



## **Needs Assessment for Asian Sex Workers in Queensland**

**March 2015-September 2015**

### **Introduction**

This Asian sex workers needs assessment was funded by a grant from the Community Gambling Benefit Fund administered by the Office of Liquor and Gaming Regulation, Queensland.

Queensland has a higher level of sex work regulation compared to other states in Australia with a licensing system administered by the Prostitution Licensing Authority and policed under the Criminal Code. Despite this the majority of sex workers in Queensland work outside of the regulatory framework.

This is the first needs assessment conducted for Asian sex workers in Queensland. The primary objectives of this research were to assess the current levels of knowledge about sexual health, sex work law in Queensland, rights and responsibilities and workplace rights, as well as identifying existing barriers and learn about the experiences and opinions of Asian sex workers. Further, our aim was to present this information in a report that would enable us to seek long term funding from relevant agencies to employ Asian focused peer educators. This report is to support that outcome. The following report provides an overview of the key findings from the assessment.

### **Method**

This research was organised and conducted by peer Management Committee and Staff of Respect Inc. We restricted participation to those who are current or past Asian sex workers in Queensland, including those who are brothel based, private (independent sole operator and/or working co-operatively with other sex workers), street based and other forms of sex work that meets the definition of prostitution in Criminal Code. A questionnaire was created by the Respect Inc Asian Focused Peer Educators and developed with feedback from the Scarlet Alliance Migrant Project Steering Committee and approved by the Management Committee of Respect inc. It was then translated into Chinese, Korean and Thai.

The questionnaire consisted of 40 questions covering the following 7 categories:

1. Demographics,
2. Migrant experience,
3. Understanding of legal rights and responsibilities,
4. Health and Safety,
5. FIFO/DIDO (Fly in, Fly out / Drive in, Drive out) Traveling for work,
6. Workplace rights (Brothel / Escort / RnT parlour),
7. Access to services and information.

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The data was collected by one on one meetings, phone calls and email between June 2015 and July 2015. The majority of the questionnaires were completed via one on one meetings with Asian sex worker peer staff of Respect Inc. These were Peer Educators who had Korean, Thai and Chinese as their first language.

Once the research staff introduced themselves, participants were given an overview of the research and it's purpose. Participants were told that the survey was anonymous and they were allowed to skip any questions that might make them uncomfortable to answer. The survey was conducted verbally by the interviewers in English, Chinese, Korean and Thai. The survey normally lasted about 15 minutes and was followed by discussion for details when possible. Participants were offered \$50 as a token remuneration for their time and a total of 101 participants were surveyed.

Data was entered into a data spreadsheet and analysed across several categories for this report.

## Findings / Results (data)

### 1) Demographics

#### *Industry sector*

In order to reflect the view of the various sectors of the sex industry, a target quota was set up for each sector. Our initial target was to survey a minimum of 30 private / sole operator & private with other sex workers, 30 of licensed brothel sex workers and 20 of unlicensed brothel. As it stands we obtained close to that target quota. The sector breakdown is as follows.

Private	48
Private / with other sex worker(s)	8
Licensed Brothel	27
Unlicensed brothel / agency / coop	10
Street Base	1
Casual / Opportunistic	1
Other	10

Thus only 27 selected 'licensed brothel' which is the regulated sector. All others selected unregulated sectors. Other and Unlicensed brothel / Agency / Coop in this survey are massage parlor based sex work. Massage parlor based sex workers who were surveyed chose two categories mixed to identify their form of sex work. This would indicate that more work needs to be done to break down barriers to access this group.

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## Gender

Female	85
Male	9
Transgender Women	6
Unknown	1

## Age group

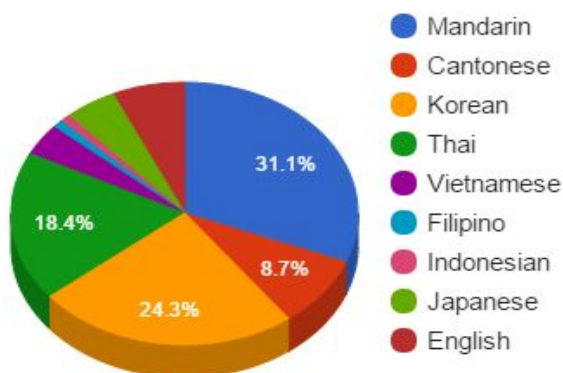
17 and under	0
18 - 25	13
26 - 30	36
30 - 40	29
40 - 50	21
50 - 60	2
60 - 70	0
70 and over	0

None of respondents identified as being under 17 years old, nor over 60 years old. The most active working age group is 26-30.

