



# ASIAN MIGRANT SEX WORKER EXPERIENCES OF BORDER FORCE RAIDS

This briefing paper examines the significant disconnect between Australian Border Force (ABF) policy statements<sup>1</sup>, and the lived experience of Asian migrant sex workers during 'workplace compliance operations' or raids. Based on 23 reported raids in 2025 alone (19 in Naarm/Metro Melbourne, 9 in Northern Territory), this document contrasts ABF claims with firsthand accounts from sex workers and peer educators, as reported to Scarlet Alliance and member organisation Vixen.

The evidence demonstrates that current ABF operations create systemic barriers to justice, compromise worker safety, cause significant economic harm, and undermine the very protections they claim to uphold. These militarised compliance visits bear no resemblance to workplace inspections in other industries and represent discriminatory enforcement targeting sex work specifically.

## Key Findings

Border Force operations targeting Asian migrant sex workers:

- Create confusion about the legal status of sex work in decriminalised jurisdictions
- Involve armed groups of 4-10 uniformed officers conducting surprise raids during work hours
- Deny workers access to translation, interpretation, or legal representation
- Result in workers being interviewed in lingerie without permission to dress
- Cause immediate income loss and long-term economic instability, including workplace closures
- Discriminate by only requesting ID from workers of Asian appearance
- Create opportunities for predators to extort and threaten workers
- Drive workers away from health promotion services and peer support
- Cause some workers to self-deport rather than face further intimidation

## ABF Claims vs. On-Ground Reports

### Claim 1: ABF "acts to protect vulnerable migrant workers" by "conducting intelligence-led visits across all industries"

ABF states that "ABF acts to protect vulnerable migrant workers and to address exploitative and illegal practices, conducting intelligence-led visits across all industries. Sex workers have the same workplace rights and protections as workers in other industries and sectors, all of which are subject to migrant worker protections in the Act."

Sex work is decriminalised in many Australian jurisdictions, meaning police no longer regulate the industry and sex workers have access to the same industrial and workplace health and safety protections as any other worker.

However, peer educators from member organisations report that Border Force compliance visits create confusion, causing sex workers to disbelieve sex work is lawful. Sex worker organisations observe pre-decriminalisation behaviours returning among Asian migrant sex workers and their workplaces: including hiding condoms, pretending not to offer sexual services, and refusing peer educators entry for health promotion.

Asian migrant sex workers describe groups of uniformed armed Border Force officers entering their workplaces during work hours, interrupting bookings in work rooms and remaining on-site for up to four hours while separating and interviewing workers.

In 2025 so far, Asian migrant sex workers have reported 19 separate raids in Naarm (Metro Melbourne) and 4 in the Northern Territory.

Sex worker organisations, peer educators and Asian migrant sex workers expect to be treated equally, and in the same way other workplaces are treated. However, in communication with unions and migrant workers' organisations, sex worker organisations have not learnt of any similar incidents reported by workers in other industries in 2025. This suggests that only sex work workplaces are subject to this type of enforcement.

While it has been suggested that workplaces may have been visited by state police and workers may be attributing police behaviour to Border Force officers, CCTV and photographic evidence clearly show Border Force officers, not state police, in attendance at the raids described.

## **Claim 2: "All ABF actions occur pursuant to lawful warrants or by informed consent"**

Receptionists and managers describe armed groups of four to 10 uniformed Border Force officers arriving at the public entrance of the workplace, with some officers moving immediately past reception and through the workplace to areas where Asian Migrant Sex Workers are undertaking bookings, sleeping, eating or resting.

Receptionists and managers report asking Border Force officers to wait until the workers are informed via intercom before going into staff areas. In response, Border Force officers have told receptionists and managers they are not permitted to inform anyone of their arrival, and rush towards those parts of the building in an apparent effort to surprise workers.

Receptionists and managers report telling Border Force officers not to enter work rooms with closed doors due to bookings taking place. In response, Border Force officers proceeded directly to the rooms with closed doors and walked in on the booking.

Receptionists and managers describe having no recollection of being shown a warrant by Border Force officers, or being asked permission to enter.

## **Claim 3: "ABF prioritises the safety of individuals who may be harmed or exploited"**

Asian migrant sex workers describe Border Force officers surprising workers by entering staff rooms unannounced, preventing anyone present from leaving the room. They describe the Border Force officers:

- Telling everyone to stay seated
- Loudly and aggressively asking all workers present to show ID
- Moving from person to person reading out workers' legal names from their IDs loudly enough for other staff and clients to hear

Asian migrant sex workers describe this as a breach of privacy in the workplace, indicating a lack of respect or care for their confidentiality and creating potentially unsafe situations.

Asian migrant sex workers report that armed, uniformed officers loiter on the footpath around their workplace before and after raids. Workers describe that this activity leaves them feeling distressed and intimidated, and draws attention to locations that are intended to be discreet. Workers describe feeling unsafe to leave and unsafe to stay on-site, feeling conflicted, angry, fearful and harassed.



