presentation to the 4th Australian National Symposium on Sex Work
“Nothing About Us, Without Us”**

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1. Researching Our Own Community

Research projects by migrant sex workers in Australia are:¹

SIREN 1994

Sydney Sexual Health Survey 1993 and 2003

National Thai Sex Worker Consultation 2002

GAATW, Empower and SWOP NSW 2000

Chinese Sex Workers Needs Analysis 2006 - 2007

Similarities and differences in methodology emerge from these projects. All had multi-lingual sex worker peer educators involved; in the design, interviews and/or survey collection. The SIREN research in 1993 and Chinese Sex Workers Needs Analysis in 2006 decided not to ask sex workers directly about their contract and/or visa status. SIREN explains; ‘The women were not asked if they were currently under contract; nor were they asked how long they had been in the country. It was felt that these two questions may deter ‘illegals’ from participating.’²

The Sydney Sexual Health Research and the research project by GAATW, Empower and SWOP both asked direct and specific questions about contract work and immigration status.

Focus groups developing the Chinese sex worker research felt the same, and decided to make questions about migration pathways optional. However over 80% of sex worker participants chose to answer these questions. This indicates

¹ Data relating to Korean sex workers has not been incorporated into this paper because none of the migrant sex worker research to date had included sex workers of Korean language background. At the time of publication the results of the Laws and Sexual Health survey by UNSW were not available. The LASH survey included Korean sex workers and will shed some more light on this issue in the near future.

² Prostitutes Collective of Victoria, ‘What You Can Use,’ in *SIREN Speaks*, Sexual Health Information Resources and Education for Non English speaking background sex workers (SIREN) Project, Prostitutes Collective of Victoria, Section Five, 1994, p. 13.

that collecting data about visa and migration, while difficult, is not impossible, given the right circumstances.

Understanding the importance of methodology contributes greatly to our understanding of migrant sex workers needs while they are in Australia and how we can accurately collect this information.

2. SIREN Research Project with Migrant Sex Workers

SIREN was funded by the Commonwealth in 1994. It held more than sixty consultation meetings, including consulting with sex worker organisations and services in Thailand, Phillipines, Fiji, Indonesia, New Zealand and Australia.

Ten migrant sex worker workplaces (brothels) were included in the consultation process, and 19 individual Thai background migrant sex workers were interviewed for the research project in 1993.³

SIREN was the first major research project driven and run by migrant sex workers, for migrant sex workers. Many sex worker organisations at the time of SIREN remodelled their service delivery based upon the outcomes of the project. The philosophy was that migrant sex workers have a right to equal access to sex worker organisations, its resources and its decision-making processes.⁴ SIREN created an atmosphere of shared responsibility and inclusion for migrant sex workers in service delivery and policy, and set a high standard for the respect of migrant sex workers' human rights in Australia:

1) SERVICE CONTACT

Front-of-service area will present an environment which is accessible and comfortable for visitors and service users from a diversity of cultures and languages.

2) TARGETING STRATEGY

Develop and implement a targeting strategy, after due consultation if required. The targeting strategy will have the purpose of allowing NESB sensitive policy and programs to be developed within the current resource framework, and inform the need for future funding submissions to allow for an expanded service base. The targeting strategy should be updated annually, to coincide with negotiations over funding agreements and budget allocations.

3) ACCESS TO INFORMATION

- multi-lingual displays of information of relevance to Sex Workers;
- liaison with other community resources such as publishers of resource catalogues, ethno-specific agencies,

³ Prostitutes Collective of Victoria, *SIREN Speaks*, 1994, p. 62.

⁴ Prostitutes Collective of Victoria, *SIREN Speaks*, 1994, p. 38.

- government services etc, in the location of materials suitable for NESB service users;
- the use of video, audio and flip chart resources wherever possible to address literacy barriers;
- publication of promotional materials in languages other than English, and the publication of multilingual publicity
- where appropriate, advertising services through ethnic language newspapers and community language directories in English language newspapers, and on multicultural community radio;
- inclusion of ethnic networks in mailing lists;
- provision of language-specific forums from time to time, in conformity with the targeting strategy.

4) INTERNAL INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Collect and analyse data about NESB sex workers for use in the development and refinement of future targeting strategies, evaluation of projects, and work reviews. Reporting forms will be amended to include collection of the following data where possible:

- languages spoken at home;
- country of birth;
- ethnicity;
- number of years in Australia;
- the need for interpreters/translated material:
- the level of participation in programs.

5) CULTURALLY RELEVANT SERVICES

Undertake to provide services which are responsive to the diverse cultures and languages of sex workers.