## Country of origin and Language

Chinese, Korean and Thai are the 3 highest represented language preferences. This is what

### Preferred Language



we expected to find as it is generally considered anecdotally among the Asian sex worker

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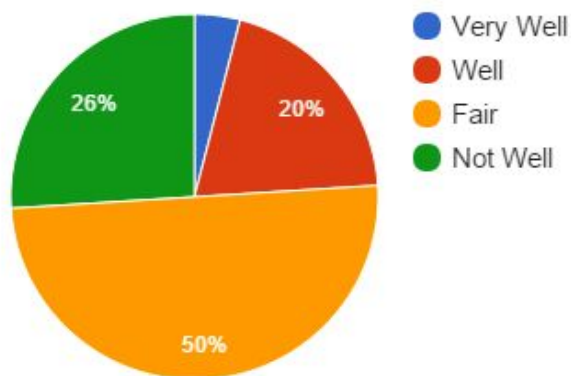
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community that most come from China, Korea and Thailand. However, because our interviewers were Chinese, Korean and Thai speakers, there may be some bias.

Nonetheless these three language groups are to be considered as prioritised languages when translating sex work related support resources.

Participants were asked about their level of English capacity. Only 24% said that they could speak English well or very well whereas 50% seem to consider their level of English is fair and 26% recognised that their English level is low. These self-assessments are subjective and might have a relation to their confidence with English as interviewers found that often the participants' speaking and understanding was different to that they stated in the survey. It is suggested that an exact measurement tool should be utilised in future studies for more accurate evaluation.

## How well do you speak English?



Further, the question for level of English was not divided into written and spoken English therefore this should be assessed in future studies also.

In any case it was clear that most participants felt they could do with better English capacity in sex work.

*"My English is very limited, I sometimes have troubles when taking and negotiating bookings with clients. One occasion, I had a client came in for a booking and had bit of misunderstanding. He got very angry and rude and I was so scared I did not know what to do"* (Sole operator, Thai, Cairns)

## **2) Migrant experience**

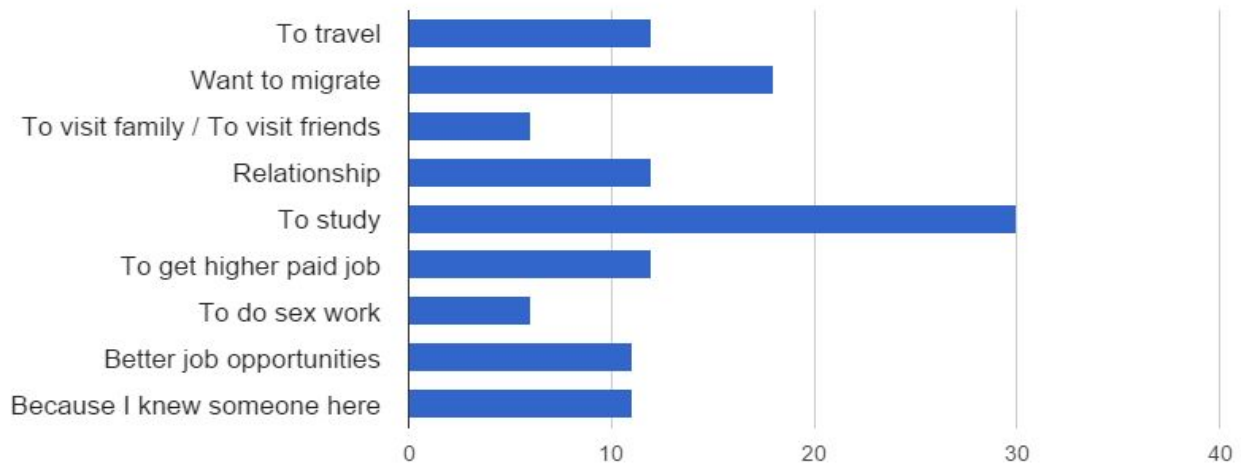
*Reason for coming*

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A number of different reasons for migration were reflected by Asian sex workers in

