

# POWER & VOICE

SAFETY. POWER. SISTERHOOD.

nyws

## Featuring Ocama Collective

Discussing the challenges of birthing while Black and Indigenous and what changes we need in the system

## Featuring an interview with Elene Lam

This article talks about the barriers sex workers face in Canada

## Featuring NWRCT

This article is about how Native Women's Resource Centre Toronto has been supporting Indigenous women and peoples with innovative means

## Featuring an interview with the ED of SAWC

This article is about the response of South Asian Women's Centre to COVID-19 and how they came through for the community



Dear Reader,

When we began to shift our fundraising work to Community-Centric Fundraising almost two years ago there was one principle that always stood out to me;

**Individual organizational missions are not as important as the collective community.**

As organizations doing our work within the oppressive system we function in, we sometimes forget our collective goals. At our very core, NYWS will always be committed to dismantling systemic white supremacy and gender-based violence. Fight for Justice helps us center social determinants such as employment conditions, social environments, education, and literacy, all through a gender-based lens. With your willingness to engage with our work and campaigns, our Fight for Justice program began to help us become louder and take more meaningful actions in the fight against misogyny- in all of its forms.

The area of focus for this particular action is systemic racism. As a team we discussed what could be this action. We could have asked you to sign a petition or write your MP, but we thought of this as an opportunity for us to bring attention to experts in anti-racist work within our community.

Each interview will provide insight on the work each organization does, how they have moved through the pandemic, and what they need as an organization to continue their work. We ask you to support these organizations especially as we move into the biggest holiday season. Each organization has different needs and each article outlines how you can support them.

Thank you so much to Cassandra and Hirut from the Ocoma Collective, Pamela from Native Women's Resource Centre, Elene from the Butterfly Collective, and Kripa from South Asian Women's Collective for your time, your voice, and sharing your work with us.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lindsay Sweeney-Hockin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Lindsay Sweeney-Hockin, CFRE**

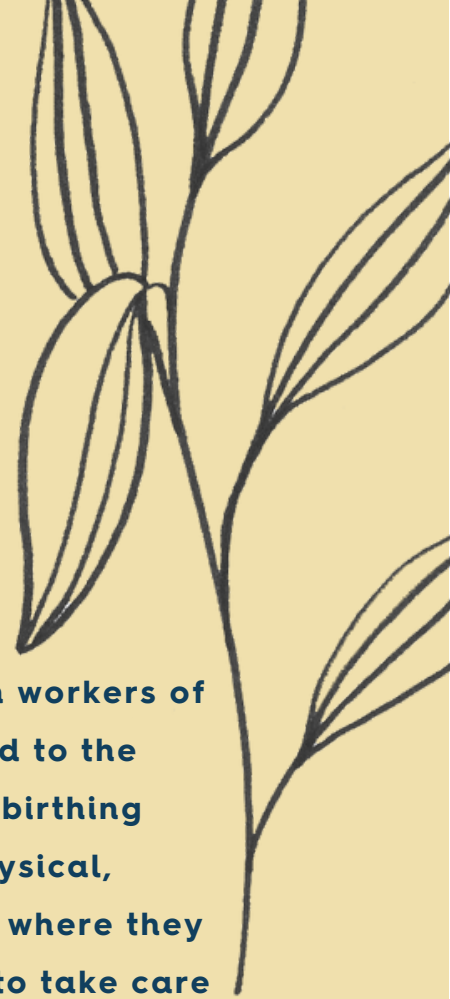
They/She

Director of Development,  
North York Women's Shelter



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Ocama Collective	4
Native Women's Resource Centre	8
Butterfly	12
South Asian Women's Centre	17



## OCAMA COLLECTIVE

**Ocama Collective is a community-directed group of birth workers of colour, living and working in Tkaronto, who are dedicated to the reclamation of traditional and holistic childbearing and birthing practices, amongst IBPOC folks. They provide mental, physical, emotional, and strategic care while meeting their clients where they are and making sure that they have everything in place to take care of themselves and the child. They engage in education around pre-partum, post-partum, and ways to take care of the client as well as the child. They are not medical professionals but they fulfill the role of companions for those people who are moving through the journey of giving birth physically, as well as their close ones.**

We started our conversation with Cassandra Thompson, full-circle/full-spectrum Doula, plant medicine maker, and Hirut, lactation consultant (IBCLC), Doula, trainer/speaker, from Ocama Collective by talking about the historical (mis)treatment of IBPOC folks and how it finds its way into their work as an act of care towards IBPOC individuals. Engaging in a short history lesson, Cassandra tells us about Henrietta Lacks, a Black woman, whose body and genes were used to create many of the cures we have today; her family was in no way informed or compensated. In Canada there was forced sterilization of indigenous individuals.