- consult with NESB sex workers before developing new projects and/or funding submissions;
- develop special projects in line with the targeting strategy;
- explore the possibility of partnership agreements with ethno-specific agencies, migrant women's health centres, or other appropriate services to implement new or expanded activities;
- develop NESB access targets for all existing projects
- include NESB access issues in any evaluation mechanisms

6) STAFFING AND WORK PRACTICES

Recognise that the organisational responsibility for access rests on all staff, not any individual. To this end, the following are as desirable skills amongst all workers:

- the ability to work with interpreters, ethnic media and translators;
- the ability to disseminate information within ethnic communities;
- knowledge of the impacts of migration and culture on sex workers,

- awareness of ethno-specific networks and other resources useful to NESB sex workers;
- the ability to gather data about NESB sex workers in a sensitive and non-intrusive manner.
- Provide training or access to training for staff in those areas with which staff are not familiar.
- Six monthly work reviews will incorporate evaluation of NESB access targets
- New positions or vacancies will be advertised in the ethnic media as well as English language newspapers.
- If a project or activity requires the employment of specialist bilingual or bicultural staff, PCV will recognise additional skills by the payment of a loading for these skills.

7) CONSUMER PARTICIPATION

Convene and resource a NESB Access Advisory Group to act as a reference for effective involvement by NESB consumers in decision making processes. Participants should ideally include members of the communities represented in any current or past targeting strategy, NESB consumers, and people with expertise in NESB community education.⁵

These strategies were successfully implemented across the sex worker services in Australia during the 1990's and as a result created a huge change in sex worker work conditions in Australia, as measured by the Sydney Sexual Health Surveys in 1993 (pre-SIREN) and 2003.

3. Sydney Sexual Health Survey

In May 1993, Sydney Sexual Health began their first ever survey of Thai, Chinese, Malaysia and other Asian background migrant sex workers. Opened in 1990, the sexual health clinic used a Chinese interpreter and a Thai speaking health educator to administer the questionnaires. The Sexual Health centre also conducts joint outreach and promotions with SWOP, and has developed long term trust relationships with Asian background migrant sex workers in Sydney. The first survey was designed as an evaluation tool by a Masters student at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Sydney,⁶ and was a convenience sample, conducted over twenty seven months. Ninety one sex workers participated in the survey. In November 2002 the Sexual Health centre began a follow up survey, with similar methodology, with 165 sex workers participants.

The second survey by SSH proved that the implementation of the SIREN recommendations by sex worker organisations in Australia, led to improved conditions for migrant sex workers. While the SSH survey is specific to Sydney, it

⁵ Prostitutes Collective of Victoria, *Siren Speaks*. 1994, 38 - 40

⁶ CC O'Connor CC, *Monitoring the Sexual Health of International Sex Workers Attending SSHC* [masters treatise], Faculty of Medicine, University of Sydney, 1993.

can be assumed that the similar projects in Queensland, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, if measured, would show similar results:

The findings of this study indicate that after nearly 10 years of a decriminalised sex industry and ongoing culturally appropriate interventions by peer educators from SWOP and by project staff, Asian female sex workers attending SSHC or accessed on outreach are more likely to practice safer sex in the workplace and to have better welfare profiles than was the case in 1993-95. Evidence from SSHC's database indicates that they also have improved sexual health outcomes.⁷

4. 2000 GAATW, Empower and SWOP Research

In 2000 a research project with Thai migrant sex workers in Sydney was conducted by Empower Foundation from Thailand, the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women, also from Thailand, and the Sex Workers Outreach Project in New South Wales. The overall design and reporting was a collaboration between these groups. The research was for the purpose of establishing up to date data for the Scarlet Alliance National Forum and ICAAP, both in Melbourne in late 2000. Twenty interviews were conducted over one week, seven in private homes or escort agencies, and thirteen in massage parlours or brothels, with Thai speaking migrant sex workers in Sydney.

This research also recommended strongly the improved resourcing of services for migrant sex workers:

Resources on health care and safe sex in Thai need to be very easy to understand, however from our experience we found that the resources may not be enough information for the women, therefore we should organise a series of training/workshops for the women in their work place. We may need to do more outreach activity and get information from the women about their interests, then conduct training according to their interests.

- Workshops do not need to focus on health but can encompass a range of issues including English classes and life skills.
- Outreach activities conducted by EMPOWER should include information about the preparation needed before travelling overseas to work in the sex industry.
- Simple resources should also be developed in Thai to distribute to women in Thailand about working overseas⁸

5. 2002 – National Thai Sex Workers Consultation

⁷ Pell et al, 'Demographic, migration status, and work-related changes in Asian female sex workers surveyed in Sydney, 1993 and 2003,' in *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, vol. 30, no. 2, (2006):157-162, p. 161.