## Main reason coming to Australia

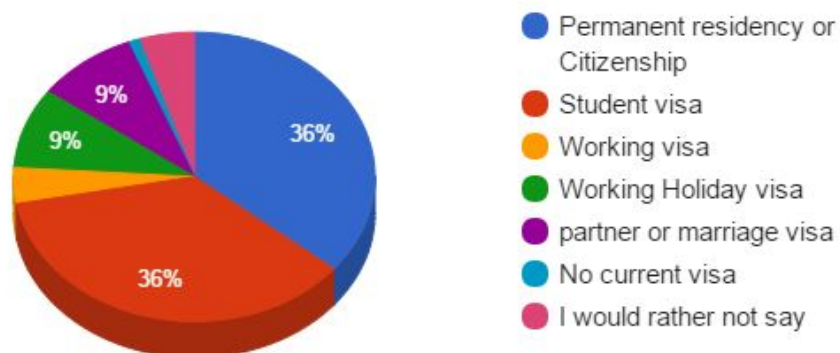


Queensland. The most common reason for coming to Australia is 'to study' followed by simply wanting to migrate.

### Visa status

Just over a quarter of Asian sex workers who participated in this survey in Queensland have citizenship or permanent residency and equally over another quarter is staying in Australia with student visas. The second most common visas are working holiday visa and marriage

## Visa Status



or partner visa which also allow one to work. The surveyors found that for these participants Australia is not a difficult country to get a valid visa to stay and work therefore taking risks with illegitimate visa conditions appear to be rare in Asian sex workers. Most of the

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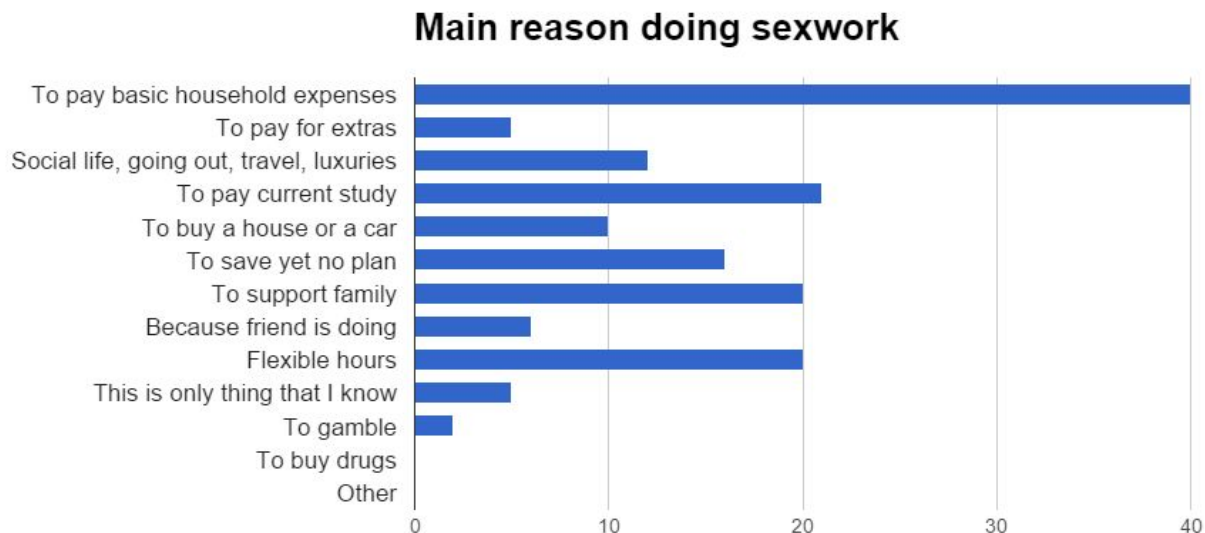
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respondents have a valid visa with work permission and they were open to disclosing their visa status.

## *Reason for sex work*

Participants were asked why they were doing sex work. 'To pay the basic household expenses' was counted as the most common reason for doing sex work. Following that the second most commonly stated reason were, almost equally, 'To pay current study', 'To support family' and 'flexible hours'. However, since many Asian SW / Asian non-SW use a student visa as a way of legally staying and working in Australia, it may be that they selected "To pay for current study" because they fear that their student visa status would be scrutinised by the researchers and there would be an expectation that they should spend their sex work money on study. It does not necessarily mean that they do sex work to pay for the study or attend classes. We feel that more qualitative research is needed to fully understand this issue.

Contrary to stereotype only a small % said they spent their money on gambling and none said they used it to buy drugs.



Just over 40% of participants are studying at the same time as doing sex work and just under 40% are currently not doing other work other than sex work.

