

PATHWAYS INTO, THROUGH, AND BEYOND THE ILLICIT MASSAGE INDUSTRY

*A survivor-informed survey
of women's lived experience*

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In partnership with:



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Executive Summary

- **Purpose & Scope**
- **Key Findings**
- **What This Means**
 - For service providers
 - For funders
 - For policymakers and law enforcement

II. Full Report

- **Introduction**
- **Methodology**
 - Survey Design
 - Recruitment
 - Translation
 - Survey Focus
 - Study Limitations
 - Key Terms
- **Survey Findings**
 - Who Responded
 - Who the Women Are Before Migration
 - Hardships and Gender-Based Inequities Before Migration
 - Housing Stability and Cultural Priorities Before Migration
 - Drivers for Migration
 - Entering the Illicit Massage Industry
 - Movement and Mobility Within the Illicit Massage Industry
 - What Happens When an IMB Shuts Down
 - Reasons for Leaving
 - Experiences With Service Providers
 - The Future Women Want Beyond the Illicit Massage Industry
 - Immigration Fears and Their Impact on Safety
 - How Long Women Expect to Stay in the Illicit Massage Industry
- **Conclusion**
- **Appendix**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Illicit massage businesses (IMBs) operate in plain sight across the United States, yet the women inside them remain largely unheard. They are rarely asked what they need, what they fear, or what they hope for. This Survivor Outreach Project is an effort to change that.

In 2025, The Network partnered with five service providers and surveyed 67 Chinese-speaking women who have worked in the illicit massage industry in the United States. This program was building off of insights from the report “Strengthening Public Awareness and Outreach Activities within the Illicit Massage Industry” that was published by the Office of Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) in 2024. Designed with guidance from Chinese-speaking survivor consultants, the project represents one of the first multi-state, survivor-informed surveys focused specifically on this population.

Rather than centering the legal elements of trafficking, this report follows the women’s lived experiences—from life before migration, to their arrival in the U.S., into the massage industry, and toward the futures they want.

PURPOSE & SCOPE

The purpose of this project was to build a deeper, more accurate understanding of the women working in the illicit massage industry and the circumstances that shape their lives. The study sought to clarify who these women are, the pathways that bring them into the industry, and the ways they move within it. It also aimed to document their day-to-day work experiences, their hopes for the future, the types of jobs they would prefer, and the specific support they say they need in order to make a safe and sustainable career transition. Ultimately, the project was designed to strengthen survivor-informed outreach, improve service delivery, and guide policy decisions that more effectively meet women’s needs.

To achieve these goals, The Network and its partners developed a 33-question bilingual survey that invited women to share their experiences in their own words. At the guidance of survivor consultants, the survey intentionally did not ask about force, fraud, or coercion. These topics can feel intrusive or unsafe during initial engagement. This approach ensured the project remained trauma-informed and prioritized trust, allowing participants to share openly about their journeys, challenges, and aspirations.

Our Partners: APAIT/SSG, Garden of Hope, Into the Light, Reset180, The WellHouse.

Survivor Consultants: Yunxi Wang, JingJing Ying, Tina Cheng

If you’d like to learn more about this report or explore ways to partner with us, please reach out at info@thenetworkteam.org.



KEY FINDINGS

1

Women in IMBs are older - and more experienced - than commonly assumed.

The women in this study were significantly older than public perception suggests. The average participant was 48 years old, and most arrived in the United States around age 39. Before migration, they held a wide range of jobs, including sales, factory work, restaurant roles, and small business ownership. Some women worked in skilled professions such as nursing, accounting, pharmacy, and early childhood education. Only one participant had ever worked in massage before coming to the U.S., which challenges stereotypes and reframes workers in IMBs as middle-aged migrant women supporting children, aging parents, and extended families.

2

Migration is driven by loss, violence, and financial pressure.

Many women described circumstances of profound instability before leaving home. Half had experienced divorce, one in five reported domestic or intimate partner violence, and 12% reported experiences of gender inequity that limited their opportunities growing up. These experiences often pushed women into the role of sole provider for their families. Financial pressure, especially the need to support children and elderly parents, was the most common reason for coming to the United States, identified by 75% of respondents.

3

Women enter the illicit massage industry very quickly after arriving in the U.S.

Entry into the illicit massage industry often happens fast. Half of the participants began working in a massage business within one year of arriving in the U.S., and nearly two-thirds (63%) started this work between 2021 and 2025. This short “pipeline” reflects the combined effects of limited English, age discrimination in low-wage labor markets, direct recruitment into massage work, and the absence of viable alternatives that can meet urgent financial needs.

4

Housing is stable. Work and safety are not.

Only 13% of participants had experienced homelessness before coming to the U.S., and many described housing as the first thing they stabilize upon arrival. Their preference to remain in familiar immigrant communities, like Flushing, NY or Los Angeles, CA, is rooted in the cultural concept 安居乐业, which emphasizes securing a safe home before focusing on work. Even after law enforcement operations or IMB shutdowns, women overwhelmingly return to these known communities rather than use shelters, which feel unfamiliar, stigmatizing, or disconnected from their language and support networks.

5

Enforcement disrupts but does not resolve exploitation.

Nearly four in ten participants had experienced a forced IMB shutdown. Among those, 40% moved quickly to another massage business, 26% remained unemployed for a period, and 35% shifted into other low-wage jobs such as restaurant work, rideshare driving, or nail services. These patterns make clear that enforcement alone does not create stable exits from the illicit massage industry.



6

Women dream of ordinary jobs and know what they need to get there.

When asked what they would prefer to do instead of massage work, women named roles in nail and facial services, food and restaurant work, childcare, certified professions such as tattooing or acupuncture, and small business ownership. They also described, with striking clarity, the supports they would need to make a transition. Their top needs were English education, stable immigration status, professional skills training, and help covering basic living expenses during a career shift. On average, each participant selected four distinct needs, offering a clear roadmap for service providers and funders.

7

Immigration insecurity is the strongest predictor of fear and silence.

Immigration status emerged as one of the most significant barriers to safety and stability. Sixty-four percent of non-citizens worried about their safety or life in the U.S. because of their immigration status, and women who had been in the country for fewer years were more likely to feel unsafe. When long-term residents were excluded, the average length of stay among fearful non-citizens dropped to just two years, suggesting newly arrived women are particularly vulnerable. Early access to immigration support may be essential in preventing IMB work recruitment or accelerating safe exits from the industry.

WHAT THIS MEANS

The findings from this study point to clear implications for how communities, service providers, funders, and policymakers can more effectively support women in the illicit massage industry.

For service providers, the evidence underscores the importance of reaching women early—particularly in Chinese immigrant hubs where newly arrived women often settle and where they are most vulnerable to recruitment into the illicit massage industry. Case management, legal referrals, and practical, culturally grounded education on rights and daily life in the United States emerge as essential tools, not supplemental ones. Equally critical is the role of trust: participants consistently highlighted the impact of patient, consistent relationships with individual staff members, suggesting that long-term rapport may matter as much as the type of service offered.

For funders, the data provides a clear roadmap for investment. Women named the supports they need with striking consistency: English language education, immigration stability, and professional skills training, along with financial assistance that can bridge basic living expenses during a career transition. Funding strategies that prioritize these areas, particularly those that sustain long-term, relationship-centered outreach, are more likely to produce meaningful and lasting change.

For policymakers and law enforcement, the findings highlight the limitations of enforcement-only approaches. While law enforcement actions may temporarily disrupt massage IMB operations, they do not, on their own, create safe or stable exits for the women inside them. Instead, enforcement should be paired by design with immediate, culturally and linguistically accessible services that can help women navigate next steps safely. Prioritizing visa pathways, early outreach, and education on labor rights and workplace protections can reduce vulnerability, promote safety, and help prevent trafficking before it begins.





