



Sex Work ≠ Human Trafficking

What is sex work?

Sex work is the exchange of sexual services for money or other goods. It includes escorting, street-based sex work, exotic dancing, pornography, and more.

What is human trafficking?

Human trafficking involves recruiting, transporting, harbouring and/or exercising control, direction or influence over the movements of a person in order to exploit that person. Human trafficking occurs in industries such as agriculture, manufacturing, construction, domestic work, the sex industry, and many other industries.

The conflation of sex work and human trafficking

Oftentimes, sex work and human trafficking are seen as the same thing. However, we must listen to what people say about their own experiences and refrain from naming their experiences for them. Not everyone in the sex industry is trafficked; not everyone who is trafficked is in the sex industry.

Sometimes well-meaning anti-trafficking efforts can inadvertently cause harm to sex workers when they are not well thought through or informed by evidence-based research.

Why is it important to differentiate between sex work and human trafficking?

It's not just semantics. Confusing sex work and trafficking has very serious consequences both for people who are trafficked and for sex workers.



Some of the consequences of conflating sex work and trafficking include:



Education is critical in reducing misinformation and stigma. When people come together to share and learn from each other - such as at our 2019 provincial sex work conference (above) or one of our Curriculum for Change trainings (below, a training in Whitehorse) - change can happen.



- When the entire sex industry is understood as trafficking, a disproportionate amount of trafficking resources is diverted from other types of labour trafficking, which the International Labour Organization asserts are more pervasive than trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation.
- When the entire sex industry is understood as trafficking, only crimes that meet the trafficking threshold are of interest to police. Crimes such as assault, sexual assault, robbery and other serious crimes against sex workers are unaddressed. Predators seize this opportunity and act with impunity.
- The trafficking discourse portrays all sex workers as victims. Consequently, sex workers are excluded from sex work policy and legislative decision-making. Sex workers are also excluded from anti-trafficking policy-making despite being knowledgeable and well-positioned to address human trafficking.
- When ill-informed anti-trafficking strategies such as police raids on massage parlours or hotel stings are applied to sex workers, these increase sex workers' distrust of and animosity toward police. This results in underreporting of crimes when sex workers actually experience violence or exploitation. These anti-trafficking strategies also cause loss of income, displacement, and the detention and deportation of migrant sex workers. Misguided 'rescue' missions are counter-productive and increase sex workers' precarity and vulnerability to violence and exploitation.
- Conflating sex work with trafficking shapes the public perception that human trafficking is of epidemic proportions and is more prevalent than it is in reality.
- This conflation also reinforces sex work stigma and misinformation, including myths such as believing that no one would ever 'choose' sex work, or that all sex workers are forced into the sex industry.

Living in Community is a unique initiative that brings together diverse stakeholders to collaboratively improve the health and safety of sex workers. We undertake public education, policy advocacy, and sharing of our unique model of collaboration with the goal of creating communities that are healthy and safe for everyone.

Learn more at: www.livingincommunity.ca