## *Entering sex work in Australia*

Nearly half of Asian sex workers surveyed say they entered the sex industry in Australia through friends who are sex workers. It shows strong connections between Asian sex workers and if their work in Australia is better than their own country they will often

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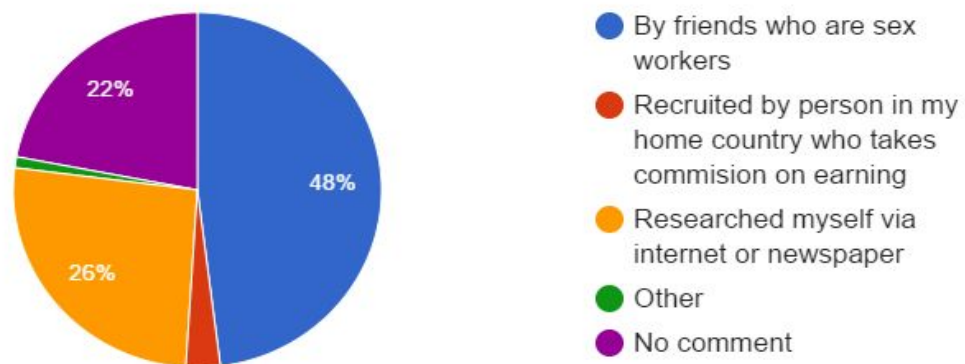
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recommend to friends and share information. The next common response is 'Researched myself via internet or newspaper'. However, the research found an interesting fact that 22% of people opted for 'No comment'. This is the highest 'No comment' response in this research and may indicate that this is considered a dangerous question to answer. Given the amount of media hype and policing around trafficking this is not surprising.

*"I have been doing really well as a sex worker in Australia compare to Korea where prostitution is criminalised and no respect for this work. I told my sex worker friends they are all here now. I helped them to look for a place to work and supported when they want to turn to private"* (Sole operator, Korean, Gold Coast)

*"My family pays for my study, but my life standard here does not meet the same quality as in my home country. I searched internet to work in massage parlors couple of days a week so I can spend for holiday or shopping."* (Massage parlor based, Chinese, Brisbane)

## How did you get into the industry in Australia?



*What is the hardest part of being a sex worker in Australia?*

'Lack of information regarding legal knowledge in Australia' was pointed out as the hardest part of being a sex worker in Queensland, therefore distributing more up to date and accessible information is a key to supporting Asian sex workers. As it is a service industry, unstable income is noted as the second hardest part of being a sex worker, followed by isolation.

*"It is not fair, some private Asian sex workers have a boss who organise multiple advertisements and provide security for them. That is illegal. I do not have strong financial support as them. I just try to obey the law here why do I have to compete with them?"* (Sole operator, Chinese, Gold coast)

*How do you prefer to be called?*

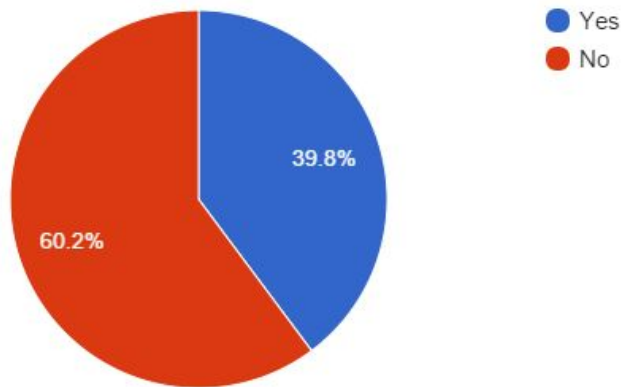
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Over half of Asian sex workers who participated prefer not to be identified or referred to as a sex worker. This may be because in many Asian countries, sex work is criminalized and there is strong social stigma towards them and they are often not respected.

## Do you like to be referred to as a sex worker?



*"I do not want to be called as a sex worker, I guess it is not as strong term as whore but still uncomfortable to acknowledge as a sex worker."* (Sole operator, Japanese, Brisbane)

This indicates a need for services to Asian sex workers to be mindful that respectful, culturally appropriate terms be used. It will inform our factsheets and promotional material.

### **3) Understanding of legal rights and responsibilities**

Two thirds of interviewees responded that they do not know their legal rights as a sex worker or were unsure. It is noted that people were not well informed, or only somewhat informed, about their legal rights and responsibilities as a sex worker in Queensland and that this is a large gap in need for Asian sex workers.

In light of recent changes to the Anti-Discrimination Act that allow accommodation providers to refuse services to sex workers we were interested in whether Asian sex workers experienced this issue but only 5% of Asian sex workers surveyed said they had experienced a refusal from accommodation or been asked to leave because of their occupation. This may point to a well developed peer based referral system and this could be a resource that Respect Inc could utilise with more community development.