FULL REPORT

INTRODUCTION

Illicit massage businesses (IMBs) are one of the most common forms of sex trafficking in the United States. Though they operate in plain sight, the women working inside them are rarely asked directly about what they are experiencing, what they need, or what they dream of for their future.

Because of language barriers, cultural stigma, and fear of authorities, the anti-trafficking field has had limited direct access to the workers in IMBs. As a result, most responses to IMBs have focused on enforcement, not understanding.

The Network exists to dismantle the illicit massage industry by cutting off the business model that allows IMBs to open and operate. We believe that shutting down IMBs requires understanding who is being exploited, how they are being recruited, and what would help them safely exit.

To address this knowledge gap, The Network launched the Survivor Outreach Project in 2025 in partnership with five service providers:

- Garden of Hope (New York, NY)
- Reset180 (Fairfax, VA)
- The WellHouse (Birmingham, AL)
- Into the Light (Arkansas)
- APAIT (Los Angeles, CA)

We also recruited three Mandarin-speaking survivor consultants, Yunxi Wang, JingJing Ying and Tina Cheng, women with lived experience in the illicit massage industry, who shaped the survey questions, outreach strategy, and interpretation of findings. Their involvement ensured that our approach was culturally aligned, trauma-informed, and grounded in reality.

The result is a clearer, more human understanding of the women in this industry.

METHODOLOGY

SURVEY DESIGN

The study was built around a 33-question bilingual survey, offered in both Chinese and English to ensure accessibility for participants. The survey was developed with input from Mandarin-speaking survivor consultants and clinicians who reviewed the language, structure, and tone to ensure it was compassionate, culturally aligned, and trauma-informed. Based on their guidance and to avoid creating barriers during early engagement, the survey intentionally excluded questions about force, fraud, or coercion. These topics are common in formal trafficking screenings but can feel intrusive or unsafe for women who are still building trust with the service providers.



RECRUITMENT

A total of 74 individuals completed the survey. Of these, 67 participants identified as women and met the criteria for inclusion in the analysis. Participants were recruited through two primary pathways:

- Direct outreach to massage businesses by trained teams (24%)
- Service provider client databases (76%)

The geographic clustering in the sample reflects existing service-provider networks and the demographics of the illicit massage industry. Of those recruited through service providers, 96 percent were located in either Flushing, New York or Los Angeles, California, two areas with large Chinese-speaking immigrant communities and significant concentrations of illicit massage businesses.

TRANSLATION

All survey responses were collected in Chinese and then translated into English. Translation prioritized preserving the original meaning and tone of participants' words while ensuring clarity for analysis.

SURVEY FOCUS

The survey explored a broad range of topics to capture the women's experiences before, during, and after their involvement in the illicit massage industry. Areas of focus included demographic backgrounds, migration pathways, entry into the illicit massage industry, mobility between establishments and states, daily work experiences, interactions with service providers, future aspirations, and the specific support participants identified as necessary for making a safe and sustainable career transition.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings from this pilot. First, the survey intentionally omitted sensitive questions related to force, fraud, and coercion. This decision was guided by survivor consultants and clinicians with extensive experience working with women in IMBs to ensure the approach remained trauma-informed and appropriate for early-stage outreach, but it also means the study does *not* capture the full range of trafficking experiences.

The sample size was relatively small, which limits the ability to generalize these findings to all women working in the illicit massage industry. In addition, the majority of participants were recruited from just a few geographic areas, with particularly high representation from Flushing, New York, and Los Angeles, California, reflecting known population patterns but also creating geographic clustering that may influence the results.

All data collected was self-reported, which carries inherent limitations related to recall, interpretation, and comfort with disclosure. Finally, because most participants were reached through existing service-provider networks, the sample may reflect individuals who were already more connected to support systems, potentially introducing selection bias.

Despite these limitations, the study offers rare and valuable insight into the lived experiences, needs, and aspirations of Chinese-speaking women within the illicit massage industry, and provides a strong foundation for future research and outreach.

KEY TERMS

Illicit Massage Business (IMB): Storefront posing as massage business that provides commercial sex.

Women: Survey participants identifying as female.

Survivor: As defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

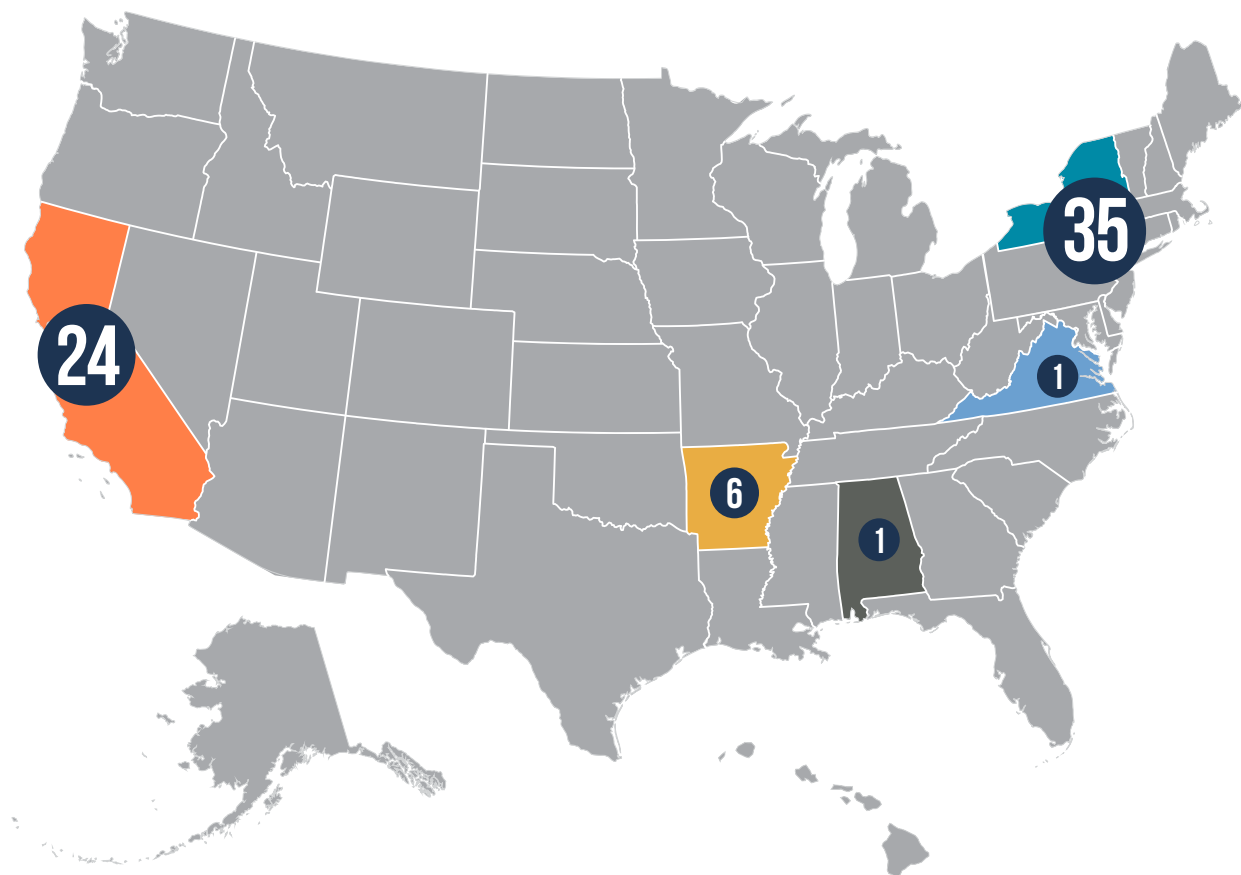
Massage Worker: Used interchangeably with "women." We acknowledge that many women surveyed or those working in this industry are not (1) licensed massage therapists and/or (2) W-2 employees of the business.