⁸ Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women, Sex Workers Outreach Project and Empower Foundation, *Research with Thai sex workers in Sydney*, Unpublished, 2000, p. 3.

In June 2002 Scarlet Alliance funded a national meeting of Australian multicultural projects. The top outcome of that meeting was:

1. Support needs to be provided to facilitate sex worker participation:

1 a. Organisations of sex workers/peers need to be funded and properly resourced with training, expertise, and access to professional development⁹

Sex workers of Thai background concluded at that meeting that there needed to be more resources put into peer education. After the experience of the gains that had been achieved in the wake of the SIREN project, it was clear to this group that increased resourcing into this area was important. The groundwork SIREN had laid now was becoming more specific – the professional development of staff in this field needs more attention.

6. Thai sex workers in Australia – what we learnt

Thai sex workers are coming to Australia older, with more life experience, more likely to be married, divorced, or having had a relationship with an Australian man, and are more educated in recent years than in the early 90's where we have the first data from. Generally Thai sex workers in Australia can speak some English.

In the 1993 SIREN project, Thai sex workers were twenty and older. The 2000 most Thai sex workers were older than twenty five. In the Sydney Sexual Health survey, the average age also increased over the decade, from an average of 25 to an average of 33. This age increase in the research is backed up by anecdotal information from sex worker organisations. Thai migrant sex workers are generally older than the stereotype, and in 2008, if the trends have continued, are coming to Australia older than in previous decades.

Thai sex workers in the SSH 2003 survey had a higher rate of divorce, separation, or to have been widowed, than Chinese sex workers.¹⁰ Thai women were likely to have Australian partners.¹¹

All twenty of the Thai sex workers interviewed in 2000 research could communicate in English.¹²

⁹ "Thai Senate delegation on the process of public participation" SWOP 2002 [http://www.scarletalliance.org.au/library/swop-thaidelegation02 viewed October 2008]

¹⁰ Pell et al, 'Demographic, migration status, and work-related changes in Asian female sex workers surveyed in Sydney, 1993 and 2003,' 2006, p. 160.

¹¹ Pell et al, 'Demographic, migration status, and work-related changes in Asian female sex workers surveyed in Sydney, 1993 and 2003,' 2006, p. 160.

¹² Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women, Sex Workers Outreach Project and Empower Foundation, *Research with Thai sex workers in Sydney*, 2000, p. 1.

Thai sex workers “more likely to report better English reading ($p=0.001$) and writing ($p=0.028$) skills than Chinese speakers.”¹³

Overall education levels of migrant sex worker participants in Sydney Sexual Health survey increased between 1993 and 2003. Primary school level education was 12% in 1993 and 33% in 2003; tertiary was 18% in 1993 and 37% in 2003 ($p=0.00$).¹⁴

In 1993 and 2003, a third of the SIREN participants had worked in the sex industry prior to travelling to Australia, two thirds had not.¹⁵ The sex workers who had worked in another country before coming to Australia had worked in Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Japan.

The 2000 research found that “...some women felt embarrassed/ashamed about working in Thailand (more stigma), they felt more confident to work as a sex worker here rather than Thailand / more income here.”¹⁶

7. Thai Sex Workers Are Experienced and Knowledgeable

We know that when given the opportunity, Thai sex workers will pay for their own ticket and obtain their own visa almost all the time. Less than 10% are on contract.

Thai migrant sex workers in the Sydney Sexual Health research were globally aware and embarked on a range of travel: “15% of the women said they had visited Australia for sex work three times or more previously. In both 1995 and 2003, about 20% had previously been in Australia for sex work.”¹⁷

The research also suggests that Thai women were more experienced with sex work and migration for sex work than their Chinese counterparts; “More Thai women than Chinese planned to work in the industry when they came to Australia (33.3% vs. 6.4%) ($p=0.00$). 25% of the women had intended to study in Australia.”¹⁸

¹³ Pell et al, ‘Demographic, migration status, and work-related changes in Asian female sex workers surveyed in Sydney, 1993 and 2003,’ 2006, p. 160.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Dabbhadatta et al, ‘Changes in Migration Status and Work Patterns in Asian Sex Workers attending a Sexual Health Centre,’ *Scarlet Alliance Submission to Commonwealth Attorney General’s Department*, Scarlet Alliance, (2004), p. 42, URL: <http://www.scarletalliance.org.au/library/traff-sub04>, site accessed 10 July 2008.