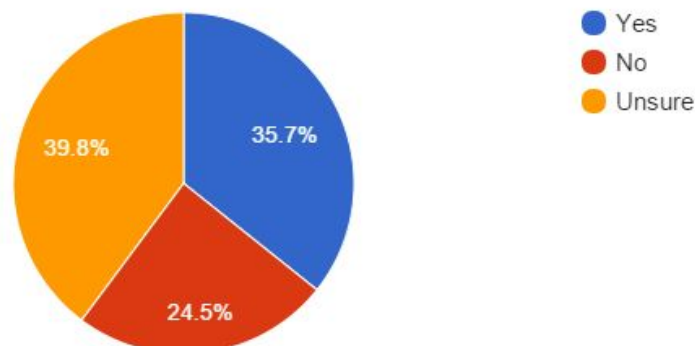


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## Are you aware of you legal rights as a sex worker in QLD?



The most accessible source of information about their legal rights and responsibilities as a sex worker is friends who are sex workers. It shows again strong connections between sex worker peers yet only positively functions when the information is accurate. Sex workers organisations and internet are the next most accessible source, therefore precise information on sex worker peer based organisations' website should be considered as the best approach.

### **4) Health and Safety**

#### *Sexual health*

Over 90% of participants answered that condoms are used for all sexual activities and only 6% said they did not use condoms for only vaginal sex or anal sex but not for oral. There has been a stereotype towards Asian sex workers (both from outside and inside of the sex industry) that usage of condoms in sex work is lower than among non-Asian sex workers. There is some anecdotal evidence that many Asian sex workers who have done sex work in other countries, have chosen Australia because condom use in the sex industry is relatively higher than some other countries. Nearly half of participants said they had never experienced difficulties when negotiation using condoms with clients.

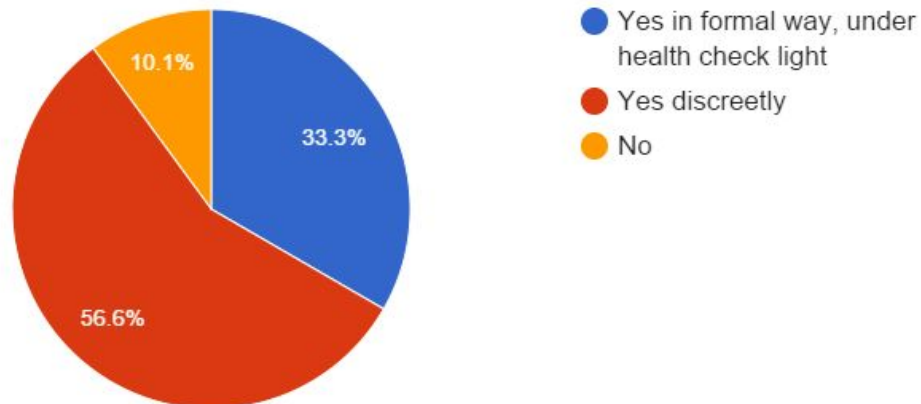
*"I previously worked in Japan for few years but safe sex is not practiced most times and I had to let clients to load inside me as a part of service which is disgusting. When I heard the earning is similar and the chance of using condom is most likely in Australia, I invested my money and time to come over here because it is safe for me."* (Brothel based sex worker, Korean, Melbourne)

Over a half of the Asian sex workers surveyed prefer discreet sexual health checks on clients for a better flow with them. And only 33% perform formal sexual health check under a health check lamp, as per brothel licensing conditions.

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## Do you check your client for STI?



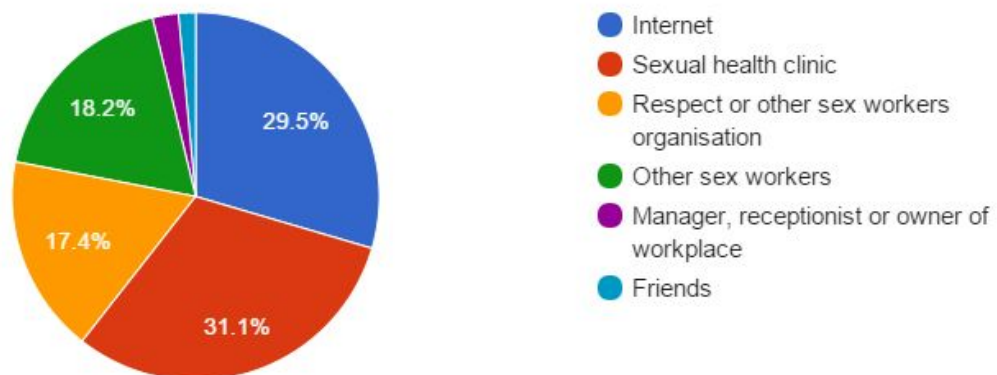
When Asian sex workers find any symptoms of STI on clients 70% say they refuse to continue the service. This presumes that often when they see anything abnormal but are not sure or do not know what it is, they have less ability to negotiate with clients and alter their service to less 'risky' non-contact services such as hand relief or toy show. This compares to 20% of others that mostly offer alternative services.