SURVEY FINDINGS

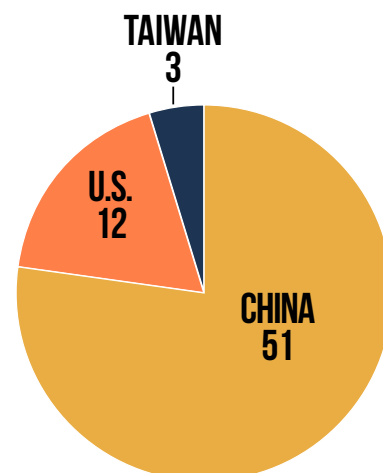
WHO RESPONDED

The women who participated in this survey were concentrated in a handful of states that reflect known patterns in the illicit massage industry and established Chinese immigrant communities. Of the 67 participants, the largest groups lived in New York (35) and California (24) at the time of the survey, with smaller numbers in Arkansas (6), Virginia (1), and Alabama (1). This distribution aligns with the geographic spread of service-provider partners and the clustering of Chinese-speaking massage workers in major metropolitan hubs.



NATIONALITY BREAKDOWN

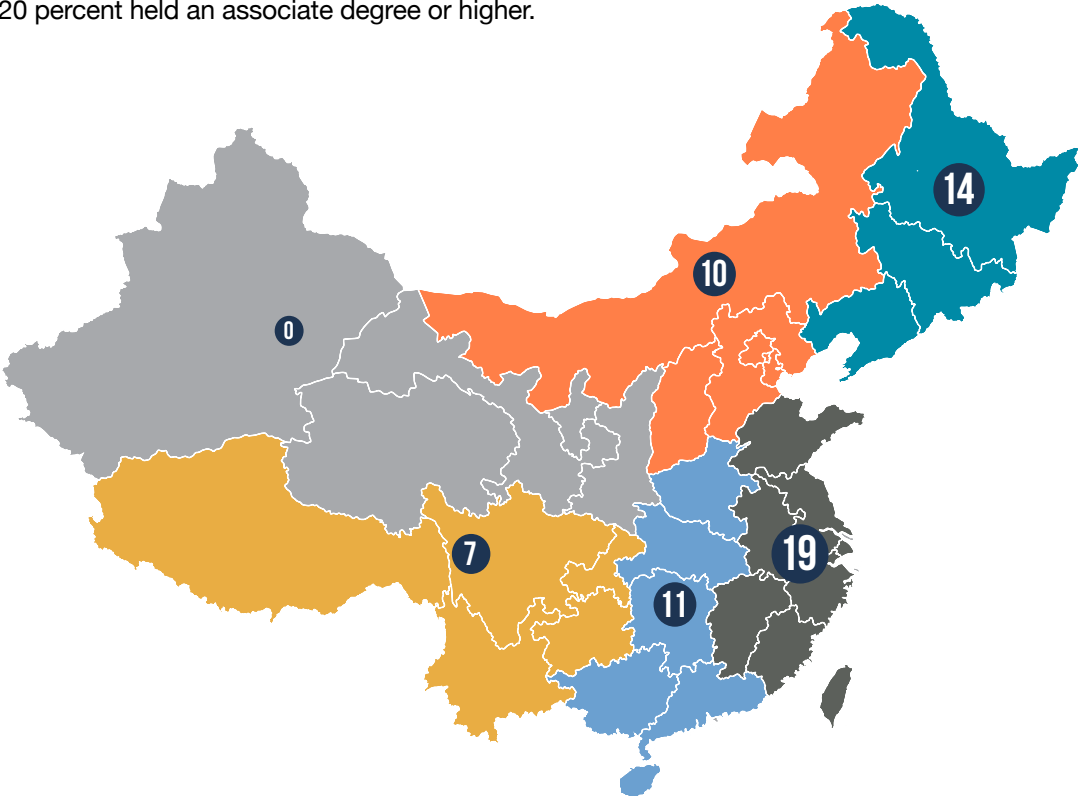
In terms of nationality, the vast majority of women (51) identified as Chinese nationals. An additional 12 participants were U.S. nationals, and 3 were from Taiwan. This reflects the well-documented predominance of Chinese-speaking women within the illicit massage industry and underscores the need for linguistically and culturally tailored outreach and support.





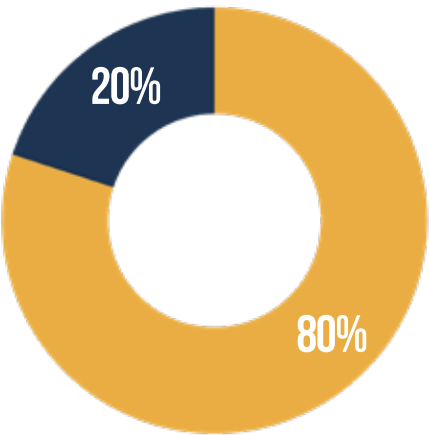
WHO THE WOMEN ARE BEFORE MIGRATION

The women who participated in the survey were, on average, 48 years old at the time of data collection, and they came from a wide range of regions across China. Of the 63 participants who answered the question about their hometown, 61 named provinces across the country, highlighting significant geographic diversity. Educational backgrounds varied, but most had limited formal schooling: 80 percent reported having a high school degree or less, while 20 percent held an associate degree or higher.



Regional hometown distribution throughout China among the participants

EDUCATION LEVELS



- High school degree or less
- Associate degree or higher

PAST WORK EXPERIENCE

Work experience was nearly universal. Ninety-three percent of women had been employed before migrating to the United States, working across sectors such as sales, restaurants and food service, factories, and small businesses. Several women had professional roles, including nurses, accountants, pharmacists, or kindergarten teachers. Despite this diversity of experience, only one participant reported ever working in massage before coming to the U.S., underscoring that most women entered the illicit massage industry with no prior training in the field.

A detailed breakdown of the responses with selected quotes to the question “What kinds of jobs did you do in China?” is available in the Appendix.



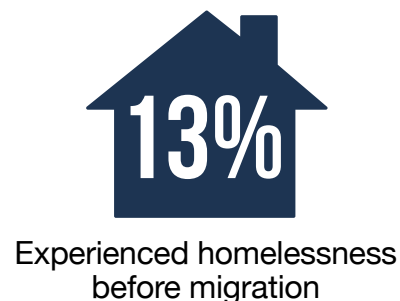
HARDSHIPS AND GENDER-BASED INEQUITIES BEFORE MIGRATION

Many women described significant hardships before migrating to the United States. Among the 40 participants who reported at least one such experience, half had gone through a divorce, one in five experienced domestic or intimate partner violence, and 12 percent reported experiencing gender inequity during childhood that limited their access to schooling, opportunities, or family support.



HOUSING STABILITY AND CULTURAL PRIORITIES BEFORE MIGRATION

A relatively small subset of participants (13%) reported experiencing homelessness before coming to the United States. Women emphasized that securing stable housing is a deeply rooted cultural priority shaped by the concept of 安居乐业, which implies the stability and security in one's living condition beyond just a house, linked to broader social and emotional well-being. This cultural lens helps explain why women tend to remain in established Chinese immigrant neighborhoods, avoid unfamiliar shelters, and rely on known community networks.



