



Brief submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women  
For the study on: Human Trafficking of Women, Girls and Gender Diverse People  
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Submitted on behalf of Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter by Laurel McBride

### **Who we are**

Vancouver Rape Relief & Women's Shelter (VRRWS) operates Canada's oldest rape crisis centre and a transition house for battered women and their children. We are active in responding to women who have experienced any form of sexist attack on the continuum of male violence, some of which are: rape, battery, incest, prostitution, and sexual harassment. The collective is diverse in terms of race, age and class backgrounds. The majority of VRRWS members are women who have experienced some form of male violence in their lives.

Our knowledge and authority on male violence against women is derived from responding to 1,200 women who are new to us each year. Vancouver Rape Relief has been active on the issue of prostitution, locally and nationally, for decades. As a member of the Women's Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution, VRRWS intervened in the Ontario Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Canada in the landmark Bedford case. We appeared before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights and the Senate in 2014 to provide submissions on Bill C-36, which became the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA)*. Most recently in 2022, VRRWS was a member of the Women's Equality Coalition who intervened in the constitutional challenge to *PCEPA* brought by Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice.

### **Any Market for Paid Sex Allows Human Trafficking to Expand**

VRRWS is pleased that the Committee is undertaking a national study on human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Canada. The historical disadvantage and exploitation of the women and girls who make up the sex trade is deserving of the Federal government and Canadian public's prompt attention. However,

we maintain that any analysis of human trafficking must also look at the system of prostitution. It is a mistake to separate sex trafficking and prostitution. Rather, we know that sex trafficking and prostitution work in conjunction to satisfy a system of exploitation that commodifies women as things to be bought and sold on the market. The men who purchase women in prostitution are the same men purchasing women who have been trafficked into the sex trade.

A strong, evidence-based approach, supported globally, to ensure that no more women and girls get caught up and harmed by this industry is to target the demand that fuels trafficking for sexual exploitation through criminal law.

This is reflected in the United Nations General Assembly's adoption of Resolution 77/194 <sup>1</sup> on December 15, 2022 which states that, "trafficking in persons is fuelled by high profits for traffickers and demand that fosters all forms of exploitation."

Canada, too, is a participating state in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which issued a paper in 2021 titled "Discouraging the Demand that fosters trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation."<sup>2</sup> All OSCE participating states are required to take steps to discourage demand for sexual services.

Until there is no longer a market for sexual access to women and girls' bodies, traffickers will continue to have financial incentive to recruit vulnerable women and girls into commercial sexual exploitation. The work of shrinking market demand for men's paid sexual access to women is daunting but we believe it is possible and will require all of us to shift the societal attitudes that sustain women's unequal position.

While criminal legal tools are always just one part of such a response, the deterrent effect of having in our criminal code and prosecuting those who commit the offense of (286.1) Obtaining sexual services for consideration, must not be understated.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/759/64/PDF/N2275964.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/f/489388\\_2.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/f/489388_2.pdf)

### **Demographics of Who is Targeted for Sexual Exploitation**

The following data<sup>3</sup> is based on our work with 100 women who called our crisis line in a two-year period and told us that they were at the time, or in the past, in prostitution.

Of those women in prostitution who called VRRWS, 24% were 15 or younger when they entered prostitution. Furthermore, 43% of the women who called VRRWS were “underage” (younger than 18) when they entered prostitution. Most often, the girls resorted to prostitution because of on-going sexual assault by their father (in some cases the father also pimped the girl) or grooming by an adult “boyfriend,” who often gave them drugs to make sure they stayed dependent on him. Most girls in these situations were “runaways” from abusive homes and/or raised in foster care.

Indigenous women are only 3% of women in Metro Vancouver, yet they make up 27% of the women in prostitution who called Vancouver Rape Relief. Many of the Indigenous women who call us are women who escaped their community because of the violence they experienced there or were lured to Vancouver by men disguising themselves as someone who will take care of them but in reality end up trafficking them. Black women are only 1.2% of women in Metro Vancouver, yet they make up 14% of the women in prostitution who called VRRWS. This data reflects the intersection between racism and sexism in prostitution. While all women are vulnerable to male violence, the rate of victimization for racialized women is even greater. This pattern is also reflected in the data of our work with battered women, as 72% of the women who stay in our transition house are women of colour or Indigenous women.