*"I do not do formal sexual health check under health check lamp as it is so awkward with client but I check discreetly through the booking before perform any sexual activities. And if I see any symptoms, I leave the room and let the reception deal with client."*(Brothel based, Thai, Sunshine Coast)

### Information about Sexually Transmittable Infections (STI's)

The most common way of getting information about STI's is a sexual health clinic followed by the internet. It is a concern that access to sexual health services are limited as only two sexual health clinics are available in Ipswich and Gold Coast where the largest Asian sex worker population is located. It is notable that GPs were not indicated as sources for STI information.

## How do you get information about STI?



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Even though only just over a quarter of respondents are licensed brothel based sex workers who are legally required to obtain a certificate of attendance of for medical sexual health checks every three months, almost half of the Asian sex workers who participated get a sexual health check every three months. And 23% get a check whenever they think they need to get a check up. Massage parlor based sex workers tend to choose less frequency due to their limited exchange of bodily fluid with clients as most times the service is only hand relief. This indicates a need for sexual health clinics to provide free, anonymous checks to be accessible for Asian sex workers who will obtain them regardless of the law.

When it comes to personal safety, 70% felt mostly safe or very safe when working, while the other 30% responded that they feel unsafe sometimes or unsafe a lot. It is still considerably higher than many other occupations for example like retails.

Hiring licensed security is very costly and less likely to be used by a sole operator, so many chose to work with other sex workers as a relatively safe way to increase their feelings of security even though it is working outside of legal framework in Queensland, whereas some only prefer to work in brothels or massage parlors due to provision of security.

*"I used to spend \$1500 a week for licensed security and when I added rent of private work place, my overhead was already \$2000 a week. I could not afford it anymore. Now I just work with my sex worker friends. It works better for me because it is not expensive and we are there for each other very supportive. (Private with other sex workers / Korean / Brisbane)*

## **5) Travelling for work FIFO/DIDO (Fly in, Fly out / Drive in, Drive out)**

Most participants who said they travelled for work said they did so because it was 'more discrete' (43.8%) or 'to be working away from home' (18.8%). With touring Asian sex workers, discretion is the key reason for travelling to work. For most of them, Australia is not their home country, however, people regard their resident city as their home town in Australia where they might have friends, family and people they know from the community. The Asian community is very small and well connected therefore they value a secretive work environment. It was noted during additional conversation that this response was found more regularly from brothel based Asian sex workers.

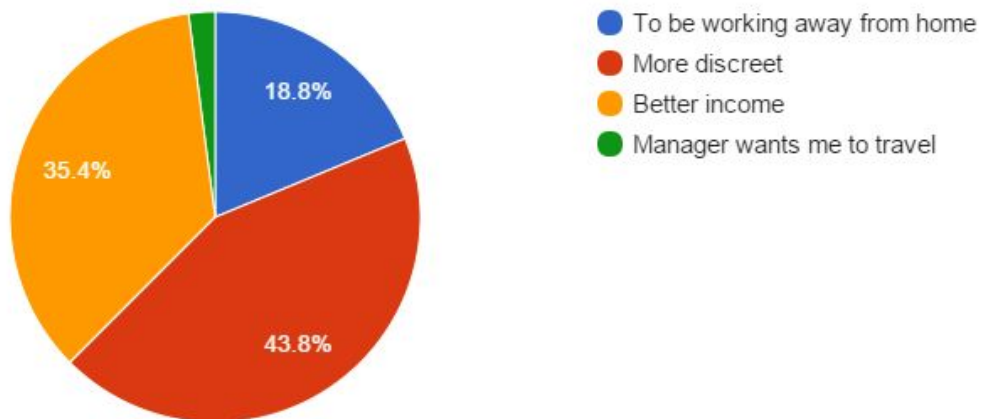
Next main reason was 35% who said they traveled for 'better income'.

Only a small percentage said they had been asked to travel by someone else, such as a manager.

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## What is main reason you travel for work?