When an IMB shuts down, women often want to rush back to their “home” in Flushing or Los Angeles. Even if a woman doesn’t formally rent a room, it is fairly easy for the women to find a family hostel and rent a bed from the host within the area when needed. Thus, women don’t commonly report housing as a need or take shelter placement, even after a sudden shutdown of the IMBs they were working and living at.

Women often prefer returning to their previous communities rather than accepting free shelter offered locally after an IMB shutdown because (1) they feel safer in familiar communities where they can navigate without speaking English; (2) using a shelter may be perceived as a source of shame, indicating they have failed to support themselves; and (3) they are accustomed to providing for their loved ones and themselves, making the idea of receiving free housing feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable.



DRIVERS FOR MIGRATION

Women in this study arrived in the United States later in life, 39 years old on average - often at a time when they were already supporting children, caring for aging parents, or navigating major personal upheavals such as divorce or debt.

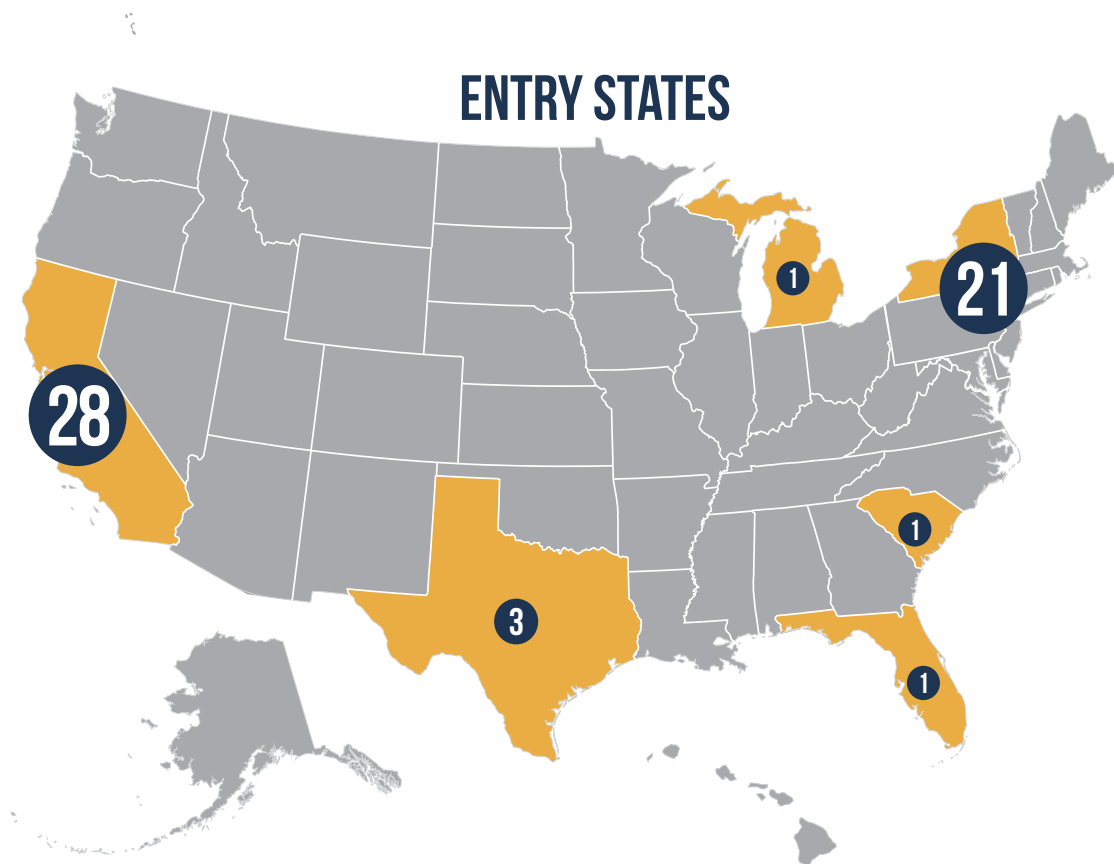
When asked why they migrated, 60 participants provided clear and consistent themes. Financial need was by far the most common reason, cited by 75 percent of respondents, often rooted in the obligation to support family members. Nineteen percent described seeking a change in environment or personal freedom, 10 percent migrated to reunite with family already in the U.S., and 9 percent referenced asylum-related reasons, such as religious or political concerns. We've included direct quotes from the women to underscore the complexity and weight of these decisions.

Women primarily entered the U.S. through California and New York, followed by Texas, Michigan, South Carolina, and Florida. These entry points align with established Chinese immigrant communities that commonly serve as first landing places for new arrivals.

A detailed breakdown of the responses with selected quotes to the question "Why did you migrate to the U.S.?" is available in the Appendix.

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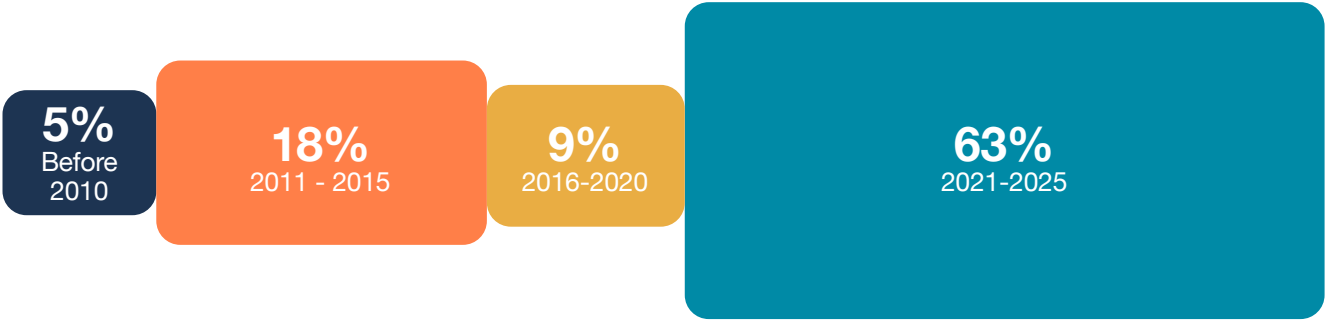
Average U.S.
arrival age





ENTERING THE ILLICIT MASSAGE INDUSTRY

Most participants entered the illicit massage industry within the last few years. Of the 63 women who reported when they began working in the industry, nearly two-thirds (63%) started between 2021 and 2025. Smaller numbers started between 2016 and 2020 (9%), 2011 and 2015 (18%), or before 2010 (5%). Entry was rapid: half of the women began working in a massage business within one year of arriving in the United States. This swift transition reflects urgent financial need, limited English proficiency, and the difficulty of securing sustainable work soon after migration.



However, the average start year was 2015 among the participants who were recruited through direct IMB outreach (n =14) compared with 2021 among those recruited through service providers’ databases (n = 50). This difference suggests direct outreach to IMBs may be effective at reaching longer-term or harder-to-reach individuals, supporting the massage workers who have never accessed social services despite being possibly eligible or those who have graduated from the services but remain vulnerable. Further studies with more balanced samples are needed to better understand and confirm this observed pattern.

