

Gender Justice Should Include Sex Workers' Rights



“WE ARE CALLING ON YOU TO SHOW YOUR SOLIDARITY FOR SEX WORKERS’ RIGHTS.

WE MUST RECOGNIZE SEX WORK AS WORK AND SEX WORKERS’ RIGHTS AS BEING INTEGRAL TO GENDER JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES. WE MUST LISTEN TO THE VOICES OF SEX WORKERS AND UNDERSTAND THE DIVERSITY OF SEX WORKERS’ EXPERIENCES.

WE MUST RECOGNIZE WHERE WE HAVE BEEN MISINFORMED AND CORRECT OUR UNDERSTANDING WITH NEW INFORMATION.

WE MUST RECOGNIZE THE HARMS BEING CAUSED BY CRIMINALIZATION, POLICING, AND DISCRIMINATION.

WE ARE CALLING ON YOU TO STAND IN SOLIDARITY WITH SEX WORKERS IN THEIR FIGHT FOR THEIR RIGHTS AND JUSTICE”.

BUTTERFLY (ASIAN AND MIGRANT SEX WORKERS SUPPORT NETWORK)

What’s wrong with anti-sex work women’s groups?

Anti-sex work feminists often assume sex work is inherently violent and exploitative. They call themselves “radical feminists” or “abolitionists”; however, they are not radical. Instead, their beliefs reproduce patriarchal, colonial, and white supremacist systems. They silence the voices and experiences of sex workers themselves. They deny sex workers’ agency and their ability to make decisions. This perspective also fails to look at the complexity of identity and lived experiences of sex work.¹

Anti-sex work feminists have co-opted and appropriated the language of abolition used by Black enslavement and prison abolitionists. Their calls for an increase in political control and criminalization of sex work in the name of “protection” and “anti-slavery” in practice, inevitably undermines the objectives of what abolition stands for. Anti-sex work women's groups gain social, political and financial benefit through this process at the individual and organizational level.

¹ Maynard, R. (2012). Carceral feminism: The failure of sex work prohibition. *FUSE Magazine*, 35. <https://robynmaynard.com/writing/carceral-feminism-the-failure-of-sex-work-prohibition/>

What's wrong with a carceral approach?



A carceral approach relies on policing and criminalization to address gender-based violence (e.g. domestic violence, sexual violence, human trafficking).

However, carceral regimes often harm people who are poor, BIPOC, experience complex mental health concerns, engage in sex work, and/or are migrants as they result in an increase in state violence, racial profiling, surveillance, apprehension of children and youth, deportation, and mass incarceration.

They not only fail to address underlying economic, social, and legal conditions that exacerbate gender-based violence, but they also increase stigmatization, marginalization, barriers to accessing supports, and vulnerability to exploitation and violence.

“Stop racism, stop Asian hate! Police cannot protect us, we have to protect each other and fight together!”

Asian migrant massage workers and sex workers

What's wrong with anti-trafficking organizations?

Many of the most prominent and well-funded anti-trafficking organizations are also anti-sex work, are/or tied to fundamentalist Christian groups, law enforcement, politicians and big corporations which uphold saviourism, moralism, colonialism, and white supremacist ideals.

Their main goals are often not about eradicating human trafficking itself but rather ending sex work and creation/dissemination of pornography. They create moral panic against sex work by conflating sex work with human trafficking.

They tend to advocate for surveillance and harmful policies against sex workers, migrants, BIPOC, LGBTQ+ folks, youth, and other marginalized communities. A few examples of the harmful causes they advocate for include: supporting criminalization of sex work, increasing racial profiling, boarder control and policing, apprehension of children and youth, increasing surveillance by hotel and transportation service providers and neighbourhood organizations, and imposing punitive bylaws.

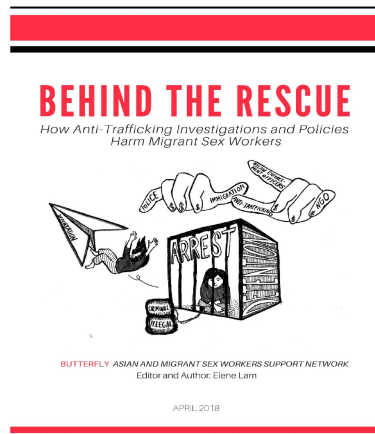


What are the impacts of harmful anti-human trafficking policies?