Due to limited number of Asian brothels, occasionally brothel based Asian sex workers have difficulties when looking for a place to work because shifts in Asian brothels are often fully booked months in advance. Similarly private/sole operators have problems since they are not welcomed by many accommodation providers from time to time and on rare occasions are even asked to leave when the building manager finds out their occupation.

*"I live in Sydney but I always come to work in Queensland. It is really difficult to find a brothel to work as I have to request my shifts in months advance. The brothel I am currently working, I had it requested in January. And recently, I just put a shift request in one of brothel in Queensland. That place is fully reserved till beginning of next year."*  
(brothel based sex worker, Korean, Sydney)

### **6) Workplace rights (Brothel / Agency / Massage parlor)**

Under legislation in Queensland, all sex workers are entitled to the right to choose their clients, nevertheless just under half of brothel and massage parlor based Asian sex workers in the survey feel pressure when not wanting to see some clients.

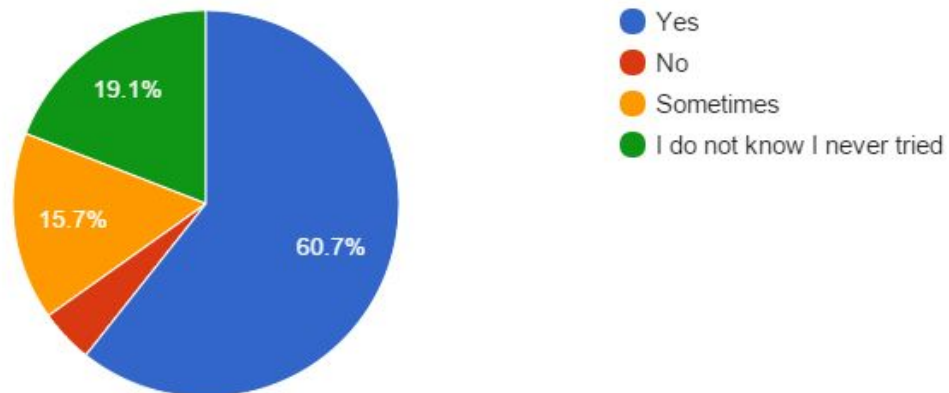
When asked if their workplace allowed them to refuse clients, 20% answered that they did not know because they had never tried to refuse clients in the workplace. A further 15% said their workplace does not allow them to refuse clients. This is a finding that requires more outreach to advise sex workers of their rights.

Sex workers were also asked about penalties in the workplace and we have found that in Queensland any kind of penalty system in sex work places is very rare.

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## Does your work place allow you to refuse clients?

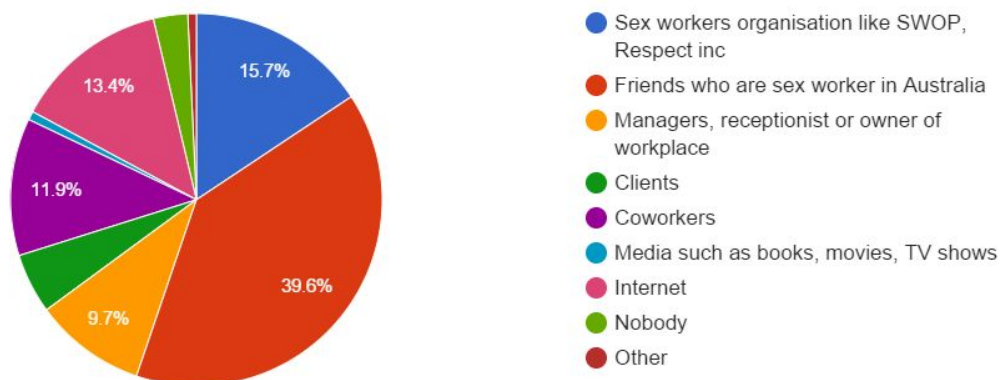


Supply of prophylactics is compulsory under the law in Queensland licensed brothels and there are laws which compel private sex workers to use prophylactics also. All licensed brothels in Queensland are supportive of using condoms and dams and supply them in-house. On the other hand, massage parlor based sex workers are not in the same position since not only is providing a sexual service from a massage parlour illegal but also the majority of their service provision is hand relief in which likelihood of contracting STI's is minimal. There is a lot of work to be done to level out the legal frameworks and outreach to Asian sex workers so that there is equity in workplace health and safety in Queensland.

