

Peace Vigil, Union Square Park, New York City (March 19, 2021)
Photo by Antony Wong

A Willing Blindness: Race, Gender, and Class in the Atlanta Spa Killings

JOHN J. CHIN

“Can we embrace the other in our own communities?
What are the consequences when we fail to do so?”

IT PROVIDED SOME COMFORT to see the outpouring of support for the Asian women killed in the horrific massage parlor shootings in Atlanta on March 16, 2021. The flurry of media attention about my research with Lois Takahashi was also gratifying, despite the tragic origins of that interest. In October 2019, Lois and I had released a report, “Illicit Massage Parlors in Los Angeles County and New York City: Stories from Women Workers,” to share findings from our NIH-funded study, where we conducted in-depth interviews with 116 Chinese and Korean women working in sexually oriented massage parlors. Media accounts had documented raids, mass arrests and undercover stings of illicit massage parlors in U.S. cities and suburbs. Often lost in these accounts were the daily experiences of the women workers from their own perspectives. Our report explored what the women said about why they worked in these establishments and under what conditions, including their experiences with law enforcement. We also offered recommendations that might help to address some of the hardships they faced without further penalizing, traumatizing, or victimizing an already vulnerable population.

We had published academic papers from the study but wanted to create something that might be more accessible to policymakers, health and social service providers, and advocates. We had received some good feedback on the report from these sectors. But soon after the Atlanta shootings, the report got noticed by reporters and started trending on Google. Lois and I were contacted by a number of reporters. We were impressed with their sensitivity to issues of race, gender and class.

But despite the outpouring of mostly positive and supportive attention being exhibited, I had to ask myself, where has that concern been all this time? And, have we all failed these women? That we’ve failed these women as a society overall wasn’t a new realization—the main hardships they faced had roots in larger systems, such as racism and sexism, immigration policy, segmented labor markets, and even colonialism and war. But the shootings drove home in particular that we as an Asian American community may have failed these women as well, that they were let down by their own people. The warm embrace of the ethnic community—with its cultural resources, social capital, and a path to a viable economic future—failed to reach these women.

Whether or not the women were sex workers—which is its own complicated question—they were likely seen in their communities as sex workers, and thus rejected. In our study, women who worked in illicit massage parlors talked about participating in some of the cultural institutions where immigrants typically seek support, such as religious institutions. But in these places, the women dared not discuss the fact that they worked in a massage parlor, which they said would immediately mark them as sex workers. Even nail salon workers looked down on massage parlor workers, they said. One woman said that the people in the church she tried to attend treated her like a case of infectious disease. The women were painfully isolated, with very few people, aside from other massage parlor workers, knowing what they did for a living.

Invisible Community or Willing Blindness?

The illicit massage parlor world is not an invisible community. These mostly storefront businesses are there for everyone to see. In fact, they've been the cause of community complaints, often by non-Asians, which prompted police raids and arrests. I would suggest that the invisibility of massage parlor workers is the result of willful ignorance or an active wish for them not to exist at all. The women in our study who wanted to get out of the massage parlor industry said they needed legal support to adjust their immigration status, business loans and job training to transition to other lines of work, and social support, including from churches and other religious institutions that served their ethnic community. For the most part though, they didn't receive these types of support, and when they did, it came from outside of the Asian American community or from some of the few Asian American organizations that made it a point to reach out to these women. That much more could be done is evidenced by the sizeable contributions by many Asian Americans and others to the several GoFundMe efforts initiated after the Atlanta shootings, raising \$3.5 million within days.

Within Asian communities, discomfort with accepting sex workers may reflect a generational divide. Talking over the Atlanta shootings with a close Korean friend of the family in her 80s, I asked her if the incident scared her. She had told me previously that she and her husband had been so alarmed by the general rise in anti-Asian violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, seeing news stories of Asian seniors being pushed and punched, that they had altered their daily exercise walk path to avoid a quiet park where they could be isolated if confronted by an attacker. But my elderly friend's main preoccupation about Atlanta, at least at the moment, was embarrassment on behalf of the Asian American community upon seeing the bold signage for "Young's Asian Massage" splashed by CNN across her TV screen. To be fair, her reaction wasn't only about feeling that it was an embarrassment to the community, but also about seeing a painful representation of how Asian women are fetishized and wishing for that not to be perpetuated, a hurt that reached back to the Korean War and has continued to haunt her. She went on to recount how her Korean friend of a similar age was not long ago the uncomfortable focus of a white American veteran of the Korean War who worked at the golf course they frequented. He would flirt with her friend and make suggestive comments. It became so relentless that my elderly friend confronted this man on her friend's behalf, making the point that her friend was well-educated and married to a well-educated Korean man. In her mind this was her way of telling the man that her friend was not a sex worker from Itaewon who came to the U.S. as a war bride. It was important for her to make that very clear to him. In this way however, she was simultaneously trying to dismantle stereotypes while also furthering the stigma about sex work.

