

Behind Illicit Massage Parlors Lie a Vast Crime Network and Modern Indentured Servitude

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She was 49, a recent immigrant and deeply in debt to a loan shark back home in China when she answered an employment ad three years ago that promised thousands of dollars a month, but offered no job description. She realized too late that she had been tricked into working at a massage parlor in Flushing, Queens, where besides kneading backs, she was expected to sexually service up to a dozen men a day.

Some of the clients were violent, and the boss charged \$10 a day for her to sleep on a sofa in a room at the parlor where rats nibbled on her food. “The customers were very terrible,” said the woman, who, ashamed of the stigma of her former profession, asked that her name not be used. “After you perform a service, they would find an excuse to take the money away.” They would, she said, “do even worse things.”

In strip malls across the country, neon signs and brightly colored placards promise hot stones, acupuncture and shiatsu with photos of women or couples receiving relaxing shoulder rubs. But a traditionally Asian form of therapeutic relaxation with deep roots in big-city Chinatowns has spun off a different kind of massage parlor that has little to do with traditional remedies. It has exploded into a \$3 billion-a-year sex industry that relies on pervasive secrecy, close-knit ownership rings and tens of thousands of mostly foreign women ensnared in a form of modern indentured servitude.

The frequently middle-aged women who work in parlors with names like Orchids of Asia and Rainbow Spa are often struggling to pay off high debts to family members, loan sharks, labor traffickers and lawyers who help them file phony asylum claims. In some cases, their passports are taken and their illegal immigration status keeps them further in the shadows, with some of them rotated every 10 days to two weeks between spas operated by the same owners. Forced to pay for their own supplies and even their own condoms, many women must sleep on the same massage tables where they service customers and cook on hot plates in cramped kitchens or on back steps.

“We stopped thinking about just cages, bars and chains as the means of coercion,” said [John Richmond](#), the State Department’s top anti-trafficking official. “They are using nonviolent forms of coercion.”

The [recent arrest warrant filed against](#) Robert K. Kraft, owner of the New England Patriots — and the solicitation charges filed against nearly 300 men in multiple jurisdictions as part of the same case — riveted national attention to a stretch of Highway 1 along Florida’s Treasure Coast dotted with strip malls, gas stations and sapphire ocean views. Across the region, parlors were empty and many frequent clients were phoning their lawyers, wondering if more warrants were going to drop.

Law enforcement officials said there were an estimated 9,000 illicit massage parlors across the country, from Orlando to Los Angeles. The epicenter of this national underground is the bustling Chinatown in Flushing, in the New York City borough of Queens. Women — typically Chinese, but also Korean, Thai and East European — arrive at Kennedy International Airport, learn the trade and are sent out to places like Virginia, Iowa, Texas and Florida. Women are recruited locally through ads in Chinese-language newspapers or over the social network WeChat.

“Flushing is the center of this network,” said [Lori Cohen](#), the director of Sanctuary for Families’ Anti-Trafficking Initiative, which has interviewed around 1,000 massage workers over the past five years and helped the 49-year-old immigrant who was sexually assaulted leave the business after she was arrested. “They are showing up in different parts of the country, but all of them have addresses in Flushing, Queens,” she said.

The women are paid just a sliver of the \$60 or more the client pays for an hourlong massage. Their real money — and chance at a better life — comes in the form of tips, which they are encouraged or

A 60-year-old former massage worker from Taiwan, who agreed to be identified only by the nickname she commonly uses, Tina, said she was lured into working at a massage parlor in New York a decade ago by the travel agency broker who helped secure her visa to travel to the United States. “People come here and don’t have a place to live,” she said. “These places offer a place to live, and it seems like a nice idea. They say, ‘It’s not safe to keep your passport on hand,’ and they will ask to hold the passport.”

She was arrested several times before getting out of the business, and feels comparatively lucky. One close friend was spirited to Texas by traffickers, she said, had her passport taken and was forced to see eight to 12 customers a day. One day the tearful calls she often received from her friend came to an abrupt halt.

“A lot of the businesses that look like either nail salons or massage places, especially the places that offer massage, there are bad things happening there,” she said. “It’s 100 percent organized crime.”

The ubiquity of the massage parlors offers an accessibility and sheen of normalcy not offered by traditional brothels. And as the massage parlors have expanded even into small-town America in recent years, meticulously detailed review sites like Rubmaps have served as the Yelp and Foursquare of the illicit parlor business, with graphic anatomical descriptions of the women and explicit breakdowns of the sexual services proffered.

Even at illicit parlors, owners and managers can claim ignorance of the additional services offered by employees behind closed doors. The evidence gathered during raids and searches often tells a far different tale. The police say it is common to find ledgers tracking the number of “dates” women have had, as was found in a bust in Dallas in 2016. In one case in Kansas, a search of the premises yielded a notebook with handwritten Chinese-English translations that “included sexually explicit phrases such as ‘did you bring condom’ and ‘happy ending.’”

A federal law enforcement official, speaking on the condition of anonymity because this person is involved in active cases, said that the most common method for smuggling women from Asian countries was either a fraudulent tourist visa or a fraudulent work visa, such as for nursing work. Many came as students, then overstayed to work in the sex industry.

