Title
Protecting the Rights of Massage Parlor Workers

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Masseuses report experiencing physical, emotional, and verbal abuse while working as well as sexual harassment and assault from parlor owners and customers.
As of 2011, there were close to three thousand massage parlors and spas in California and more than four hundred in Los Angeles County. Yet, specific data about this sector remains elusive because some masseuses are undocumented employees and anecdotal evidence suggests that many masseuses receive “under-the-table” low pay and work long hours under bad conditions.

Across the United States, local laws and federal immigration policy combine to produce a situation where massage parlor workers, who are predominately female, are left unprotected, which can result in exploitation through a trifecta of wage theft, deportation threat, and sexual harassment. Failing to recognize the differences in the types of massage parlors and masseuses, the current broad-brush legislative approach to regulation is inadequate and does not properly address worker conditions. New legislation is needed to provide legal protection to masseuses.

Recent policy has been driven by presumptions of inappropriate sexual behavior or trafficking. Such assumptions stigmatize all masseuses and threaten their financial stability—and for some, could lead to deportation. Recent media attention and legislation have focused on human trafficking and prostitution investigations. Fueled by a “Not In My Back Yard” attitude, new state and local policies were implemented and resulted in raids and shutdowns of several massage parlors, which often results in stigmatizing or criminalizing the women.

In September of 2014, Governor Jerry Brown approved Assembly Bill 1147 (AB 1147) “Massage Therapy Act,” which amends the previous law and re-establishes city control with regard to zoning. Additionally, the bill draws distinctions between parlors. Legitimate massage parlors have complied with legal regulations and hire certified masseuses. Illegitimate massage parlors are those engaging in human trafficking or prostitution.

AB 1147 also reauthorizes the California Mas-
sage Therapy Council to evaluate professional masseuse standards and to oversee certification of massage therapists, which involves fingerprinting, 500 hours of training, and an exam. This certification process presents significant barriers for masseuses with limited English skills, financial and time constraints, undocumented status, or different cultural norms (for example, distrust of government agencies), which can lead to further exploitation.

CRITIQUE
Research shows that masseuse work is often the only available employment for Asian immigrant women who face barriers to the formal economy, including low English fluency, undocumented status, limited housing options, and remittance commitments. These work impediments are applicable to many immigrants working in the informal economy who typically have few avenues to rectify their employment situation. Unfortunately, AB 1147 is a one-size-fits-all legislation that fails to address working conditions and rights of massage parlor workers.

RECOMMENDATION
In a recent study of Asian massage parlor workers in San Francisco, masseuses reported experiencing physical, emotional, and verbal abuse while working. Masseuses can also experience sexual harassment and assault from parlor owners and customers. Massage parlor workers need fair wages, safekeeping from violence and harassment, and health care access. Current legislation includes no such protection or legal assistance.

Instead of shifting local regulatory control, state legislators should develop legislation that provides legal aid for massage parlor workers. Rather than feeding into negative perceptions of masseuses, policy needs to focus on improving working conditions. To support personal and economic choices of masseuses, legislation should follow similar guidelines set up in the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights and mandate safe work environments, fair wages, and protection from harassment.

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NOTES
5. California Massage Therapy Council (CAMTC) https://www.camtc.org/