But change in attitudes within Asian American communities is clearly possible. We've heard many new voices promoting different messages, largely among Asian American advocacy groups that represent or work with sex workers. We've also heard refreshing voices from our Asian American elected officials who represent a new generation. For example, New York State Assemblymembers Ron Kim (D-Queens) and Yuh-Line Niou (D-Manhattan) have supported state legislation that would decriminalize sex work. A *New York Daily News* article covered their attendance at a "kink-themed fundraiser for [a] sex workers' rights group." Assemblymember Kim was quoted as saying, "it is an uncomfortable topic for many people and we want to help destigmatize this space." He went on to recount his own journey to supporting sex workers' rights: according to the article, "his mind was changed by what happened to Yang Song, a Queens sex worker who died in 2017 as she ran from or was chased by vice cops in Flushing."

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Some people feel more compassion towards sex workers when believing that they had no choice in entering that line of work, as with situations of sex trafficking. But the question of choice is very often tricky, and support for sex workers shouldn't be predicated on whether the work was chosen or not. Most of the women in our study said that they chose to provide sex work in a massage parlor. But they also talked

about having an extremely limited set of choices for earning a living wage, especially since they often had limited English proficiency and undocumented immigration status. When they turned to their co-ethnic compatriots for legal assistance to adjust their immigration status, they were often taken advantage of by predatory lawyers who spoke their language.

It's important to respect the choices these women have made, but most indicated to us that if they had better alternatives, they wouldn't be working as sex workers in massage parlors. There are some well-meaning social service organizations that have tried to help massage parlor workers move into other professions. But funding is quite limited, and helping them is more complicated than it needs to be because of the secrecy required as a result of the tremendous stigma these women face in their own communities.

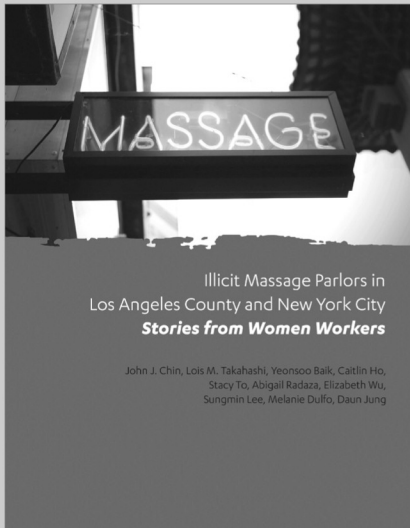
In analyzing the media coverage soon after the shootings, I was struck by a *Daily Beast* article that featured an interview with the 22-year-old Korean American son of Hyun Jung Grant, one of the spa workers. The article seemed to fly under the radar and ran somewhat counter to most news coverage that had been extremely careful to not suggest the women might have been sex workers, unwittingly playing into anti-sex work stigma. The *Daily Beast* article in contrast suggested that the massage parlors were likely sexually oriented based on some emerging information. Mr. Park, without explicitly stating that his mother was a sex worker, recounted how she for most of his life told him to tell others that she worked at a makeup parlor. Only after doing an online search of where she worked did he realize that it was a massage parlor that was likely sexually oriented. Concerned for her safety, he asked to see first-hand where she worked, and when he went to the spa he saw that "it matched the image in my head that I was worried about." Nevertheless, he accepted that "...here in America, she did what she had to do... She was a single mother of two kids who dedicated her whole life to raising them."

The Atlanta shootings were a wake-up call to society about the challenges these women face, and about the reality of anti-Asian violence. But it should also be a wake-up call to us as Asian Americans as we ask ourselves:

- **What if we as a community could embrace these women, without judgment and stigma, without fear that they would reflect badly on our communities?**
- **What if there were a more consistent outpouring of support and resources for these women from our communities—that warm embrace from the ethnic community that has helped so many other immigrants through rough patches. How could the lives of the Atlanta spa workers have been different under those circumstances?**
- **Can we as a community accept that a person might be both a sex worker and a loving mother dedicated to raising her children?**
- **Can we embrace that person in our churches and temples and in our own social circles? Can we extend to them the grace, kindness and material help they might need to move on to other things if they wish to?**
- **Can we embrace the other in our own communities? What are the consequences when we fail to do so?**

Whether or not these women were sex workers shouldn't really matter. Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Hyun Jung Grant, Soon Chung Park, Suncha Kim and Yong Ae Yue were women who needed our help, and we all came to their aid only after the unspeakable happened.

AAARI Lecture Video (December 11, 2020), <https://aaari.info/20-12-11chin/>



Recommendations

John J. Chin, Lois M. Takahashi, Yeonsoo Baik, Caitlin Ho, Stacy To, Abigail Radaza, Elizabeth S.C. Wu, Sungmin Lee, Melanie Dulfo & Daun Jung

Illicit Massage Parlors in Los Angeles County and New York City: Stories from Women Workers, http://johnchin.net/Article_Files/MP_Study_10.11.19_FINAL.pdf

Ostracism by the Asian American community cuts deeply on an emotional level because that's where home is. But all communities—Asian and non-Asian need to be held accountable. There are many ways that the larger society can help. The following are some of the recommendations that emerged from our study, focusing on four primary areas: 1) modifying law enforcement practices; 2) increasing employ-

ment options; 3) improving healthcare access; and 4) reducing the stigma of illicit massage parlor work.