Cassandra and Hirut

There are many such instances that make it difficult for Black and Indigenous folks to trust the healthcare system that has exploited them. “This violence has transgressed into how care is handled, whether it is microaggression or very active invasion of someone’s body and bodily autonomy,” Cassandra says. According to Hirut, who recently finished her Masters with research on experiences of birthing during Covid, Black people today are birthing in a state of survival mode, it is not because of Covid but because of anti-Black racism. She added that we have very little information or what it means to give birth in Canada as a Black person and birth workers are presented with the challenge of figuring out what kind of intervention is needed with someone is birthing in survival mode.

Talking more about their clientele, we asked Cassandra and Hirut what intersection of the IBPOC communities their organization primarily serves. They told us that their clients mostly identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of colour, labeled as racialized in some way. Cassandra and Hirut remember a particular encounter in which the parent giving birth was not racialized but their partner was and as a result, lost their family's support. Given the fact that the child would be racialized and the family structure was impacted due to systemic oppression, Ocama chose to take on the client. When making the decision to provide service, Ocama Collective pays attention to the layers of oppression that the person giving birth may not be able to realize - things that might happen to their child, things might happen to the partner while they give birth, etc. They also serve 2SLGBTQIA+ members of the IBPOC community.

Next, we asked Cassandra and Hirut what obstacles their organization faces while serving IBPOC communities. They commented that ‘othering’ through oppressive practices in our systems was the main issue that stood out for them. They said, “We are working in a system that we are not in control of.” This system was set up for white settlers in colonial society by white settlers. Within this system, IBPOC bodies are considered to be entrenched in indentured servitude. Queer and trans folks are seen as abnormal, strange, and anomalies in this system. BIPOC, queer, and trans folks are thus believed to have higher tolerance for pain - this denial of experience results in disempowerment of IBPOC, queer and trans individuals.

Talking specifically about the VAW sector, Cassandra says the obstacles birth workers like her face are rooted in mistrust of residents by the shelters themselves. VAW shelters often do not allow visitors and support systems into their space. Ocama might need to come in to help survivors with lactation or childcare in a space that is comfortable for the survivor; however this is prohibited in VAW spaces and acts as a barrier to the work of doulas, birth workers, etc. Cassandra says if VAW shelters trust the survivors that live in their space to be self-determining, external agencies like Ocama will be able to work with them and build other support systems, so that the shelter is not the only space that the survivors can rely on.

## HOW TO GET INVOLVED

You can find out more about Ocama Collective and their work on <https://www.ocamacollective.com/>

They ask that you support them at this time through donations. You can donate at <https://www.ocamacollective.com/donate>

For any BIPOC individuals interested in birth work, Ocama Collective welcomes you to get in touch with them

To stay connected with Ocama Collective on social media, follow them on Instagram @ocamacollective

For general inquiries please email: [info@ocamacollective.com](mailto:info@ocamacollective.com)

**[ocamacollective.com](https://www.ocamacollective.com)**



***“Racism, specifically,  
is the state-sanctioned  
or extralegal  
production and  
exploitation of group-  
differentiated  
vulnerability to  
premature death.”***

***— Ruth Wilson Gilmore***





# NATIVE WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE TORONTO



**When we were researching organizations, we wanted to partner with for this volume, we were certain that they needed to align with trauma-informed principles apart from being anti-racist. We found Native Women's Resource Centre and came in contact with Pamela Hart, Executive Director at NWRCT, who agreed to have a conversation about the service they provide for and by Indigenous people. Pamela describes NWRCT as a gathering place for Indigenous women and children, trans 2-Spirited and other gender-inclusive folks, to find community and support. Located in the heart of downtown Toronto, NWRCT works to create a safe space for indigenous individuals to find connections to culture while also filling important service gaps for the community. They support Indigenous folks by catering to their needs for the day.**

We asked Pamela what systems of oppression are affecting Indigenous peoples on this land today. She explained Canadian interferences have caused oppression to the Indigenous communities- oppression that has had many different forms and faces throughout history. "It all started with contact," Hart elaborates, as she further details how Canada has benefitted from oppression of Indigenous peoples. With residential schools and the 60s scoop, the racism slowly became institutionalized, she says. The constructs of Canadian society that came to be as a result of institutionalized racism harms Indigenous people today, especially Indigenous women, 2-Spirit folks, and gender-diverse folks.