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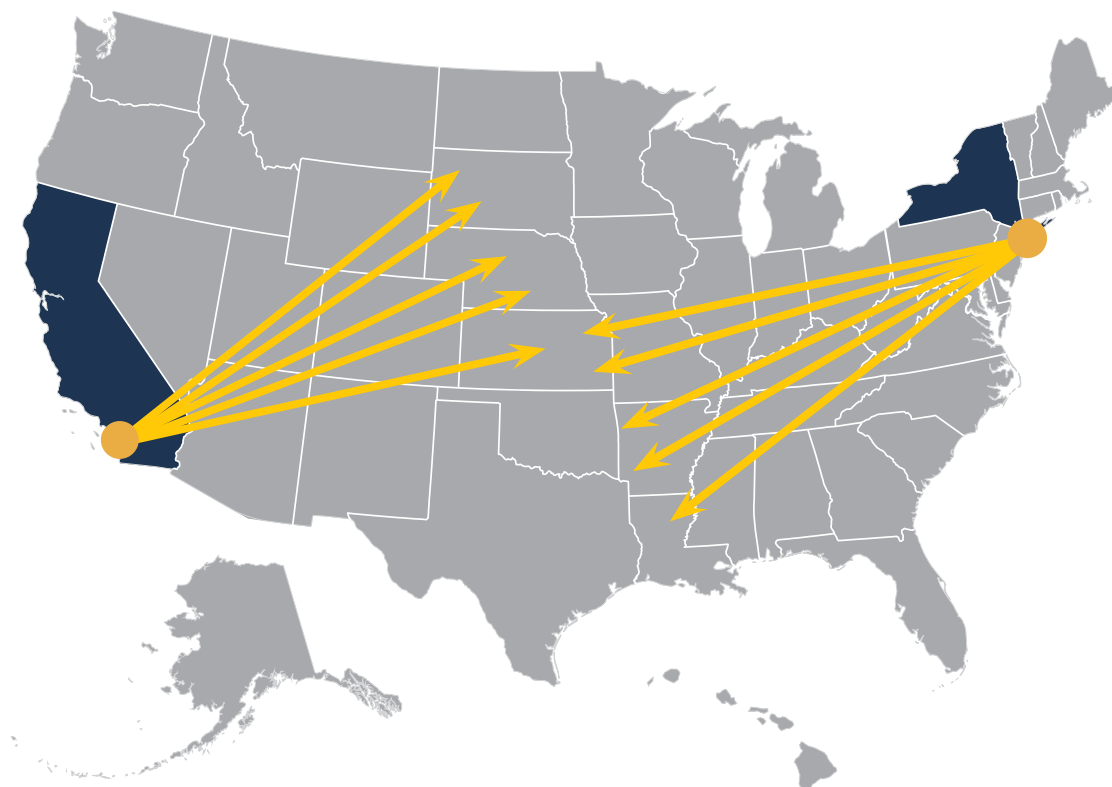


Entered IMBs within one year of arrival



MOVEMENT AND MOBILITY WITHIN THE ILLICIT MASSAGE INDUSTRY

Mobility within the illicit massage industry was common, but less fluid than often assumed. Fifty-two percent of participants had worked in a different state from their point of entry, yet 76 percent were still living in the same state where they had their first massage job at the time of the survey. Among those who entered through New York, 71 percent remained in New York; among those who entered through California, 67 percent stayed in California. Participants' own words - "I have never left" and "I've always been staying in New York" - reflect the strong pull of immigrant enclaves and the stability they provide.



THE STABILITY IN THE MOBILITY

Drawing on direct service experience, it is common to see women return to their “home” city, like Los Angeles or New York, for short periods of time. This time is often seen as a break to attend to personal matters, doctors appointments, or simply to feel a sense of peace being back in their community of the same language and cultural background. This is the rare stability they can experience within the mobile living context of the industry. For the women in the massage industry, migration to the U.S. has been hard enough and moving constantly is not preferred. One of the few things they can do to restore their well-being is to stay in touch with all the places where they regain this sense of home.

While our survey intentionally did not probe women for experiences of force, fraud, or coercion in the industry, the opportunity for breaks in work also illuminates some degree of independence the women may have working in illicit massage. This is a reality we must hold in tension, as this does not negate women's frequent and traumatic experiences of violence and exploitation.



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN AN IMB SHUTS DOWN

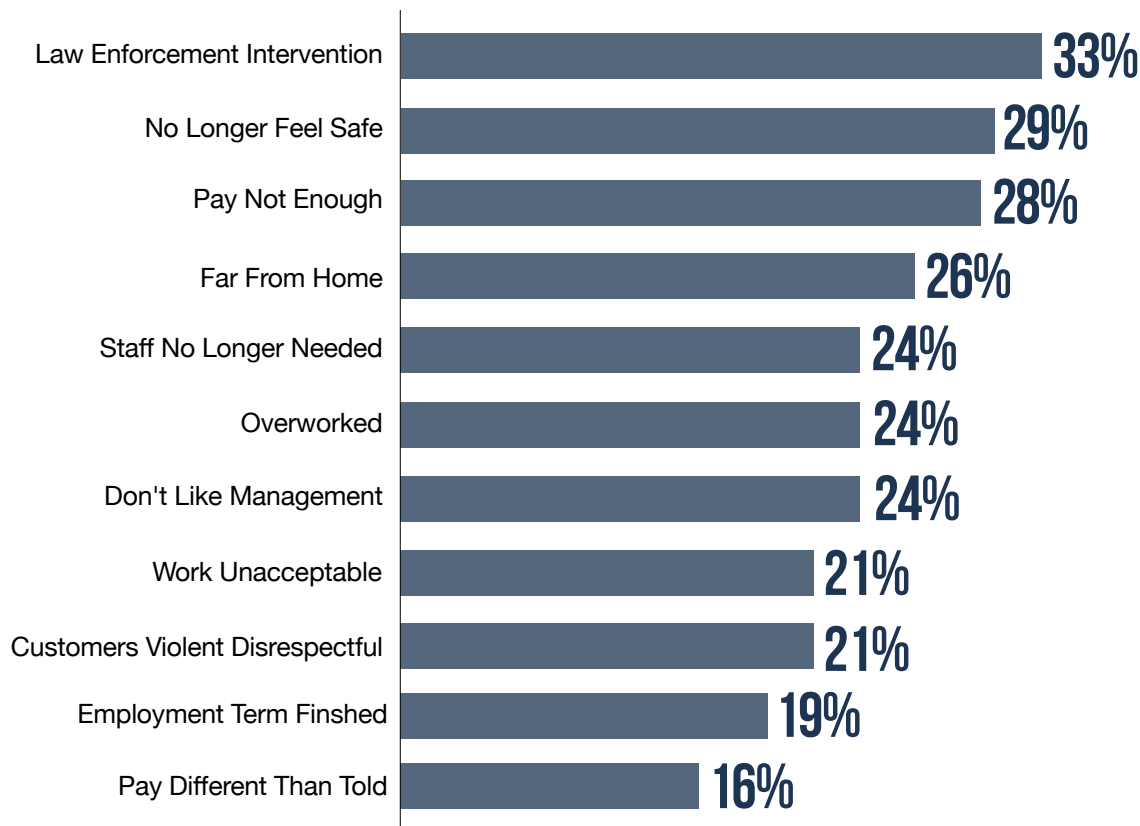
Nearly four in ten women (39%) had experienced the disruption of a massage business shutdown. Their responses illustrate that enforcement actions tend to shift, rather than resolve, exploitation. After a shutdown, 40 percent of participants moved to another massage business, 26 percent experienced a period of unemployment, and 35 percent transitioned into non-massage jobs such as restaurant work, rideshare driving, or nail services. These patterns make clear that enforcement alone does not create stable exits from the illicit massage industry.

A detailed breakdown of the responses with selected quotes to the question “Where did you go after a storefront closure?” is available in the Appendix.



REASONS FOR LEAVING

When asked what factors influenced their decision to leave a massage business, 58 participants responded and each participant selected an average of three reasons each, reflecting the overlapping pressures they face. These reasons included law enforcement intervention, pay inconsistencies, unsafe conditions, distance from home, and other workplace-related concerns. The variety and frequency of selected factors highlight how instability and lack of agency shape women’s mobility within the illicit massage industry.