Sex workers, particularly youth, racialized (e.g. Asian), and migrant sex workers, are silenced. Their agency is denied through the imposition of a “trafficked victim” being lured into the sex industry narrative. These sex workers are described as fearful, ignorant, brain washed and not able to consent to their need to be rescued.² Anti-human trafficking policies contextualize complex experiences of economic and social vulnerability caused by intersecting systematic oppressions (e.g. ableism, racism, classism, sexism) and problematic policies (e.g. land dispossession and displacement, housing and income insecurity, over-incarceration, a discriminatory immigration system) as human trafficking.

The Problem with “Raid and Rescue”:

“Raid and rescue”³ is being used to “identify” and “rescue” victims. Since sex work is conflated with trafficking, anti-trafficking raids become anti-sex work raids. These raids result in increased harassment, apprehensions of youth, surveillance, arrests, detainments, and deportations. This divests and debilitates sex workers’ livelihoods, sources of income, and support networks, and thereby increases their vulnerability to experience exploitation and violence. Involvement of law enforcement enhances dangerous working conditions and sex workers are left to carry the weight of the harmful impacts resulting from the raids. Sex workers may be forced to work underground and accept violence or vulnerable situations in order to avoid interaction with police.



“The law claims to protect our safety, but this is opposite. I supported and protected the safety of other sex workers by answered the call and screen the clients. They felt safer by having someone help them communicate with the clients. If something bad happens, I would kick away the bad clients. However, I was arrested and charged. I lost everything: I lost my home, my income and even my dog. My psychological and mental health is severely affected. Why am I being charged and punished when I helped other workers?”

Jane, who was arrested and imprisoned

“I am not a trafficked victim. I just want to work. I am using my own hand and my own body to earn a living to support myself and my family. When they arrested me, they searched all my stuff and took my money. The \$7,000 the police took was the income I earned from two months. Why did they arrest me and take my money when the police said they are protecting me?”
Lin Chan

² Lam, E., & Lepp, A. (2019). Butterfly: Resisting the harms of anti-trafficking policies and fostering peer-based organising in Canada. *Anti-Trafficking Review*, 12, 91-107. <https://www.antitraffickingreview.org/index.php/atrjournal/article/view/379/314>

³ Walters, K. (2017, November 25). Beyond ‘raid and rescue’ Time to acknowledge the damage being done. *Beyond Trafficking and Slavery*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/beyond-raid-and-rescue-time-to-acknowledge-damage-being-done/>

What's wrong with anti-trafficking funded programs?

- **They identify/"red flag" trafficked victims⁴**

Trafficking "detection" tools are often based on racist, classist and sexist ideologies about people who work in the sex industry. These indicators are problematic because they are based on assumptions, myths, and misconceptions related to trafficking, sex work, and migration. This also upholds a culture of longstanding racist and sexist stereotypes of Asian woman in society. These faulty indicators increase surveillance of marginalized communities and create barriers for sex workers to be listened to, and to access supports and services.

- **They produce trafficking victims**

Service providers often need to frame conditions and experiences of sex work, poverty, and homelessness as human trafficking in order to fulfill funding requirements. This results in a large number of people being categorized as trafficking victims to justify requests and renewals for additional funding, as well as increased surveillance, policing, and criminalization.

- **They create barriers to accessing support**

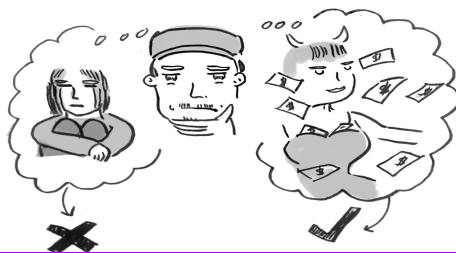
Anti-trafficking programs often require people to identify themselves as trafficked victims or "at risk" if they do not want to experience barriers of access to support and services. These programs focus on and filter information related to selected trafficking indicators. Sex workers' stories may be distorted, and their experiences and needs may be neglected or unaddressed altogether.

Exiting Programs: A Violation of Self-Determination:

Exiting programs aim to stop sex workers from working in sex industries. These approaches reinforce the assumption that the work is inherently immoral and 'problematic' and the only way moving forward requires individuals to uproot their lives and absolve themselves from anything related to sex work. This ignores the agency and decision-making power of sex workers. Instead of offering requested supports, exiting programs become points of surveillance, preventing the development of trusting relationships, and pushing sex workers and others away from support and services.