### **Sexual Exploitation and Substance Use**

Two thirds of the women in prostitution who call us, tell us upfront that they are dependent on substances. Some women tell us that they were first dependent on drugs, most often as a coping response to past sexual violence and turned to prostitution to pay for the drugs. Other women tell us that they started using drugs or alcohol as a way to cope with the experience of being sex trafficked. Some women have disclosed that they cannot engage in prostitution without using substances. Women have also told us that they are often offered drugs and alcohol by johns.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://rapereliefshelter.bc.ca/vancouver-rape-reliefs-data-on-prostitution/>

Half of women who call us reveal being controlled or coerced by a trafficker. We have also observed that traffickers sustain their power over women with physical violence and/or by facilitating and maintaining a woman's addiction.

### **The Toll of Sexual Exploitation**

Sexual exploitation has a ruinous effect on women's mental and physical health. We accompany women to hospital for immediate medical attention if they are injured and connect them to community health clinics to get subsequent medical care. For many women, they have not had access to these basic services in some time. Further, while it is extremely common for women who have been sexually exploited to suffer from PTSD, specialized resources to aid in recovery are nearly nonexistent.

### **Challenges of Holding the Perpetrators of Harm Accountable**

In British Columbia, sex buyers operate with impunity with the knowledge that local police departments will not arrest them, that they have in fact passed policy that views obtaining sexual services for consideration as a non-priority for enforcement. Not only do these policy decisions encourage the expansion of the industry and the fertile ground for trafficking to thrive, women also receive the message that the commodification of their bodies is ordinary, permitted, and desirable.

Due to the terror they experience and ongoing threats from pimps and traffickers, women are often fearful of reporting to police and testifying in court. At times, women have recanted their statements because of threats by their traffickers. When they are too scared to testify, we ensure that women understand that we are behind their decision and will support them regardless of if they testify. The experience of being trafficked removed their ability to make decisions for themselves and so, we believe it is crucial to follow their lead when making decisions about their bodies and own safety.

### **Supports Requested by Sexually Exploited Women**

We provide support to women who are currently being sexually exploited, women who were trafficked into prostitution, women who are trying to exit prostitution, and women who are no longer being sex trafficked but still struggle with its long-lasting emotional and physical impacts. We also provide support to women who have been assaulted by johns and traffickers.

Some of the support we offer to women being sex trafficked includes; immediate support on the crisis line when faced with a situation of violence, housing in our safe shelter, accompanying women to the police if they wish to make a report, accompanying women to get medical attention at the hospital, or helping them get into recovery or treatment programs for substance use, which is very difficult to access and is all the more reason why women need more detox and recovery programs available on demand. Women in prostitution will also call us for help to meet their basic physical needs like food, rent, clothing, transportation, and utility bills.

The main request for half of the women in prostitution who call us is finding a safe shelter. This reflects the need for safety from a trafficker, or a john, the lack of means to rent a place and the need for support from other women. Women will also call us for support groups or counselling, even if they haven't exited yet. A third of the women calling us are looking for support in exiting prostitution and sex trafficking.

### **Recommendations**

1. We urge the Canadian Government to finally enact our current prostitution laws, the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act* passed under Bill C-36, on a national scale. The Vancouver Police Department have publicly stated that they will not arrest johns even after the law criminalizing the purchase of sex was passed. We call on the federal government to ensure that RCMP and municipal police forces make the purchase of sex, and women's equality, an enforcement priority.
2. Exiting services must be funded, expanded, and accessible for all women wanting to leave prostitution when they make the decision to. It is necessary that it includes provisions for:
  - Safe, supportive and affordable housing
  - A livable income
  - Access to detox on demand and recovery programming
  - Mental health supports and medical care
  - Access to various levels of education
  - Childcare
  - Pardons for non-violent crimes related to prostitution: the cost to get a pardon is prohibitive and has a real impact on the ability to find gainful and meaningful work

3. A complete decriminalization of the women in the sex trade. This includes the removal of Section 213(1.1) in the criminal code that maintains a way to criminalize those in prostitution if they are next to a school ground, playground or daycare centre.
4. Canada must end the criminalization of trafficked women and establish an achievable route for landed immigrants to gain legal status. We state that trafficked women do not belong in cells but instead they should be treated as victims of male violence against women and therefore be offered the necessary services to be protected and helped. Access to affordable legal representation is essential for this. Legal Aid must be adequately funded to respond to growing demand for immigration, family, and criminal law involving male violence against women.
5. We also recommend that translation services be available throughout all government institutions. Women survivors of the sex trade who do not speak fluent English need to be able to engage with police, immigration and welfare in their own language. Institutions publicly say this is offered but we know this is not a service that is consistently applied in practice.