



## Sex Work and Indigenous Peoples

### One Woman's Story

By Sekani D.

*with contributions from Living in Community*

When I was asked to write about Indigenous people and sex work, I had to take a lot of factors into consideration. Perhaps one of the biggest issues with sex work when it applies to Indigenous folks is "choice." The concept of choice is critical to understanding the difference between sex work and survival sex. These are two different types of sex work that I have much experience with.

#### **Sex work and survival sex**

First let's explore how choice applies to sex work. Sex work, as I know it, is a form of work where one sells sexual services to another person. That person is a client and they both consensually agree to a sexual service that is okay with both parties. In return for the sexual service, the sex worker gets paid for services rendered.

Next is survival sex work, which applies to a large part of my experience. Survival sex work is still work and is a sexual service provided for payment like sex work as I described above, except the survival sex worker does not have as much choice in whether they want to do survival sex or other work. What plays a big part in choice is opportunity. I can say that when I was stuck in the cycle of survival sex, I didn't have much opportunity to stop. I had to worry about rent – sure, I was on income assistance, but that only covered rent at shady single room occupancy (SRO) buildings where my safety was always compromised – and I also had to clothe and feed myself. I did try to find jobs, but it seemed the more identities I had, the more stigma I would receive. I am a Trans, Indigenous woman who was low income and was self-medicating with street drugs. I was told by many owners/managers that customers would not understand me.



**Sekani D. is from the Dakelh Nation. She is a Trans woman who works in the field of social justice. She shared this story about her experience with Living in Community.**

## Choice and opportunity

So, the difference between sex work and survival sex is the idea of choice and where opportunity plays a role. As an Indigenous person I see why so many of us are lacking opportunity, mostly due to the history of colonization and discrimination in this country. Many Indigenous people are dealing with intergenerational trauma and the impacts on our family and kinship systems. In addition, throughout history Indigenous women have been stereotyped as immoral and sexually loose. All of these issues play a role in limiting our options for ways to support ourselves.

## A holistic understanding

I would like to say that we must stop separating the two concepts of sex work and survival sex, especially when having conversations about sex worker safety. Both activities need to have safety at their core when deciding on laws and policies as well as how we implement and fund support systems. So, Indigenous sex work and survival sex work are two separate forms of sex work that can be differentiated by the concept of limited choices. Indigenous folks are impacted on a bigger level by racism, lack of opportunity, forced assimilation, and torture. These rights violations have deep roots in today's Canada. We must all work together to enhance the lives of Indigenous peoples to promote wellness and safety, no matter what form of work they participate in.

Mussi Choo for reading and sharing your most precious gift of your time.  
Sekani D.

Anti-colonial Indigenous women's organizations argue that repression and policing of sex workers increases the risk of violence to Indigenous women who are selling and trading sex. Many also call for the decriminalization of sex work and call attention to ongoing racism within the justice system.

Some of these organizations include:

- Sex Workers United Against Violence (SWUAV), Vancouver
- Vancouver Sex Workers' Rights Collective
- Native Youth Sexual Health Network, Canada and the USA
- Peers Victoria's SACRED program

**"Indigenous folks are impacted on a bigger level by racism, lack of opportunity, forced assimilation, and torture. These rights violations have deep roots in today's Canada."**

**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](http://www.livingincommunity.ca)