Many women arrive in the United States from China bearing heavy debt burdens and try to find work in restaurants or nail salons. But the money isn’t good enough for the five-figure debts weighing them down. The massage jobs are presented as opportunities for fast, easy money.

“They will talk about how they used to work in a restaurant and it was really hard physically and they couldn’t make that much money, and then they heard from somebody or saw an ad saying they could make a lot more money in a massage parlor,” said Leigh Latimer, a supervising attorney at the Legal Aid Society’s exploitation intervention project in New York.

One reason the Asian massage parlors remain so poorly understood is the extreme reluctance of the women to speak with the police and even with their own lawyers.

“Even though I’ve represented many, many women arrested in unlicensed massage parlors, because of the level of distrust of people working, almost all immigrants, almost all undocumented, they don’t trust even their attorneys enough to let them know what’s happened to them,” Ms. Latimer said.

Some fear retaliation by traffickers to their families in China, and some feel morally indebted to those who helped find them a job, said Chris Muller, the director of training and external affairs at Restore NYC, an anti-sex-trafficking organization.

“This is a powerful exploitation tactic,” he said. “Any favor is implied there is going to be a payment back. ‘Look at what I have done for you. I found you a job. I found you a place to live and this is how you repay me?’”

Small networks of spas are also common, and their ownership structures are complex and opaque. “It’s rare that you have a mom-and-pop business where they’re just running one,” said Lt. Christopher Sharpe of the New York Police Department’s vice section. “Usually if they’re running one, they have a second or a third business.”

Bradley Myles, chief executive of [Polaris Project](#), a nonprofit that works to combat human trafficking, said that the madams arrested on big raids like the recent ones in Florida — known as “mamasans” — are often women in their 60s and 70s who have spent decades in the sex trade but are usually pretty far down in the organization.

Above these site managers is usually a person who appears on paperwork as the massage parlor owner, but is often just a frontman running a shell company. The payouts from the shell company go to what is legally known as the “beneficial owner.”

“Very little is known of the behind-the-scene owners,” Mr. Myles said. “They are hiding behind shell companies, hiding behind mamasans. They are hiding behind fake people.”

In addition, the networks have groups of drivers that help move the women from place to place. Some networks are only two or three layers deep, others four or five.

“I’ve certainly seen indicia of larger networks and indicia of powerful transporters,” said the federal law enforcement official.

The Florida Department of Health disciplined 62 massage parlors or therapists last fiscal year, up from 14 the year before, records show. The agency receives upward of 300 complaints about unlicensed massage facilities each year.

Department inspection reports described women inside the spas living in tight quarters cluttered with essentials, including rolling bath carts stuffed with toiletries, shelves lined with coffee mugs and cooking pots and stashes of assorted snacks. The women slept on individual cots and in some cases appeared to keep their belongings and blankets inside locked plastic trunks.

Their IDs showed that several of them had addresses outside Florida, including in Flushing, N.Y.; Lilburn, Ga.; San Gabriel, Calif.; and Temple City, Calif.

Those who are arrested are not necessarily left to their own resources. When sheriff’s deputies in Martin County, Fla., were interviewing Lixia Zhu, 48, one of the massage parlor employees arrested two weeks ago, it wasn’t long before a New York lawyer arrived and identified himself as her lawyer. The lawyer, Baya Harrison IV, told *The New York Times* that Ms. Zhu used to work in New York and that her friends had hired him to defend her.

The county sheriff, William D. Snyder, said Ms. Zhu had tearfully told deputies and a public defender about how her passport was kept from her in a locked safe and how the woman she worked for once threatened her by brandishing a gun.

One woman in the Florida sting has been charged with human trafficking, after police officers conducting surveillance saw her shuttling two other women carrying suitcases in and out of a spa in Vero Beach.

Bob Houston, a former F.B.I. agent who now works as a consultant to combat trafficking, said that Thai traffickers often employ elaborate schemes to help women intended for the massage industry apply for tourist visas. The traffickers create false back stories, giving women the appearance of an established life at home, including a spouse and bank account, all to help them qualify for a tourist visa. They even produce fake diplomas from massage schools. The tab is usually \$40,000 to \$60,000, he said.

“They owe a bunch of money to the people who recruited them,” he said.

In December, [36 people in Minnesota were convicted](#) for their roles in a Thai sex trafficking ring that shuttled hundreds of women from Bangkok to cities across the United States, including Phoenix, Las Vegas, Atlanta and Minneapolis.

The women, referred to as “flowers” by the criminal organizations, were forced to work at massage parlors with no choice about where, when and with whom they performed sex acts until their debts were paid off. They were permitted to move around outside the parlors only with so-called runners working for the organization, evidence in the case showed.

The decision by law enforcement in Florida to focus on patrons of the establishments in such a public way rather than the women working there has generated a lot of fear among clients.

John Musca, a criminal defense lawyer with an office in Vero Beach whose website advertises sex crime defense, said he has received panicked phone calls from many men who frequented the establishments and are worried that the police are about to come knocking.

“There are a great number of folks who are on pins and needles,” Mr. Musca said.