# NATIVE WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE TORONTO



Pamela Hart, ED at NWRCT

How does this affect the daily lives of Indigenous individuals? According to Pamela, the obstacles created by this system make it difficult to navigate across their own territories. She elaborated on how emergency shelters including the VAW sector, healthcare, and other service providers, including some Indigenous organizations, have lost the trust of Indigenous people in this country, as a result of decades of oppressive and extractive practices. Many of these organizations have contributed to the state-led genocide of Indigenous people through indirect means. NWRCT makes efforts to fill these gaps, wherever possible, with services including pre- and post-natal programming, crisis calls with healers, hot

meals and more. Pamela added that they NWRCT is committed to keeping a cultural aspect to all its services, something that has been long denied to Indigenous peoples by colonists.

So we asked Pamela, how do we move forward, how do we bring the appropriate change. According to her, “(w)e are in the phase of truth right now.” She believes that in order to move forward we need to keep in mind the recommendations made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) inquiry report. NWRCT continues to make use of these reports and Pamela encourages others to use these valuable resources as well. She also talked about the need for monetary support for Indigenous organizations in Canada – the best way to support community is from within community and thus Indigenous organizations need your financial support.

We also wanted to take this opportunity to gain insight on how NYWS, in our work, can learn to create a more appropriate space for Indigenous survivors. We asked Pamela what specific changes are needed in the Violence-Against Women sector? Hart, who has previously worked in the shelter system, shed light on the need for us to recognize how violence can look different for Indigenous folks and how their needs can differ from others. She thus emphasized a need to re-evaluate the parameters of violence for Indigenous women and 2-Spirited individuals.

# NATIVE WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE TORONTO

With Covid-19 forcing an online transition for everyone, NWRCT feared they could not be an active support in the absence of in-person programming and drop-in services. We asked Pamela how NWRCT responded to this change. Covid-19 also exacerbated gaps in service for Indigenous folks. Some of the larger gaps, Hart said, were around the safety of Indigenous women and their children, especially when we look at the increase in MMIWG2S+. The status of Indigenous women in general became more precarious with housing and healthcare making the situation worse. Hart said NWRCT created a hotline for women and gender-diverse folks to access staff support or connect to elders. This hotline was a way to reach the community and their needs to the best of NWRCT's ability. They were also able to provide devices to Indigenous people and their children for schooling and programming purposes.



---

## HOW TO GET INVOLVED

To connect with them or find out more about what NWRCT does, go to [www.nwrct.ca](http://www.nwrct.ca)

NWRCT welcomes all donations, there is always a need to be fulfilled. [Donate here.](#)


You can also get involved at NWRCT as a volunteer.

As a non-Indigenous individual, NWRCT encourages you to read about their work and share it with others. This helps us as a community better understand the need for organizations such as NWRCT.

You can stay updated on the activities of NWRCT, check them out on Twitter @NWRCT Instagram @nwrct

[nwrct.ca](http://nwrct.ca)





***“Understanding the interconnected nature of oppression will help us realize the interconnected nature of liberation.”***

***— Aditi Mayer***



# **BUTTERFLY**

## **ASIAN AND MIGRANT SEX WORKER SUPPORT NETWORK**

**Butterfly is an Asian and Migrant Sex Worker Support Network that is grounded in the idea of building the foundation for community and advocacy for the rights of Asian and migrant sex workers. We found out about Butterfly through our Development Administrative Coordinator, who attended a vigil held by Butterfly for the 8 victims of the 2021 Atlanta Spa Shooting. Their intersectional and abolitionist approach to their work made us want to partner with them for this project and so we contacted Elene Lam, Executive Director of Butterfly. Butterfly is intersectional in its very existence, working at the nexus of race, class, gender, and immigration status, working to decriminalize sex work and create community for Asian and migrant sex workers.**

