



Brief to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights

Re: Review of The Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act

February 2022

The Aboriginal Women's Action Network opposes the legalization of prostitution, and any state regulation of prostitution that entrenches Aboriginal women and children in the so-called "sex trade." We hold that legalizing prostitution in Vancouver will not make it safer for those prostituted, but will merely increase their numbers. Contrary to current media coverage of the issue, the available evidence suggests that it would in fact be harmful, would expand prostitution and would promote trafficking, and would only serve to make prostitution safer and more profitable for the men who exploit and harm prostituted women and children. Although many well-meaning people think that decriminalization simply means protecting prostituted women from arrest, it also refers, dangerously, to the decriminalization of johns and pimps. In this way prostitution is normalized, johns multiply, and pimps and traffickers become legitimated entrepreneurs. Say "No" to this lack of concern for marginalized women and children, who in this industry are expected to serve simply as objects of consumption.

A harm-reduction model that claims to help prostituted women by moving them indoors to legal brothels, not only would not reduce the harm to them, but would disguise the real issues. There is no evidence that indoor prostitution is safer for the women involved. Rather, it is just as violent and traumatic. Prostitution is inherently violent, merely an extension of the violence that most prostituted women experience as children. We should aim not merely to reduce this harm, as if it is a necessary evil and/or inescapable, but strive to eliminate it altogether. Those promoting prostitution rarely address class, race, or ethnicity as factors that make women even more vulnerable. A treatise can be written about Aboriginal women's vulnerability based on race, socio-economic status and gender but suffice it to say that we are very over-represented in street-level prostitution. There may even be a class bias behind the belief that street prostitution is far worse than indoor forms. It is not the street per se or the laws for that matter, which are the source of the problem, but prostitution itself which depends on a sub-class of women or a degraded caste to be exploited. A major factor contributing to the absence of attention given to the women who have gone missing women in Vancouver is the lack of police response, and the insidious societal belief that these women were not worthy of protection, a message that is explicitly conveyed to the johns, giving them the go-ahead to act toward these women with impunity.

Given that the vast majority of prostituted women wish to leave prostitution, we should focus on finding ways to help them to do that rather than entrenching them further into prostitution by legalizing and institutionalizing it. Here in Vancouver, if we are to help those most in need, young Aboriginal women, it would help to think more long-term, to focus on healing and prevention. Let's not get tricked into a supposed fix which is not even a band-aid, but only deepens the wounds. AWAN demands that Aboriginal women have the opportunity to raise our families within our Traditional values of having a respected position for women and children in our societies. The single-most effective way of achieving that goal is empowering and resourcing Aboriginal women's groups, such as AWAN, so that we can organize, engage with other sectors of society and speak with our own voices.

Aboriginal Women's Action Network (AWAN) was established in 1995. Since then, AWAN has been a voice for Aboriginal (Indigenous) women's concerns regarding governance, policy making, women's rights, employment rights, *Indian Act* membership and status, and especially male violence against women, including the impact of prostitution on Indigenous women. Much of AWAN's work has centered around the eradication of male violence against women and the abolition of prostitution.

AWAN recognizes that Indigenous women have been subjugated under patriarchal systems imposed by the colonizers who occupied their unceded territories, and our goal is to bring back matriarchal traditions. AWAN's members see their decolonization process as being intertwined with feminism, and so operate from a feminist perspective. AWAN maintains that any meaningful reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settlers cannot take place as long as Indigenous women are being exploited in prostitution. AWAN members live and work in British Columbia, governed by a feminist collective, and work towards the liberation of all Indigenous women in Canada.