

Sex slaves or harassed sex-trade workers?
Being 'rescued' by police means imprisonment
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Kita never considered herself a "sex slave." So when police raided the massage parlour where she was working in 1994 -- located near Sherbourne and Dundas -- she didn't consider herself "saved" either. In fact, languishing for 18 months in custody was pretty much the worst thing that ever happened to her as she waited to get over a bawdy-house charge accompanying her so-called rescue. Of her former massage-parlour employer, Kita says, "Everything was fine. The boss -- she took care of everything. At that time, I got \$90 out of every \$120 we charged customers."

One reason Kita wasn't complaining about her job is because of where she comes from. She's a refugee from Burma, a war-torn country where she was impoverished. Speaking through an interpreter, Kita says, "You asked me if I was a slave of my employer here, and I say no."

But police and immigration officials are saying yes. Increasingly, migrant sex-trade workers are spending months in jail after being charged with prostitution and immigration offences during raids on megacity strip clubs, brothels and massage parlours. Although police often claim they are rescuing migrant sex workers, advocates say the women are less free after being saved.

"The women do report that the worst thing that happened to them during their stay in Canada was being arrested, strip-searched, then being held in detention for three months to a year," says Kara Gillies, a spokesperson for the Migrant Sex Workers Advocacy Group. "I just don't understand how charging people, arresting them from their working environments, then putting them in cells is helpful. This is the justification for going in and disrupting people's lives and livelihoods. It's on these grounds that police are rescuing these women."

While sex-trade workers are feeling the long lash of the law, their employers are lining their pockets by exploiting things like NAFTA to bring in more strippers and dancers from developing countries. The upshot is that sex-trade workers are suffering, but not necessarily because of their

working conditions.

This appears to be the true of Kita, now 22, who is married and pregnant and attempting to become a Canadian citizen. She asked to be interviewed under her former work name.

Following the 1994 raid, she spent six months at Metro West Detention Centre, then another year at Celebrity Inn -- an immigration holding tank on Airport Road. Unable to post a combined \$7,000 for her criminal and immigration bonds, Kita remained in custody. "The guards would be yelling at the children to stop crying," she remembers, "and I had to be there for a year. I had one set of clothes -- the one I wore when I was busted. I didn't have any clothes to go to court. I didn't kill anybody. I didn't use heroin or sell heroin or have any serious charges."

The definition of a sex slave is an indentured person held against his or her will and forced to perform sex for no pay. Reports claim that women are bought and sold among gangsters as sex slaves. Gillies says that's not quite accurate, and is co-writing a report on the matter funded by Status of Women Canada. "It's not sex slavery," she says. "The problem is that they have no redress when it comes to contract violations. Women's groups tend to equate prostitution with human trafficking, deeming sex work in general inherently exploitative. There's no question that many of these women are very vulnerable, often because of their status as migrant workers. Domestic workers, factory workers and seasonally employed workers all have very little access to redress when they aren't paid on time."

Gillies sees this a lot with dancers and prostitutes. "They've come in on their own volition only to end up in exploited work conditions, and it's, 'Oh well, screw you, bad whore.' But when we see the exploitation, it would be more accurately defined as a labour issue."

The women often come to Canada through underground routes with expenses paid by agents. Upon arrival, Gillies says, they've incurred debts of anywhere from \$5,000 to \$30,000. "In most situations the women know this in advance and agree to work a certain number of hours or see a certain number of clients," she says. "They run into difficulties when they agree to see 400 clients in advance and then someone on this end changes it to 500. The situation is compounded by the fact that their business is undervalued in terms of social perspective, and -- in the case of prostitution -- criminalized."

Bonds for both criminal and immigration matters can exceed \$7,000. Some

women can't pay, remaining in jail until they are either deported or they get money from "unscrupulous sources."

"It varies," says Gillies. "Some will have money that hasn't been seized by police, in which case they can post bond. But in many situations the women have been sending money to their families or paying a huge percentage of their earnings to their agents."

A Thai woman, who worked in a North York massage parlour as Amy, says she didn't happen to have \$3,500 handy when 68 people were arrested on prostitution charges in December 1998. Along with 24 other women and one man, she was charged under the Immigration Act. "There was no crime," says Amy. "Only the women, and they pointed guns at us."

More recently, the focus has changed from massage parlours to strip clubs, where police are arresting migrant dancers without proper paperwork. Project Almonzo -- a year-long blitz leading to some 700 prostitution-related charges at GTA strip joints -- found immigration officials and police working in tandem. A number of migrant women have been found to be working on expired paperwork, and others on tourist visas that provide no labour rights. "She's breaching the Criminal Code if she's into any illegal activity," says Rene Mercier, an Immigration spokesperson. "First, we can't intervene until the criminal process is complete. If the person receives a jail sentence, we can't intervene until they've done their time. It could be that the person is being detained under criminal accusations because she received a sentence, then we would detain that person under the Immigration Act until she's removed."

Mercier says Immigration Canada doesn't keep statistics on migrant sex-trade workers, but if more are plying their trade here it's because they've been invited.

Claiming a shortage of homegrown talent, strip clubs have used NAFTA to find new recruits in Mexico. Last spring, strip clubs began lobbying Ottawa to let more foreign dancers work legally -- offering to pay for immigration spot checks and a free hotline for dancers. Failing such a move, the industry claims scores of clubs will close.

Mary Taylor, outreach coordinator for the Exotic Dancers Alliance, disputes

this claim. "How can there be a shortage if some clubs have between 80 and 100 girls Thursday through Saturday?" she asks. "They want more because they're charging the dancers a fee to work in the clubs. The more girls they have, the more money they make. Each girl is paying more than \$40 a night, and they're swarming to clubs that turn a blind eye, because that's where the money is."

The industry's plea for outside help coincides with the arrest of more than 100 migrants during the year-long Almonzo blitz, leaving the dancers to fend for themselves in court. "Clubs take the girls' money and they don't provide anything for that money -- nothing," says Taylor.

While Almonzo targeted sex in strip clubs, police say the project was not intended as a hooker sweep, but as a crackdown against human traffickers.

"We're not here to change the system," says Peel morality constable Don Ross. "A lot of the people who you call migrant sex workers have been dealt with, and I think they are treated very fairly. We put them in contact with social services and they're treated as victims. They're not treated as bad people. They're not treated as accused people." Ross says the women are busted for "everything from intercourse, to fellatio, to offer of sex, to lapping."

The police officer admits several contradictory court decisions have created a gray area for all dancers, adding that it probably won't be clarified for three or four years. "You have to understand, we speak to a lot of the dancers," Ross says. "They sit there and go, 'You know what? I hate dancing this way. I don't want to dance this way. Unfortunately, in order for me to make money, I have to dance this way.'"

Whatever the focus, to Mook Sutdhibhasilp it sounds like another rescue. "Recently, they haven't been using the term 'rescue,' but that's how it started," says Sutdhibhasilp, an activist on the migrant sex workers issue who's co-writing the report with Gillies. "Thai women busted as part of Project Trade and Project Orphan were supposed to be part of an alleged sex-slave ring, too. There are still raids at massage parlours, but it's not news anymore. It's lap-dancing now, and they're talking about sending a message to traffickers.

"Local sex workers will be fined, but they won't be deported and they won't be jailed. Once migrant women get busted, they are held. They call it detention -- right, to protect the women -- but all the women just call it jail."