### 7) Access to services and information

Very strong networks within the Asian sex worker community was evident with useful information being shared between peers and it was stated as the most common source of getting information to those new to sex work in Australia. Sex worker organisations such as Respect inc, Scarlet Alliance, SWOP was the next most common way to receive advice when they first started sex work in Australia, though 5% were left with no supporting advice.

### When you first started sex work in Australia, who gave you useful advice and information?



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Legal information about sex work was identified as the most wanted information they would have liked to have access to when they started sex work in Australia and sexual health was in second place. This shows Asian sex workers' inclination for sexual health care, its maintenance and concerns about working within the law. These are both types of information that Respect Inc provides, however we are only currently funded to provide peer education on sexual health.

Over 60% of participants knew of Respect inc before the survey as Respect peer educators had built contacts for a while before the research and had promoted regularly with SMS, Respect inc website, Asian community websites and social media.

*"Respect Inc very helpful when I had problem and always be there for me."* (Massage parlor based sex worker, Chinese, Brisbane)

However that leaves 40% of participants to this survey who had not heard about Respect Inc prior to this research and shows that more outreach needs to be done with Asian sex workers in Queensland.

## Conclusions

The Asian sex workers needs assessment aimed to improve our understanding of Asian sex workers in Queensland and identify the key issues and gaps in existing health and social provision. This report documents the realities of Asian sex workers on a range of issues, including language needs, reasons for travelling and doing sex work, understanding of legal rights and responsibilities about sex work and workplace rights, sexual health, sources of information and their knowledge about Respect Inc.

In this research we found Chinese, Korean and Thai are the 3 highest represented language preferences. They are to be considered as prioritised languages for future support material production and distribution. Massage parlours emerged as an important outreach workplace to access Asian sex workers. There is a need for more research on English language skill level, using less subjective methods to gauge both written and verbal English language skills.

We also found that despite many stating that they come to Australia on valid visas, Asian sex workers are understandably guarded about the topic of how they came to be working in Australia and what they spend their money on. Respect Inc needs more resources and time to build trust in the Asian sex worker community to fully understand these issues.

The findings from the survey shows that the anecdotal prejudice and stereotype of Asian sex workers regarding their sexual health practices, for instance that usage of condoms by Asian sex workers is lower than non-Asian sex workers, is not correct. A majority of respondents in the survey practice safer sex. Moreover, spontaneous and regular sexual health screen is commonly accomplished irrespective of sex industrial sector. This indicates a need for sexual health clinics to provide free, anonymous checks to be accessible for Asian sex

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workers who will obtain them regardless of the law. Respect Inc is currently lobbying for the re-establishment of sexual health clinics throughout Queensland for this reason.

This study indicates that informal peer education between Asian sex workers is an influential source of information when first starting sex work in Australia as well as for their legal rights and responsibilities as a sex worker. Further to this, the internet and sex worker organisations are universally common guidance, this is an eye-opening encouragement for a continuous undertaking that distribution of supportive resources on the internet by peer based sex worker organisations. To do this translation and cultural focus testing of translated resources is needed.

The present study has particularly identified that social and work safety in sex work is not ensured within the current regulatory framework for Asian sex workers who mostly work outside the licensed brothels, either privately alone or with others or in unlicensed businesses such as Massage Parlours. Respect Inc believes that everyone has a right to feel safe regardless of their profession hence the system should be flexible enough to enable them to do so.

It is important to realise the value of, and to put in place, equality and diversity assistance for Asian sex workers. Asian sex worker communities have given voice to their experience of understanding and accessing available services in Queensland and we hope this can act as a catalyst for change, improving both access and outcome in sex work relevant resources.

The current service provision largely meets the needs of the population although there are some areas of improvement that have been identified and gaps in provision.

Some particular recommendations include:

- more qualitative research with Asian sex workers, in particular regarding study and English language skills
- outreach to access the 40% of Asian sex workers who have not heard of Respect Inc so that two-way peer education can be developed further
- that programs focus on those things Asian sex workers highlight as the hardest part of working in Queensland and those things they want to know about, namely
  - information about sex work law
  - sexual health and STI's
- English language assistance, particularly with negotiation with clients
- respectful, culturally appropriate terms be used in our factsheets and promotional material
- that more outreach be conducted to advise Asian sex workers of their rights to refuse clients if they choose and other workplace health and safety rights
- outreach to unregulated businesses such as Massage Parlours
- focus on internet resources and access via internet with Asian sex workers
- review of the regulatory framework to provide equal working conditions for Asian sex workers
- re-establishment of sexual health clinics throughout Queensland

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This report presents an opportunity to build on the shared knowledge between peer based sex worker organisations and the Asian sex worker community.