¹⁵ Prostitutes Collective of Victoria, *SIREN Speaks*, 1994, p. 13.

¹⁶ Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women, Sex Workers Outreach Project and Empower Foundation, *Research with Thai sex workers in Sydney*, 2000, p.1.

¹⁷ Jeffrey Dabbhadatta et al “Changes in Migration Status and Work Patterns in Asian Sex Workers attending a Sexual Health Centre,” 2004, p. 42.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Dabbhadatta et al “Changes in Migration Status and Work Patterns in Asian Sex Workers attending a Sexual Health Centre,” 2004, p. 42.

Thai sex workers in 2003 reported entering Australia legally.¹⁹

73.9% of Thai sex workers in 2000 paid for their own ticket to come to Australia.²⁰

8. The impact of trafficking measures

None of the Thai women in the 2003 survey were doing street based sex work, most worked in parlours. However there was an increase in escort work for this group when comparing the two Sydney Sexual Health Surveys (6.7% vs.1.7%).²¹ This corresponds to anecdotal evidence from sex worker organisations that the anti-trafficking responses in Australia in the early 00's were causing the industry to go further "underground" in order to avoid the raid activity that was popular at that time. Scarlet Alliance expressed this in our 2004 submission on trafficking laws 'Extensive and repetitive raids push the workplaces underground.'²²

The British Medical Journal Article made the same claim in 2004, 'efforts to reduce trafficking may be making conditions worse for voluntary migrants.'²³

It can be concluded that the increasingly underground nature of Thai migrant sex work in Australia in 2003 was not necessarily a result of actual criminal activity, as 92.7% of participants had retained their passports, an indicator at that time that the participant group were generally not on contract, and thus had not been trafficked into Australia for work. We suggest that these conditions are an unintended consequence of anti-trafficking raids.

9. Zi Teng, Scarlet Alliance, SWOP NSW, SIN SA, RhED, SWOP ACT

In 2006, Scarlet Alliance led the Australian component of a trans-national study of Chinese migrant sex workers in seven countries. Partner organisations in the research in Australia were the Sex Workers Outreach Project in New South Wales, Sex Industry Network in South Australia, Resourcing Health and Education in the Sex Industry in Victoria, and the Sex Workers Outreach Project in Australia's Capital Territory. Surveys were based upon the trans-national study survey, designed by Zi Teng, the Hong Kong sex worker concerned organisation. Focus groups of Chinese speaking sex workers in Australia made adjustments to the survey for local issues and needs.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Dabbhadatta et al, 'Changes in Migration Status and Work Patterns in Asian Sex Workers attending a Sexual Health Centre,' 2008, p. 42.

²⁰ Pell et al, 'Demographic, migration status, and work-related changes in Asian female sex workers surveyed in Sydney, 1993 and 2003,' 2006, p. 159.

²¹ Jeffrey Dabbhadatta et al, 'Changes in Migration Status and Work Patterns in Asian Sex Workers attending a Sexual Health Centre,' 2008, p. 43.

²² Scarlet Alliance, *Submission to Commonwealth Attorney General's Department*, 2004, p.4, URL: <http://www.scarletalliance.org.au/library/traff-sub04>, site accessed 13 Nov 2008.

²³ Joanna Busza, Sarah Castle and Aisse Diarra, 'Trafficking and health,' in *British Medical Journal*, no. 328, 2004, pp. 1369-1371, URL: <http://www.bmj.com/cgi/reprint/328/7452/1369.pdf>, site accessed 13 November 2008.

The research project was approved by both the AIDS Council of New South Wales and Inner South Community Health Service (Melbourne) ethics committees, prior to data collection.

The survey collection was conducted by Chinese speaking peer educators while on outreach to brothels and private workers in four Australian cities, Sydney, Adelaide, Melbourne and Canberra.

A control group of non-Chinese sex workers was recruited through Scarlet Alliance activities and volunteers.

It is the only dedicated survey for Chinese migrant sex workers in Australia, has not been previously published, and is more current than other available research. As such it provides a strong contemporary evidence base for understanding this group of sex workers in Australia.

10. Chinese Sex Workers In Australia – What We Learnt

Chinese sex workers are on average 30 or older, educated, have held professional jobs at home, had their own visa, and come from major capital cities in China.

The most common age range for Chinese sex worker participants was thirty one to forty. No-one was aged twenty or below. One respondent answered that they are fifty one years old (N=forty three). Shanghai and Guan Dong were the two most common home regions of Chinese sex worker participants. Due to the identifying nature of this question, answering it was optional, and twenty eight of forty three (65%) participants chose not to disclose their home region.

