

## Prostitution Is a Racialized Hate Crime Against Women

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Racists target the humanity of those they attack. In the Atlanta spa deaths, two Chinese women and [four Korean women](#) were six of the eight people targeted for murder by a racist white man. We wonder, who are the women who were murdered? If, as the evidence below suggests, some Asian massage parlors or “spas” like those in Atlanta also operate as brothels, then we also wonder: what forces channel Asian women into massage brothels? We know that 89% of women in the sex trade including massage prostitution urgently [want to escape](#). What were their plans for the next week or the next year of their lives? *How could we have left them so vulnerable?* And now, how can we do justice to their lives and their deaths?

Two of us are Asian, we immediately understood the implied threat of the murders: every Asian woman is vulnerable. That is the reality for every Asian woman because we cannot choose when we are viewed as Asian or as women. Fueled by white supremacy, anti-Asian racism has increased during the coronavirus pandemic, with bigots [blaming Asians for COVID-19](#). Even in Canada, with national leaders urging kindness and patience, we have experienced a [dramatic increase](#) in violence against Asians in public spaces – women and especially elderly women are targeted. The freedom of each individual woman is [curtailed](#) as we are warned to avoid parks, public transit, and other public sites of attacks.

Despite the pandemic, Asian massage brothels do a brisk business with sex buyers paying for the women inside. The violence, racism and misogyny targeting Asians in North American public spaces is distilled and intensified in the racism of sex buyers at massage brothels where sex buyers are shielded from public view and protected by public authorities. These men are paying for the women to gratify the men’s [racist and misogynist stereotypes](#) of Asian women as [submissive, exotic, or hypersexual](#) in a setting where the women’s lack of power is all too real. But the sex buyers are protected by the pretense that they are there for a legitimate service.

City officials in Atlanta and elsewhere collude in that same pretense, licensing Asian “spa” facilities while turning a blind eye to red flags that many of these businesses are likely brothels and trafficking sites. Gold’s Spa has a history of [prostitution arrests](#) and two of the spas are located in Atlanta’s red light zone where the sex trade thrives. All three of the Asian massage spas were [reviewed on a site called RubMaps](#), including reviews that enabled sex buyers to [obtain “sexual services,”](#) that is, prostitution. As the Atlanta Journal-Constitution [reports](#), RubMaps is an online site that encourages sex buyers to publicly evaluate the women in the “spas”; most of the men carefully noted the women’s ethnicities, ages, and breast sizes. All three of the Asian massage spas targeted by the killer “have dozens of reviews on RubMaps, dating back years, where purported customers describe [paying for sexual experiences](#) with staff members.” Reviews of Asian massage spas, like the three the Atlanta killer targeted, often promote prostitution in coded language that facilitates prostitution while evading law

enforcement, for example [instructing sex buyers](#) how to obtain FS (full service) at an AMP (Asian massage parlor).

The first two authors have worked as victim advocates for Asian women trafficked in massage brothels. We share Angela Hsu's [observations about red](#) flag indicators [of trafficking](#) from *inside* Asian massage "spa" brothels. These include 1) passport confiscation, 2) use of debt bondage whereby the women owe an exorbitant amount of money to the owner/trafficker, requiring them to work months or even years to repay the debt which includes ongoing deductions for rent because the women live in the massage parlor, 3) the women are provided drugs in order to addict and control them 4) constant surveillance of the women by limiting their access to transportation and the Internet and also by "chaperoning" their grocery trips, 5) denial of options to leave their "job" and seek an alternative, 6) bosses or pimps deliberately create emotional dependency in the women, 7) bosses or pimps limit the women's social contacts to the brothel's managers.

We spoke with Camila Zolfighari, former head of the Fulton County Human Trafficking Unit and former human trafficking prosecutor for the Georgia Attorney General's Office, whose descriptions of warning signs for trafficking mirror what was noted by the first two authors inside Asian massage brothels. Warning signs for trafficking in Atlanta massage businesses include: 1) The women appear to live inside the massage parlors and rarely leave the building. Groceries are brought in to the women and if they leave the location at all, they are under close supervision. Ms. Zolfighari explained that this level of control prevents the women from seeking help from concerned neighbors, anti-trafficking advocates, or law enforcement. 2) "Security" is ever-present; its purpose appears to be to control the women inside via covered windows, grates over windows and entrances, and security buzzers for entry and exit. 3) Back door entrances permit sex buyers to hide their activity and avoids law enforcement scrutiny. 4) Online reviews of women in the massage parlors describe specific sex acts that sex buyers can pay for. 5) The hours of the massage parlors are sometimes 24/7 or late into the night; these are not normal business hours. 6) The massage parlors are sometimes owned by shell corporations. They are bought and sold by the same owners in order to avoid licensing issues and to hide their identities after an arrest. Some of these owners are known to be members of organized crime groups.

San Francisco's mayor acknowledged in 2006 that although its Asian massage parlors were licensed, they were "[emblematic of a booming Asian sex-trafficking business that operates with near impunity...](#)" including pimps confiscating the women's passports, keeping the women in debt-bondage by charging exorbitant fees for food and rent, and fining the women for displeasing sex buyers. Two additional investigations of massage prostitution arrived at similar conclusions in [2019](#) and in [2020](#).

The City of Atlanta should recognize that many Asian massage "spas" are trafficking women and should shut them down rather than continue to protect sex buyers, as [Robert Kraft was protected](#) in Florida, at the expense of the Asian women who should never have been arrested. In a future article, we will discuss how a progressive law could protect women in the Asian massage brothels (by decriminalizing them and offering exit support services) while at the same time holding exploiters and predators (sex buyers, pimps, traffickers, brothel owners) accountable for

abuse and violence committed against the women. The Nordic Model law, implemented now in [8 countries](#), is widely supported by [sex trade survivors](#) and anti-trafficking advocates.

The global sex trade increasingly contributes to the dehumanization of all Asian women. When cities license Asian massage parlors, they not only abandon women, but they also send the message that Asian women's rights, safety, and personhood is secondary to men's demand for prostitution and the pimp/ trafficker's demand for profit. As an Atlanta sex trade survivor explained to the authors, "As long as places that are known for pimping women are allowed to function as high-volume legal businesses, these women will not have hope or feel safe. It gives a strong impression that the city and APD are turning a blind eye."

In the days to come, the public will hear that the only way to protect women is to decriminalize the pimps, brothel owners and their sex-buying customers. This is a lie that, if believed, has deadly consequences for Asian women. The Atlanta killings should not serve to immunize the men who harm us—no benefit should flow to the pimps, sex-buyers or traffickers. Rather, we need to abolish the racist and sexist practice of prostitution by offering women real alternatives to escape the built-in oppression that serves us up to men like Robert Aaron Long.