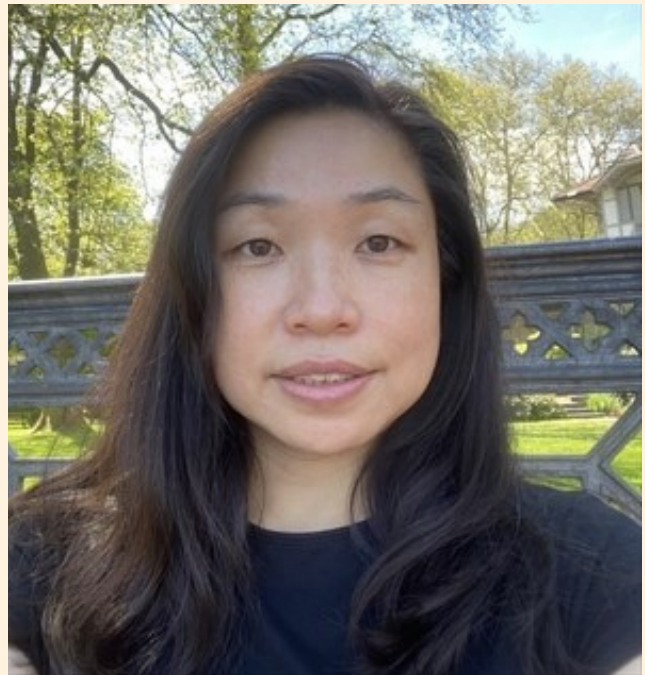
In our initial conversation with Elene, it became clear that law and law enforcement act as barriers for Asian and migrant sex workers. So, we asked her, how law and law enforcement affect Butterfly and their clients specifically. Under Canadian law, although sex work is not explicitly criminalized, sex workers are in danger of being criminally charged. According to Elene, this legal practice becomes more explicit with Asian and migrant sex workers. She told us the often-repeated story of migrant workers in Canada; unable to communicate with others or have qualifications applicable in Canada, many





migrant workers gravitate towards sex work to enter the job market. However, the duality of Canadian law appears here. Elene told us that other migrant sex workers and clients of sex workers often act as important supports for newly migrated sex workers, helping them with advertisement and networking in an unknown language and country. She said that the laws around sex work are hazy – one can advertise and sell their own sex work but cannot take help from others legally. Without external supports, she elaborates, the people who suffer the most in this industry, like many others, are the poor and racialized, who lack network and skills needed to navigate the system.

What are the major obstacles faced by Butterfly while serving Asian and migrant sex workers, we asked Elene. She said that one of the major issues is that Asian Canadian sex workers are in danger of being criminally charged for a variety of reasons and so they isolate themselves and find it hard to trust anyone. This makes it hard for Butterfly to create a relationship of trust with them. It is also very difficult to support migrant and Asian sex workers when they come to Butterfly due to limited legal remedies and difficulty in finding safe referrals, since Butterfly wants to be careful to not send clients to anti-trafficking organizations. “Anti-trafficking organizations disempower sex workers,” Elene added. Butterfly has many clients who work in



Elene Lam, ED at Butterfly

massage parlours, however because of language barriers and racism, they have difficulty finding employment. Working at massage parlours gives them autonomy and economic stability. However, Elene told us, “this agency is taken away by anti-trafficking organizations” that victimize Asian women and “think they are ignorant and cannot make their own decisions”. These organizations then advocate to shut down Asian massage parlours on these grounds. Massage parlours that are owned/operated or employ predominantly Asian masseuses are targeted as they are perceived as illegal and non-legitimate. Currently Butterfly is focused on stopping Newmarket from shutting down Asian massage parlours who have repeatedly faced racist attacks from anti-trafficking organizations. You can find their statement on the issue here.



International Day to End Violence  
Against Sex Workers

December 17



Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Network

These obstacles worsened with the rise of Covid-19. While discussing the impact of the pandemic on the Asian and migrant sex workers Elene told us that due to the criminalization of Asian and migrant sex workers, they could not access government supports. Many of them have been unable to pay taxes because of language barriers and therefore did not qualify for CERB. She added that government agencies do not provide proper interpretation services and do not allow the individual to have their own translator thus creating more obstacles for racialized individuals. On the other hand, policing of sex work has become more stringent during this time, making it even more difficult for sex workers to go out. All this while Asian sex workers faced anti-Asian hate during Covid-19, often being attacked. Butterfly has been hard at work during this time, trying to raise awareness and bring political attention and action to stop anti-Asian hate and anti-sex work hate.

Elene thinks we need the system to incorporate an anti-racist lens in order to implement policies and spaces that make it safer for migrant and Asian sex workers to practice sex work. For the next year, Butterfly will be focusing on leadership building, decriminalization, and reducing the harms of anti-trafficking work for sex workers. Butterfly is looking to help create awareness about the harms that the lack of a feminist framework can cause. You can read more about their work on their website, [www.butterflysw.org](http://www.butterflysw.org)

---

## HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Butterfly asks you to share their voice with your friends, family, and workplace.

You can help Butterfly by signing the petitions on their website for justice for migrant sex worker and against racist attacks from anti-trafficking organizations.

You can also volunteer with Butterfly, in whatever capacity you can!