I just want to work! Why do some people keep saying I am a victim of trafficking? I just want to survive and work. I am treated as if I'm the mud on the floor. Anyone can step on me. I can't speak out because my work is a crime [...]"

Wing Yuen



⁴ Kempadoo, K., McFayden, N., Pilon, P., Sterling, A., Mackenzie, A. (2017). Challenging Trafficking in Canada. *Centre for Feminist Research York University*. <https://cfr.info.yorku.ca/files/2017/06/Challenging-Trafficking-in-Canada-Policy-Brief-2017.pdf>

Police forcibly entering into the bedroom of a person they assume is a victim of domestic violence would be outrageous...



Why would it be okay to assume that sex workers are trafficking victims and violate their privacy?

“Some people say that they want the body rub parlours shut down because workers are being sexually assaulted, abused, and trafficked there. Similar to other industries, some of us may face bad bosses or experience violence at our workplaces. Human trafficking and sexual violence happen to many workers, e.g. caregivers, farm workers, restaurant workers. Violence can also occur in universities, churches, or martial relationships, however, we do not call for shutting them down or criminalizing them. Even though I am a victim of domestic violence and think that the institution of heterosexual marriage is the most exploitative system to women in the world, I still do not have the right to advocate for the criminalization of your marriage”.

A massage parlours worker

“We have too many sisters being arrested, detained and deported. Please stop your harm against us!” When I opened the door, more police arrived with him. They asked me if I had a boss or if someone took my money. They asked if I was being trafficked. I said “no.” After that, they asked me for my passport. They also forced me to unlock my phone and looked through my messages and photos. The police called CBSA, and I was arrested and deported after being detained for one month.”

- Wendy Liu

Examples of Harm Caused by Anti-Human Trafficking Organizations

The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking

1) The Centre conflates sex work with human trafficking⁵

In the report, Human Trafficking Corridors in Canada, escort services, illicit massage, outdoor solicitation, sex at a non-commercial location, and pornography are categorized as “*known types of sex trafficking*” (p. 17).

2) The Centre conflates massage parlours with human trafficking⁶

In the report, Human Trafficking Corridors in Canada, the Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking states that “[*the*] primary business of sex trafficking and commercial sex exchange is concealed under the façade of legitimate spa services” (p. 17).

3) The Centre urges the City of Toronto to police, enact restrictive bylaws against, and shut down body rub parlours and holistic centres in Toronto which are mainly run by Asian immigrant women

Barbara Gosse, former CEO of Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, stated “*why not shut them down first, before you identify that they should be legitimized*”⁷. Asian massage parlours are targeted by law enforcement. Some workers are not able to obtain licences, and are being ticketed and fined.

4) The Centre states that the aim of the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline is for folks to provide information and support. However, another major goal of the hotline is to collect data on human trafficking.

Barbara Gosse said to the CBC in 2019 that the “*hotline will allow her centre to gather information on when, where, and how often such cases come to light, which should in turn help focus efforts to eradicate the practice.*”⁸

5) The Centre works with private corporations and Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre (FINTRAC) to monitor, regulate, and racially profile massage businesses and sex industries. The information shared with law enforcement because sex work is criminalized, and financial activities related to sex work is considered money laundering. “We are now working to review records of Canadian Businesses to do a network analysis on the ownership of every holistic centre in Toronto to uncover evidence of possible criminal intent and collusion amongst owners.”^{9, 10}

⁵ The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking. (2021, February 22). Human trafficking corridors in Canada.

<https://www.canadiancentretoendhumantrafficking.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Human-Trafficking-Corridors-in-Canada-Report.pdf>

⁶ The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking.. (2021, February 22). Human trafficking corridors in Canada.

<https://www.canadiancentretoendhumantrafficking.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Human-Trafficking-Corridors-in-Canada-Report.pdf>

⁷ CityNews (2019, May 20, 2019). *Changes to body rub parlour rules prompt trafficking concerns.* [Video]. Youtube.