Sex work was the largest single previous occupation of participants, at 31%, followed by housewife (14%), small business owner (12%), student (12%) and farmer (4.8%, or two out of forty one). Other individual occupations listed were mechanic, accountant, bank officer, beautician (two respondents), police officer (one) and public servant (one).

This is the first time most participants (79%) had left their home to work in another country. 20% had previously travelled internationally to work.

88% of Chinese sex workers have their own a visa.

When asked why they chose to travel to Australia, 28% answered that someone had introduced them to the idea, 24% had been to Australia before and chose to return, and an equal number listed they choosing to travel to Australia because the sex work environment is good.

11. Chinese Sex Worker Work Conditions

Chinese sex workers not on contract in Australia, are happy with their earnings, aware of their rights in Australia. Chinese sex workers are more likely than Thai sex workers to be running their own businesses, work 8 hours or less a day, and mostly see anglo clients that are their regulars.

60% of Chinese sex workers work more than 8 hours a day. A third work less than eight hours a day (35%).

50% of Chinese sex workers see between four and six customers a day (51.2%).

Half of Chinese sex workers in Australia share a split of their earnings with the owner of the premises (44.1%). More than half of Chinese sex workers in Australia worked in full service establishments where sex is a standard part of the service (64.5%). A third work for themselves and/or are the business owner.

Over half of Chinese sex workers provide full service 全套 (按摩+做愛) (52.27%), at work, followed by closely by massage 半套 (按摩) (45.45%).

A small majority, 55%, of Chinese sex workers provided extra services to clients for extra money (55.5%).

Chinese sex workers see mostly anglo Anglo clients.

70% of Chinese sex workers use English language at work, 英文. 50% use Mandarin language at work, 普通話. Nine participants chose not to answer this question. It can be inferred from the answers given however that most participants are multilingual and speak English.

Two thirds of Chinese sex workers see mostly regular customers. The remaining third see primarily new customers. 97% of Chinese sex workers report that they used condoms with all customers. This is comparable with condom use among sex workers generally in Australia.

93% of Chinese sex workers go to a doctor if they suspected an STI, 求醫, (93%).

This is also comparable with general sex worker populations in Australia, who access sexual health clinics at a higher rate than their non-sex workers. 84% of participants had heard of their local sexual health clinic. Major capital cities in Australia have free STI services for sex workers from non-English speaking backgrounds, and workers are not expected to use their real names. This makes it extremely convenient to access clinics in Australia.

12. Chinese Sex Workers Access Justice

Chinese sex workers reported a higher level of confidence in the Australian justice system than their Australian counterparts, and were not hesitant to report injustices in the workplace if they occurred. Chinese sex workers are happy with the legal regimes here and plan to return to Australia again.

Half of Chinese sex workers would call the police in response to sexual assault in the workplace, 報警.

Answers on the topic of human rights were also very positive. 74% of participants were clear on their rights. 81% of participants answered they believe the laws are fair in Australia公平.

Levels of arrest were extremely low. 90% of Chinese sex workers have not been arrested in Australia.

Two thirds of Chinese sex workers have a better income in Australia than China (61.9%), one third experience an income that is the same to their income in China.

75% of participants answered they will come back to Australia to work.

13. Last words

Clearly, as this information shows, Chinese and Thai migrant sex workers are enjoying their time in Australia, and seeing it a profitable destination within our region. While most are travelling for sex work for the first time; the age, life experience, language skills, and educational levels show that migrant sex workers are upwardly mobile and have an international outlook. They have previously travelled and worked throughout the region, and anticipate returning to Australia.

The use of SIREN as an evidence base for policy and service delivery has had huge and demonstrable results in NSW. We know this thanks to the Sydney Sexual Health surveys that were conducted prior to and a decade after the SIREN project.

However research projects since SIREN have consistently urged increased funding for sex worker organisations infrastructure, translation, staff professional development, and outreach services to multilingual workplaces. Ignoring these specific outcomes is directly ignoring the voices of migrant sex workers.

Scarlet Alliance and our membership know where our project money is going – towards approaches that work, that are informed by reliable research, that are community driven and community accountable. We hope that Government monies towards trafficking and health can also aspire to these high standards that we believe are so important.

Australian non-government organisations and the Government Departments that fund them must now decide whether to follow an abolitionist approach to migrant sex worker and trafficking, or to work from an evidence base of research and fund ongoing research and evaluation to measure the success of funded efforts.