To donate, go to <https://www.butterflysw.org/donate>

To stay updated with Butterfly, you can follow them on Twitter @ButterflyCSW  
Instagram @butterflycsw

**[butterflysw.org](http://www.butterflysw.org)**



***“This idea that Canada's racial injustices are not as bad as they could be, this notion of Slavery Lite, of Racism Lite, of what my friend calls the “toy version of racism” is a very Canadian way of saying: remember what we could do to you if we wanted to. Passive-aggressive racism is central to Canada's national mythology and identity.”***

**— Desmond Cole**



## SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN'S CENTRE

**The South Asian Women's Centre is a voluntary non-profit women's organization run by and for South Asian Women. We wanted diverse voices in this volume, ones that reflected the people of Toronto and the needs of our population. So, we contacted Kripa Sekhar, Executive Director of SAWC, and she graciously agreed to this interview. Based on an anti-racist and anti-oppression paradigm, SAWC focuses on service delivery that caters to the intersectionality of their clients. They provide various programs and services to help South Asian women reach their full potential by increasing their economic, social, and political standing in society.**

SAWC is focused on a client-tailored service within the South Asian community. The organization has been in existence for 39 years, helping immigrants settle in Canada, creating supports for women, and providing counselling services for South Asian women and families. At SAWC, programming is shaped by the needs of the community, which are assessed frequently. Well-versed in the cultural lens, staff and counsellors at SAWC are committed to an intersectional and trauma-informed lens. SAWC wants the community to know that there is a place to go to for support. SAWC supports individuals from various communities including the Tibetan community and Portuguese community.



Kripa Sekhar, ED at SAWC

## SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN'S CENTRE

In our conversation with Kripa, we discussed how Covid-19 impacted the women and community her organization serves. She told us how, from racism to lack of adequate support, racialized communities have been adversely affected during the past 18 months. The Covid-19 pandemic amplified the pre-existing issues that were experienced across racialized groups. Discussing these pre-existing issues faced by the South Asian community, Sekhar told us about issues ranging from barriers to mental and physical health care, lack of economic and financial support to the rising domestic violence.

We followed up with questions about racialized experiences by discussing the intersectionality within the South Asian community. South Asian women are not a monolith and so each intersection faced different issues. Sekhar, herself a first-generation immigrant, brought forth important examples to explain how different struggles look for different South Asian women. Women who were not primary earners of the family, who found themselves deserted by partners, had no financial support here. Women in their later stages in life, who came from their country of origin having left their spouses or being widowed, were severely affected by isolation during the pandemic. Women who wanted to leave their abusers were often left without recourse as many shelters require Covid test results before intaking someone. Apart from this, Sekhar added, many women faced difficulty in accessing health care during this crucial time, unable to converse with doctors on the phone or access technology to book vaccination appointments.

We asked Kripa how the functioning of their organization and service delivery were impacted by the pandemic? She told us that they have been open throughout the pandemic, providing services and programming online. SAWC acted as an integral support for South Asian women in isolation, who had been traumatized and re-traumatized during the past two years. She added that they also held vaccination clinics for racialized individuals who could not access vaccines in other locations due to various barriers. Now, as we navigate life beyond lockdowns, SAWC is working to re-socialize women through healing activities while still maintaining restrictions.



## HOW YOU CAN HELP

To learn more about SAWC and to stay updated on their activities and volunteer needs, you can go to <http://www.sawc.org/about-us/>

To Donate to SAWC, you can go to <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/id/84123>

To keep up with them on social media, you can follow them on Instagram @sawc\_toronto.  
On Twitter @SAWC\_TORONTO

**[sawc.org](http://www.sawc.org)**

# Fight for Justice with us at:

[nyws.ca/campaigns](https://nyws.ca/campaigns)

**Join us and  
support women  
in times of  
crisis and help  
us advocate to  
make violence  
less prevalent  
for all women.**

**Donate today at:**  
[nyws.ca/donate-to-nyws](https://nyws.ca/donate-to-nyws)

## **WE'RE SPEAKING UP FOR ALL SURVIVORS**

Several systems of oppression exist in our communities that create violence and allow it to thrive. These systems include white supremacy, misogyny, transphobia, classism and many other forms of discrimination. In order to stop gender based violence, we need to fight for justice wherever it is needed and we need to take meaningful action to address each of these oppressive systems.

How can we do this? NYWS wants to help you be louder and take more meaningful actions in the fight against misogyny in all of its forms.

---

*"It's been two years since I first arrived at NYWS and I'm so thankful that even now, years later, I can still turn to NYWS for help. They helped us find an apartment and get it set up. They also helped us with all of the legal stuff that came up after I left. My daughter participates in many of the children's groups and we are both in counselling to keep working on healing from this experience. I still have trouble sleeping sometimes, but now it is because I am so excited for what the future holds."*

~ Person