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=city+news+body+rub++2019

⁸ The Canadian Press. (2019, May 29). *New hotline to help human trafficking victims launches across Canada.*

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/human-trafficking-hotline-1.5153851>

⁹ The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking. (2018, April 10). *Comments for Toronto Municipal Licensing and Standards Committee.*

<https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2018/ls/comm/communicationfile-79532.pdf>

¹⁰ Trichur, R. (2023, March 10). Sex traffickers are using shell companies to launder illicit profits in Canada. The Globe and Mail.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-human-trafficking-shell-companies-money-laundering/>



Harmful advocacy activities of anti-trafficking organizations

'We live in fear every day. We have to speak up for ourselves and for our livelihoods. We cannot take any more tickets or fines. This racial bylaw has to be removed. If Newmarket politicians succeed, our businesses would be forced to shut down. We would all be forced to run out of town and lose all of our assets. We are not dishonourable trash to be removed from the city. We are not expendable labourers.'

- Sunny, massage worker in the Town of Newmarket

"I am not trafficked victim. I use my hand to support myself and family. Please stop shutting down our business and bringing more policing into our lives. Please stop imposing your moralistic, colonial, and religious ideas on me."

- Ching Li

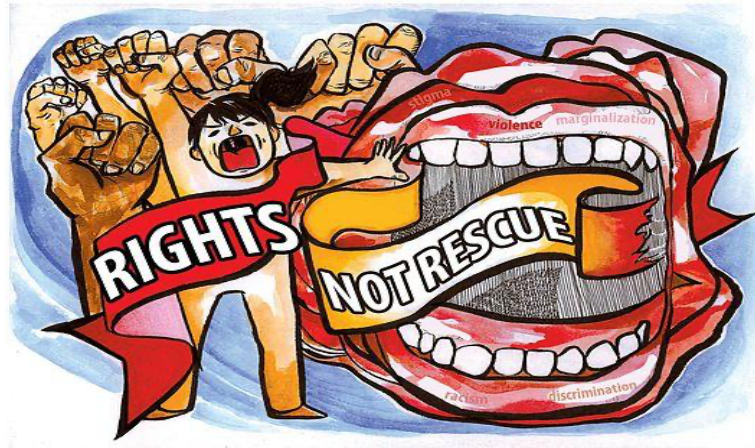
"We have too many sisters being arrested, detained and deported. Please stop your harm against us!"

-Mary Chan

"When I decided to explore my options around quitting working as a sex worker, I went to an organization that advertised to people looking to exit sex work after seeing a poster of theirs on a wall. I had hoped to make connections with other people who had successfully transitioned careers but was instead consistently talked to as a victim and had counsellors repeatedly rewrite my narrative and instead offer me ways to heal from my trauma through yoga and groups for trauma recovery and empowerment. As I was still seeing clients at the time, one counsellor even gave me the exercise to sit with myself after my session and "notice if I feel icky inside" which I felt was paternalistic and insulting. All of the device providers were social workers and no one had any lived experience or any evening understanding of what my work was actually like for me. I found the programming extremely disempowering and actually set me back for years from trying to make a change. I was already on my own personal healing journey but now I'm doing so with less confidence, self esteem and less financial security. " - anonymous

As a result of the harmful advocacy activities of anti-trafficking organizations, sex workers, massage workers, racialized peoples, and migrants are being harmed. Law enforcement officials are the foremost sources of violence in their lives. Members of these communities are racially profiled, harassed, arrested, detained, and deported. Their money and property are seized, and they are unable to use financial institutions. Their agency and autonomy are ignored and neglected. Children and youth are being apprehended as well. They are isolated and marginalized as their support networks are identified as "organized crime." Their workplaces are shut down, their livelihoods lost and they are subjected as both criminals and victims. They are forced to work underground, increasing their risk of violence and vulnerability.

Please support sex workers rights!
Stop the harms of anti-trafficking movements and policies!
(Butterfly)



<p>SUPPORT FULL DECRIMINALIZATION OF SEX WORK</p> <p>JOIN US! ACT NOW!</p>  <p>https://www.butterflysw.org/solidaristatement</p>	<p>We cannot tolerate it anymore!</p> <p>Racist attacks being waged by some anti-trafficking organizations against Asian massage parlours and sex workers must end</p>  <p>https://www.butterflysw.org/stop-racist-attacks</p>
	

Sources: “The regulation and policing of Asian migrant sex workers in Canada: A critical inquiry” (E. Lam, in progress).