## **Claim 4: “ABF prioritises the rights of individuals who may be harmed or exploited”**

Asian migrant sex workers report:

- Being given documents in the wrong language.
- Not being offered translation or interpreters.
- Being asked to sign documents in English or another language that they do not understand.
- Having their phones forcibly taken off them when attempting to translate or photograph official papers being presented to them for signature.
- Being prevented from filming their interaction with officers.
- Being asked to sign documentation even though they have no understanding of what the document says, the allegations against them, their rights or responsibilities, or what the consequences of signing the document are.
- Having no recollection of Border Force officers informing them of having a right to a lawyer or interpreter.

## **Claim 5: “ABF prioritises the well-being of individuals who may be harmed or exploited”**

Asian migrant sex workers describe raids involving:

- Separation and isolation during interviews, prevented from communicating with each other
- Interviews conducted while wearing only lingerie with no opportunity to change
- Highly visible uniformed, armed officers loitering before and after operations
- Significant and sustained loss of earnings, forcing workers to longer hours or less safe workplaces
- Damage to workplace reputation, leading to closures and reduced viability of previously safe venues
- Fear-driven deletion of all safety contacts, mechanisms and social media accounts from their phones due to fear of what ABF will do with that information

Asian migrant sex workers describe this as a breach of privacy in the workplace, indicating a lack of respect or care for sex worker organisations observe sustained economic harm impacting the workplaces previously preferred by members of the Asian migrant sex worker community, resulting in them working longer hours, opting to work at less visible workplaces, and harming the viability of workplaces with good working conditions.

The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) confirms migrant sex workers are more likely to endure unsafe or exploitative conditions when they fear deportation or exposure. A harm reduction framework not only reduces such risks but actively contributes to anti-trafficking and anti-slavery outcomes.”<sup>2</sup>

## **Claim 6: “ABF officers undertake a range of specialist training to equip them with the knowledge and tools to identify exploitation.”**

Asian migrant sex workers describe Australian Border Force officers as being verbally abusive, deliberately threatening, and dismissive of concerns being voiced while the raid was taking place.

## **Claim 7: “ABF officers treat every worker with dignity”**

Asian migrant sex workers describe Border Force workplace visits as causing them to feel degraded, traumatised, and unsafe in their workplaces.

## **Claim 8: “People in vulnerable situations require assistance and protection; unscrupulous employers face penalties”**

Sex worker organisations observe that raids on workplaces create opportunities for individual perpetrators to target Asian migrant sex workers for assault and extortion, knowing they will not be subject to recourse for their actions.



Asian migrant sex workers report predators and violent perpetrators expressing they are aware Border Force is currently targeting Asian migrant sex worker workplaces and threatening to report the workplace to Border Force unless the worker gives them something such as money, sex or extra services.

Regardless of a person's visa, temporary migrants are disincentivised from reporting this extortion or threats to police due to fear it will attract Border Force to their workplace and place themselves and colleagues at risk of loss of income. Asian migrant sex workers report that when they have told their boss or manager about these threats, they are told that reports to police will just make the situation worse.

### **Claim 9: "Migrant workers are encouraged to approach the Department for visa options"**

Sex worker organisations observe Asian migrant sex workers on temporary visas opting to voluntarily self-deport after experiencing a compliance visit to their workplace by Border Force officers, rather than attend interviews regarding their visa status.

Sex worker organisations also observe Asian migrant sex workers on temporary visas avoiding returning home after experiencing a compliance visit by Border Force officers, believing they will be flagged or reported as a sex worker by Border Force to the state in their country of origin, and fearing this will bring unfair harassment, shame, criminalisation and marginalisation on their family. This has led to some sex workers foregoing returning home for holidays or significant family events.

### **Claim 10: "ABF's actions are non-discriminatory"**

Sex workers describe armed uniformed Border Force officers only asking workers of Asian appearance to produce their ID, and not asking workers who do not appear Asian.

### **Claim 11: "ABF's actions are undertaken pursuant to the Act"**

Sex worker organisations do not dispute Border Force officers have statutory powers to undertake workplace compliance actions. However, as discussed above, the reports of Border Force officer behaviour, the frequency of visits, and the lack of comparable attention in other industries are cause for concern.

Sex workers in Australia want answers about why workplaces are being targeted so visibly, regularly and aggressively.

### **Claim 12: "ABF's actions protect migrant workers across a wide range of industries"**

Peer educators observe a correlation between Border Force officer compliance visits and being refused entry for health promotion purposes. Sex worker organisations have heard second-hand reports of managers and receptionists blaming their open-door policy for peer educators as attracting unwanted attention from Border Force.

## **References**

- 1 Statements provided to Scarlet Alliance in correspondence and meetings with Australian Border Force and Department of Home Affairs, 2025.
- 2 'Sex Workers Organising for Change: Self-Representation, Community Mobilisation, and Working Conditions', Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (31 January 2018) <https://www.gaatw.org/resources/publications/941-sex-workers-organising-for-change>

