

Exposing IMBs

We all play a role in exposing IMBs. Government, law enforcement, the media, business owners, and the public all must work to expose and end illicit massage businesses. A shift in perception is needed to understand the harm caused by IMBs, and to recognize the exploitation of workers against their will is a crime. Services need to be developed so that victims can receive help and rebuild their lives.

Community-based awareness campaigns, focused regulation, and appropriately trained culturally competent service providers are key to the effort. IMBs must be exposed for what they are: Human trafficking operations that are often run by organized crime. Ending trafficking in IMBs is possible if we unite to reduce the widespread complacency that allows them to flourish.

Discussion Questions

- 1:22 How does Mei's situation make her vulnerable to trafficking?
- 1:49 What signs suggest this might be an IMB?
- 2:28 What barriers does Mei face that make it difficult for her to seek support?
- 3:00 What means are used to control Mei and force her to comply? How might feelings of shame and powerlessness play into this control?

POLARIS Human Trafficking Hotline

1-888-373-7888
or text **HELP** to **233733**

projectnorest.org



Across the U.S. illicit massage businesses (IMBs) are known venues for human trafficking. Hidden in plain sight, these trafficking establishments are disguised as lawful massage or bodywork businesses. Traffickers secure valid permits and licensure which help these venues appear as permissible businesses, when actually they are a front for exploitation.

Many victims are recruited with promises of legitimate employment. Traffickers arrange and pay travel fees, accommodations, and may help secure visas and passports. Victims have accrued tremendous debt by the time they arrive which is used as a means of control to force them to comply. Language and cultural barriers, and limited knowledge of rights make it difficult for victims in IMBs to seek support.

Overview of IMBs

According to the 2017 Polaris human trafficking report, trafficking related to illicit massage businesses was second in prevalence following escort services.

Polaris estimates that more than 9,000 IMBs are operating throughout America with a total revenue being close to \$2.5 billion annually.

(https://polarisproject.org/sites/default/files/Full_Report_Human_Trafficking_in_Illicit_Message_Businesses.pdf)

Exploiting Vulnerabilities

Like many, Mei was recruited to the IMB through promises of employment, a massage license, and opportunity to learn English. Her travel arrangements, visa and passport were secured and paid for by her employer. Upon arrival, Mei learned her job was not what she was promised and she was in great debt. Mei was trapped.

Indicators of an IMB

Key signs indicating that this may be a human trafficking venue selling commercial sex include:

- Clientele are primarily or exclusively male
- Women live on site in the establishment
- Excessive security: cameras, locked doors, covered windows, clients buzzed in and out
- Extended hours of operation, especially late-night hours
- Heavy reliance on tips

Other Indicators:

- Advertising on commercial sex websites
- Frequent changes in storefront signage
- Prices for massage significantly below market price



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Barriers to Support

Mei knows little English, is in debt to the trafficker, and is unsure of her rights or how to get support. Her cultural background may influence feelings of shame and obligation that the trafficker is able to exploit.

Lack of Regulation

Laws and ordinances regulating the massage industry are inconsistent across jurisdictions, and often vary widely even within a given state. This inconsistency makes it easy for traffickers to move locations and set up new businesses. Systemic gaps in oversight create challenges to those who would confront IMBs. Potential indicators of trafficking such as extended hours of operation, back-door entrances and buzzer controlled doors, may not violate ordinances, and may not raise any red flags to observers or regulators.

The A-M-P Model of Human Trafficking

A

Action: Inducing / recruitment / harboring / transporting / providing / obtaining

M

Means: Force, fraud or coercion. May include: debt bondage / false job offers / threats / intimidation

P

Purpose: Sexual and labor exploitation

Means of Control

Traffickers manipulate the fears of their victims. They may threaten deportation, violence, or arrest, or control workers through social isolation and restricted access to resources. They may exploit workers financially by offering fraudulent jobs and then demanding work to pay off debt accrued through travel, passport and visa expenses.

Mei experiences feelings of powerlessness and shame initially. She doesn't know anyone in the U.S., is not familiar with her rights as an immigrant and worker, and doesn't have enough money to leave. She fears what will happen to her if she doesn't repay her debts. She tells her family everything is ok and that she is looking for another job while sending home everything she can.