Based on the above data and direct service experiences, we underscore the following work experiences voiced by the survey participants:



Law enforcement intervention is the most major disruptive strategy in shutting down IMBs or triggering a job change, whether it is moving to another massage business, staying unemployed, or transitioning to another non-massage job.



“No Longer Feel Safe” was the second most frequently selected reason. The women tend to choose to “flee” after a violent incident occurs at a business and they likely choose to return to their home city, as mentioned in previous sections. On one hand, they know the boss is less likely to step up for them. On the other hand, they are not familiar with the reporting procedures, nor are they able to communicate with the police or other professionals in English. In addition, it takes extra time and energy to finish all the processes without the guarantee of being compensated for their loss. Women often think “it’s not worth it to report.” In an ideal scenario, we would love for these women to be connected with local service providers and can reach out when they need to. Because no one can predict when the next incident will happen, we strongly recommend starting to establish relationships as early as one can. Trauma-informed and strategic direct outreach is an effective strategy to mitigate the gap.



The amount of pay is a critical factor influencing the workers’ choice and low payment is not able to retain them. It’s important for service providers to understand the needs of the women and be aware of the financial gaps, so as to tailor services, particularly about labor rights, education on safe work, and retention strategies.



“Far From Home” was the fourth most frequently selected reason. In reference to the cultural concept of “安居乐业,” being far from home is neither sustainable nor safe for the women, even though some move frequently.



Although “Pay Different Than Told” was the least selected reason among all options this time, pay difference remains to be a critical risk factor to identify exploitation, especially for the women working in IMBs because they lack the knowledge and English fluency to leave an IMB without additional help. We call for greater attention to the need for a culturally-responsive, trauma-informed and industry-specific trafficking identification approach for this population. While women in the illicit massage industry may recognize that their recruiter or employer has been dishonest about the earnings, they may not perceive this as a sign of trafficking or as an immediate safety red flag. Even after they realize the lies and want to leave early, they may be at further risk of being exploited because they need to stay longer or work more to make up for the travel and other costs spent to come to this IMB. Therefore, psychoeducation about the definition of human trafficking within the U.S. context, explaining power and control, as well as differentiating between cultural norms and laws is powerful to build rapport and trust with the women during early engagement.



EXPERIENCES WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS

Nearly two-thirds of women (63%) had received support from a service provider. They described a wide range of helpful services, most commonly case management and legal assistance (76%), followed by mental health support (43%), social support from peers or community programs (30%), awareness education on rights or safety (19%), and cash or rental assistance (19%). Many emphasized the importance of trust, citing warm, patient

“Many participants shared that APAIT/SSG's support group helped them feel less alone and gave them practical tools through activities like self-defense workshops, grounding exercises, and gentle hiking. APAIT/SSG's support group integrates structured psychoeducation, skills-based activities, and facilitated discussions, allowing clinical staff to engage participants in ways that strengthen emotional stabilization and resilience building.

- Shanshan Duan, APAIT

Although it was not a formal service being provided, data showed the rapport between the women and staff members played a critical role in making the services helpful. The quote below from a woman working with Garden of Hope illustrates this:

“The staff are very professional and patient... We talked a few times and every time I remembered her tender and warm voice, I felt less afraid. She shared a lot of things that I did not know before, such as legal knowledge, things to be aware of in daily life, and the risks to avoid in work. I appreciated her a lot.”

“Outreach is all about building rapport. Show the community there are certain agencies, certain people who came for them, who want to provide for them, and don't ask anything from them.

- Ruoxi Chen, Garden of Hope

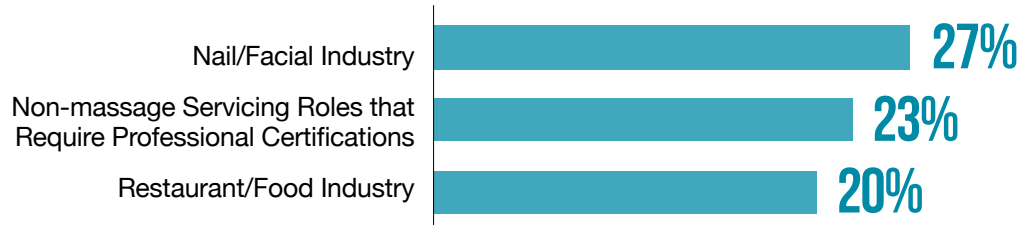
A detailed breakdown of the responses with selected quotes to the question “What is the most helpful service you have received from a service provider?” is available in the Appendix.





THE FUTURE WOMEN WANT BEYOND THE ILLICIT MASSAGE INDUSTRY

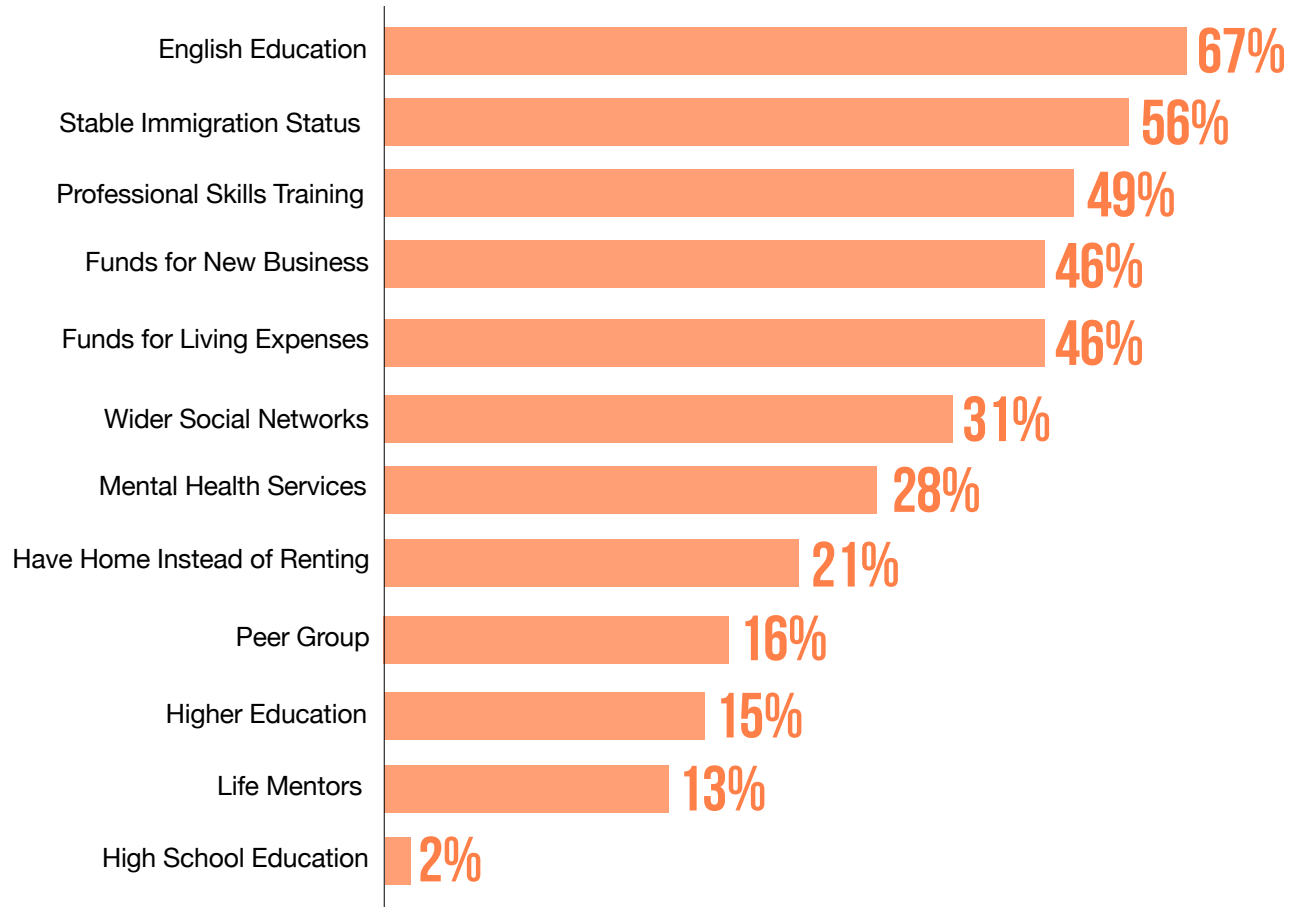
When asked what kind of work they hoped to do instead of massage, 56 participants (84%) responded to the question. Women described a wide spectrum of everyday jobs: nail and facial services, restaurant work, childcare, tattoo artistry, acupuncture, insurance roles, and small business ownership. Their aspirations reflect clear, grounded visions of stability and contribution. Below are the top three trends that emerged:



A detailed breakdown of the responses with selected quotes to the question “What kinds of jobs do you want to take instead of massage in the U.S.?” is available in the Appendix.

NEEDS FOR CAREER CHANGE

Women also identified what they need in order to transition. Sixty-one participants responded and each participant selected an average of four distinct needs. English classes, stable immigration status, skills training, and funds to cover basic expenses are mostly selected needs during a career transition. These identified needs form a clear roadmap for effective program design.



Based on the above data and direct service experiences, we underscore the following career change needs voiced by the survey participants:



More tailored, easy-to-access services are needed to help the massage workers be equipped with the desired skills in order to make a career change.



Dream big with the massage workers when considering alternative job options or planning for economic empowerment initiatives with this population.

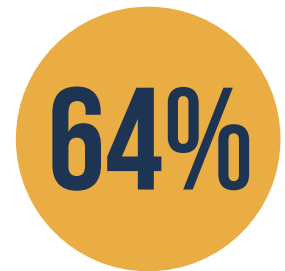


Implementing awareness education on labor rights and the U.S. job market as early as possible to maximize the impact. Strong partnerships between the anti-trafficking service providers and community programs, particularly those serving new migrants, may effectively influence migrants' career choices and potentially prevent human trafficking in the illicit massage industry.

IMMIGRATION FEARS AND THEIR IMPACT ON SAFETY

Immigration insecurity emerged as one of the strongest predictors of fear and instability. Among the 60 women who responded to this question, 64 percent of non-citizens worried about their safety or life in the United States because of their immigration status. Women who had been in the U.S. for a shorter time were far more likely to feel unsafe; when long-term residents were removed from analysis, the average length of stay among fearful non-citizens dropped to just two years. These findings suggest that newly arrived women may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation and that early screening and immigration assistance is a critical intervention point.

A comparison of the participants' average length of stay in the U.S.:



Non-citizen participants reported worrying about their safety or life in the U.S. because of their immigration status



HOW LONG WOMEN EXPECT TO STAY IN THE ILLICIT MASSAGE INDUSTRY

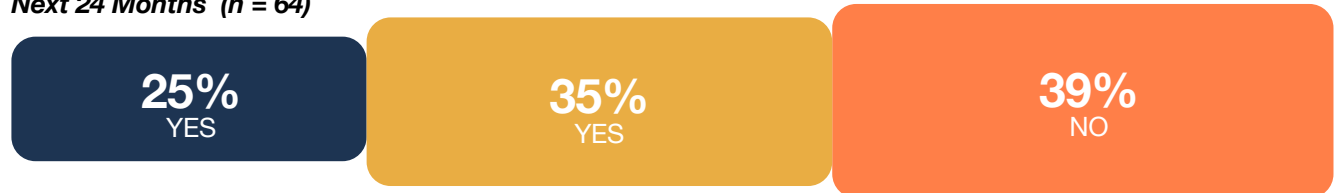
Participants were also asked whether they saw themselves continuing massage work in the near future. Their responses showed a wide range of expectations and levels of stability. About one-third of women did not expect to remain in the illicit massage industry within the next year or two, indicating a clear desire to transition out when possible. A smaller group expected to continue only in the short term, while another portion anticipated remaining in the industry for both the next 6–12 months and the next two years.

Although these patterns were not statistically significant, they reveal important variation in how women see their futures - reflecting differences in financial pressure, immigration status, available alternatives, and levels of support.

Next 6-12 Months (n = 63)



Next 24 Months (n = 64)



CONCLUSION

The findings from this pilot reveal a clear and nuanced portrait of middle-aged migrant women who are navigating profound loss, financial pressure, and safety concerns while striving to build stable, meaningful lives in the United States. Across their stories, a consistent message emerges: they are extremely resilient and capable. They want ordinary jobs and the chance to support their loved ones and sustain themselves with dignity.

They also articulate, with striking clarity, what they need to move toward that future. English language education, immigration stability, professional skills training, and modest financial support during a transition period were the most commonly identified requirements for leaving the illicit massage industry. Their responses make it clear that the barriers they face are structural, not personal.

The study underscores that enforcement alone cannot break the cycle of exploitation. While law enforcement actions may disrupt individual businesses, they do not create safe or sustainable pathways forward unless paired with culturally and linguistically accessible support. What women repeatedly emphasize that makes a difference is early outreach, trust-based relationships, and tailored services that reflect their cultural context and lived experiences.

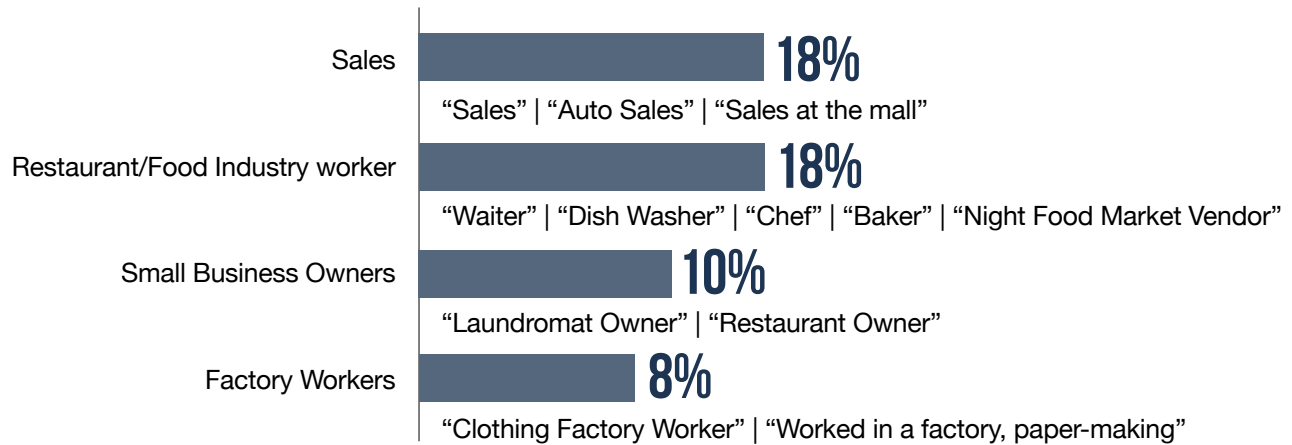
With sustained collaboration, adequate resources, and targeted investment in the areas women themselves identify as critical, it is possible to build interventions that not only disrupt exploitation but prevent it. This study offers a strong foundation for that work and points toward a future in which women can thrive beyond the illicit massage industry.