These recommendations offer incremental ways to address the most immediate issues of overly aggressive policing, as well as some of the root causes of exploitation, such as the lack of economic survival alternatives. Given the highly politicized nature of the debate on whether the provision of commercial sexual services should be legalized, decriminalized, or eliminated—these recommendations seek to move beyond the stalemate and create change that is attainable.

1) Modify Police Practices and Court Services to Protect the Safety and Rights of Illicit Massage Parlor Workers

- a) In places (most of the U.S.) where prostitution remains criminalized, scale back law enforcement efforts that are focused on arresting illicit massage parlor workers. For example, the Manhattan District Attorney's Office recently announced that it would stop prosecuting prostitution cases and would also dismiss thousands of previous cases.
- b) Increase language interpretation services during the arrest and court processes.
- c) Maintain separation between criminal proceedings and immigration enforcement.
- d) Use social media to disseminate information about legal rights and procedures.
- e) Increase collaboration between law enforcement and legal/social service providers.
- f) Provide training to police officers so that they interact with illicit massage parlor workers in a trauma-informed manner and with an understanding of the needs and rights of immigrant women who have limited English proficiency.
- g) Change arrest procedures to prevent further trauma.
- h) Community-oriented policing should be carried out with awareness of the conflicting interests within communities.
- i) Local governments should consider having law enforcement take a secondary role in the oversight of illicit massage parlors and instead have other government agencies (such as health departments) take the primary role.

2) Increase Employment Options

- a) Shift the focus of social services targeted to illicit massage parlor workers to address their economic realities.
- b) Build support networks of Asian immigrant women who have moved into sectors outside of the illicit massage parlor industry.
- c) Provide English-language classes that accommodate the women's work and home obligations.

3) Increase Access to Healthcare, Prevention Education, and Health Screening

Illicit massage parlor work leaves workers and clients at risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Among the study participants, 7% reported having ever had some type of hepatitis infection; 7% reported having had at least one STI; 43% had not been tested for HIV, and an additional 3% did not know if they had been tested; 36% had not had a gynecological exam in the last year. Potential benefits of systematic STI and HIV/AIDS education include prevention of infection by decreasing unprotected sex and increasing use of effective pre- and/or post-exposure prevention methods (PrEP and/or PEP). Regular healthcare and management of HIV infection also reduces the risk of HIV transmission.

4) Work With Key Community Institutions, such as Religious Institutions and Local Neighborhood Organizations, to Reduce Stigma of Illicit Massage Parlor Work

- a) Work with key organizations within the ethnic community: Engaging in illegal activity that is considered shameful by other community members leads to harmful social isolation and lack of social support for these women. Shame- and stigma-reducing messaging from key co-ethnic community institutions, such as religious institutions, may help to change the conversation in the community.
- b) Provide information and education to local neighborhood organizations or councils (e.g., community boards): Local neighborhood organizations are sometimes at the forefront of initiatives that encourage police crackdowns on massage parlors, without having a clear understanding of the causes of illicit massage parlor proliferation and the difficult decisions made by these women to work in the illicit massage parlor industry. Advocates and local government agencies can work with these key community organizations to get their buy-in on the benefits of providing social services and increased job opportunities for women working in illicit massage parlors.

Author

John J. Chin is a Professor of Urban Policy and Planning at Hunter College/CUNY. He is also the Principal Investigator of the Hunter College AANAPISI Project (HCAP), funded by the U.S. Department of Education. His research has focused on the role of community institutions in the delivery of social and health services, particularly to under-served communities, such as immigrant communities and communities of color. He is also interested in how key community-based institutions in immigrant and minority communities shape community values and norms, particularly in relation to controversial or sensitive topics, like HIV.

Prof. Chin has been the Principal Investigator of several studies funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) examining health issues in Asian American communities. He recently served as a member of the NIH's Office of AIDS Research Advisory Council, and is the current chair of the National Advisory Committee for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Health Policy Research Scholars program.

Prior to Hunter College, Prof. Chin was a Senior Research Associate at the New York Academy of Medicine; an assistant professor of clinical sociomedical sciences at Columbia University (Mailman School of Public Health); and a visiting assistant research scientist at the University of California, San Francisco. Prior to his academic/research career, Prof. Chin worked for the Asian & Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS (now a Federally Qualified Health Center known as Apicha Community Health Center), of which he was a co-founder and Deputy Executive Director. He also worked for the NYC Commission on Human Rights and the NYC Comptroller's Office. He has a Ph.D. in Urban Planning from Columbia University, and M.S. in Urban Policy Analysis from the New School for Social Research.