APPENDIX

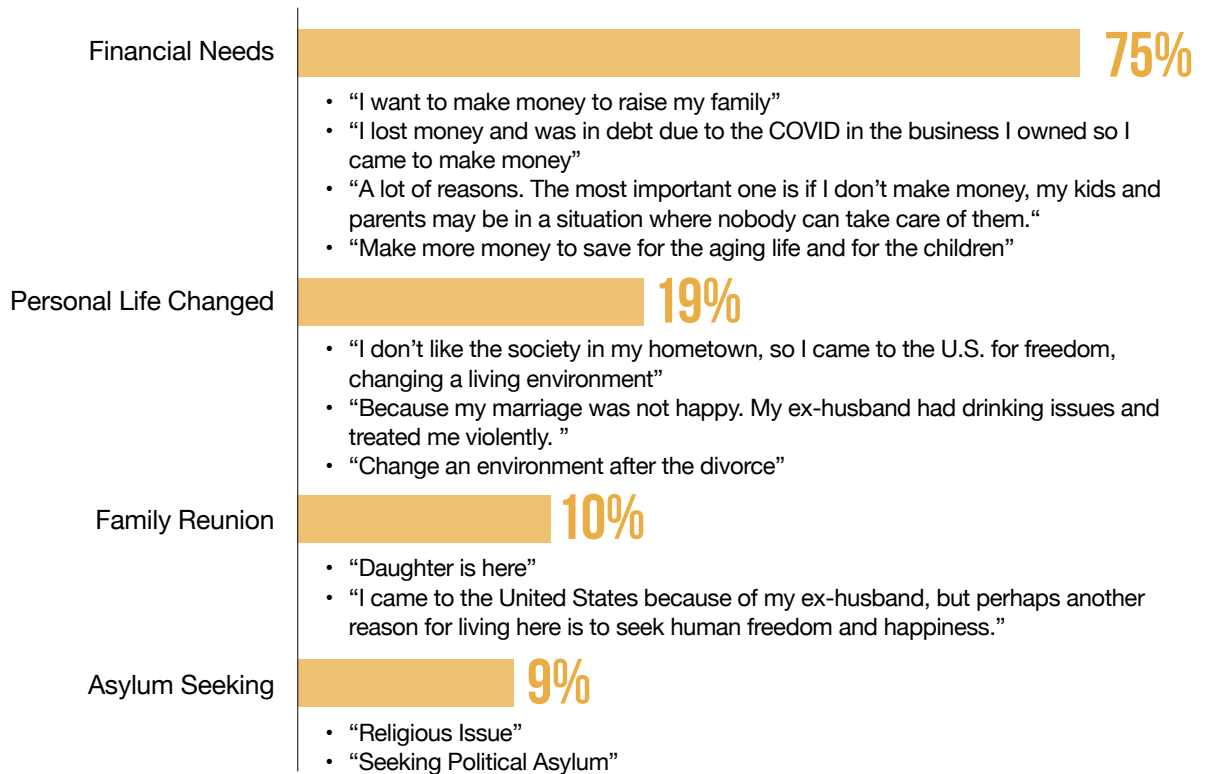
WHO THE WOMEN ARE BEFORE MIGRATION

Sixty-two participants responded to the question “What kinds of jobs did you do in China?” and the following trends emerged:



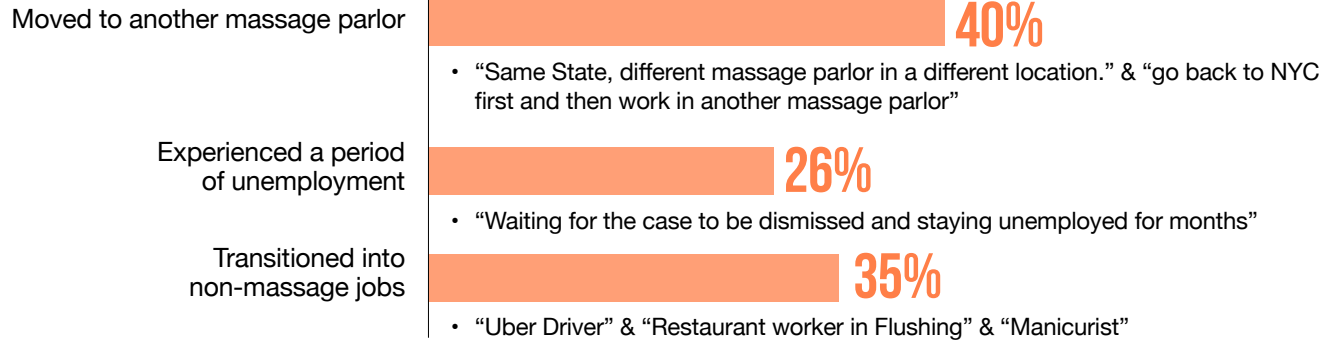
DRIVERS FOR MIGRATION

Sixty participants responded to the question “Why did you migrate to the U.S.?” and the following trends emerged:



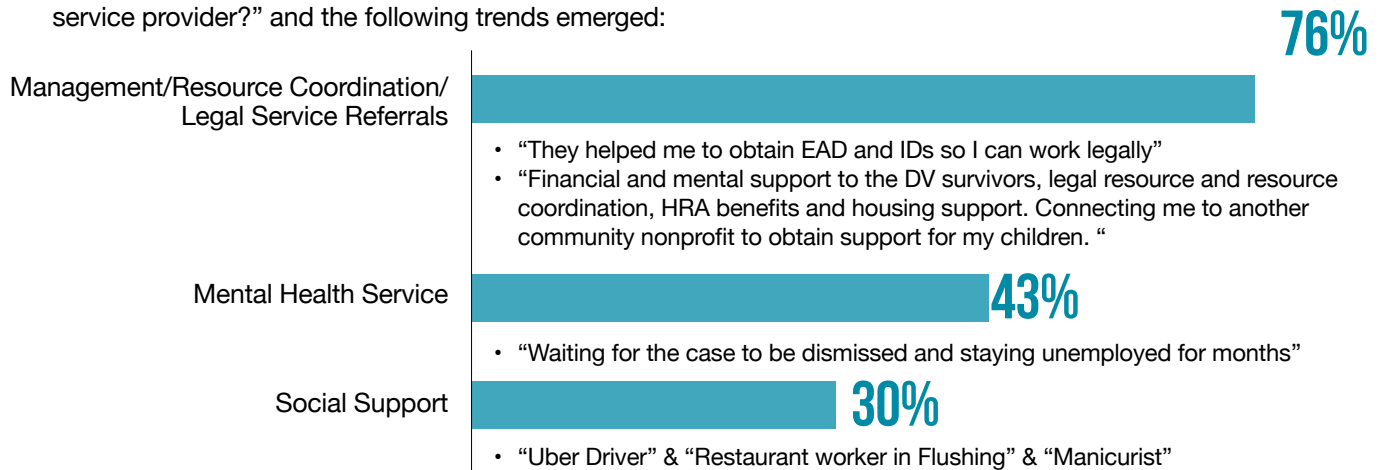
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN AN IMB SHUTS DOWN

Twenty-three participants responded to the question “Where did you go after a storefront closure?” and the following trends emerged:



EXPERIENCES WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS

Thirty-seven participants responded to the question “What is the most helpful service you have received from a service provider?” and the following trends emerged:





THE FUTURE WOMEN WANT BEYOND THE ILLICIT MASSAGE INDUSTRY

Fifty-six participants responded to the question “What kinds of jobs do you want to take instead of massage in the U.S.?” and the following trends emerged:

