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# SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES:

ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO CARE FOR

# SEX WORKERS

IN ALBERTA

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**SafeLink**  
Alberta

## About SafeLink Alberta

SafeLink Alberta is a non-profit organization that has been serving and advocating for priority populations in Calgary and southern Alberta since 1983. Our mission is to reduce the risks associated with sexual activity and substance use through education, non-judgmental services, and harm reduction programming. Our vision is inclusive, empowered, and healthier communities.

## Land Acknowledgement

SafeLink Alberta is located on the traditional territories of the Niitsitapi, which includes the Siksika, the Piikani, and the Kainai; the Tsuut'ina, and the Îyâxe Nakoda and on land which borders the traditional territories of the Cree, Sioux, and Saulteaux bands of the Ojibwa, and everyone who makes their home in the Treaty 7 and Treaty 4 regions of Southern Alberta. We also acknowledge that we are located on the unceded Battle River Territory of the Métis Nation of Alberta.

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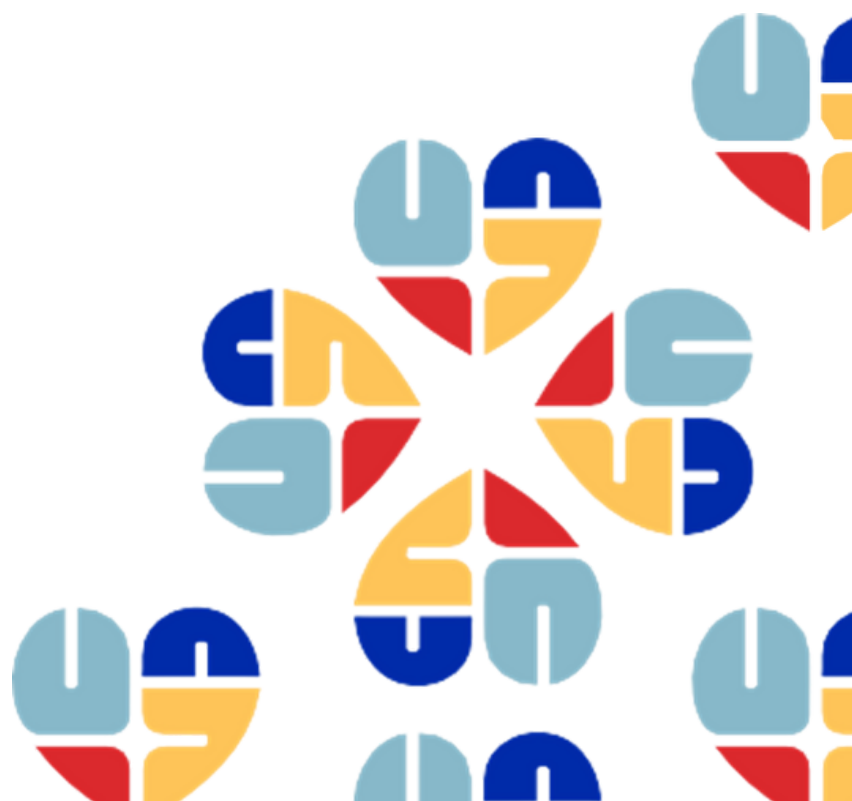
Women and Gender  
Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité  
des genres Canada

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# Executive Summary

With the financial support of Women and Gender Equality Canada, The Best Practices for Supporting Sex Workers toolkit was developed through a detailed review of literature and an environmental scan, 37 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with current sex workers and service providers, and the support of an advisory committee consisting of people with lived or living experience (PWLLE) in the sex industry. SafeLink Alberta began this research and data collection in January of 2022 to better understand the nature, prevalence, and impact of gender-based violence on participants who are engaged in sex work.

Findings from our research indicate that, despite assumptions to the contrary fueled by public discourse and popular media, the violence sex workers face here in Calgary is minimally interpersonal (e.g., sexual assault, physical violence, sexual harassment, street harassment, verbal abuse and threats, stalking, coercive control, online abuse, etc.) and largely institutional, systemic, and structural. Sex workers in Calgary face significant barriers when attempting to access local health care, supports, services, and legal recourse. That sex workers consistently identified a desire for service providers to listen and to see sex workers as human beings with valuable experiences and insights to share is a strong indicator that sex workers overwhelmingly leave these interactions feeling dehumanized.

This toolkit promotes gender equality by naming the barriers faced by the mostly women and gender non-conforming sex workers working in and around Calgary. It names the probable causes and potential consequences of those barriers and suggests current best practices for supporting people who are engaged in sex work. Although the foundation of this document is rooted in the principles of harm reduction, the evidence-based nature of the information and recommendations presented here will benefit all service providers supporting individuals in the sex work industry; organizations who do not identify as practitioners of harm reduction will still find value in this information.



Based on our extensive consultations, key considerations for supporting those in the sex work industry include the meaningful engagement of sex workers in the development, delivery, and evaluation of sex work programs and policies; stigma reduction practices such as respectful and person centered language; and an understanding of the current legal context and challenges in Canada.

Organizationally, the meaningful engagement of sex workers is a fundamental component to providing effective and sustainable support services for people who work in the sex industry. Employing sex workers and/or utilizing the support of an advisory committee consisting of PWLLE within your organization are critical to maintaining relevancy and impact. People with lived or living experience best understand the nuance of the sex industry, and possess a unique understanding of the potential benefits and issues associated with sex work. PWLLE are key to providing services to other members of the community and can increase the trust and credibility of organizations to service users.

To practice this within our own organization, SafeLink Alberta delivers the Shift program in Calgary for current or former sex workers, employs a sex worker in a peer support role, and supports a longstanding advisory committee comprised of PWLLE in the sex industry. Advisory members are compensated as experts. We have also offered external training around sex work for many years. Formerly known as Shifting Perspectives, our curriculum was significantly updated as a result of and compliment to this toolkit. We now offer education as a three part series:

- ◆ Sex Work 101: What is Sex Work?
- ◆ Sex Work 102: Laws and Legislation
- ◆ Sex Work 103: Stigma and Support

Training is free, offered virtually or in person, and includes co-facilitation or lived experience speaking by current or former sex workers. SafeLink Alberta also offers customized trainings to meet the needs of your team or organization, as well as practice consultations to address questions or challenges with implementation. Although service providers are the primary audience for both the education curriculum and this toolkit, the information within benefits all community members. Please visit [safelinkalberta.ca](https://safelinkalberta.ca) for more information.

# Methodology

Research informing this toolkit began in January 2022. In addition to an extensive review of existing literature, and in keeping with the agency's commitment to meaningful engagement of people with lived/living experience (PWLLE), researchers at SafeLink Alberta conducted a total of thirty-seven (37) semi-structured qualitative interviews with:

24

**Service providers**  
across eleven (11) agencies

8

**Current sex workers**

5

**Advisory Committee Members**  
all of whom are PWLLE in the sex industry

Concerned about the lack of demographic diversity among the PWLLE respondents and advisors, researchers also undertook an environmental scan of social media during early 2023 that focused on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. The results of the project are broken into PWLLE & Service Providers and were used to inform this toolkit and SafeLink programs.




## Sex worker responses

While sex worker responses were diverse, one commonality was the desire to be listened to and seen as human beings with valuable experiences and insights to share, and the hope to create a more just and equitable society for themselves and others. By listening to sex workers, community members and service providers can gain a better understanding of the complex issues sex workers face, and can work with them to advocate and/or to develop policies and practices that are informed by sex worker perspectives and experiences. Doing so will reduce harm, increase safety and support for sex workers, and promote greater social and economic justice. For these reasons, SafeLink Alberta is committed to collaborating with PWLLE in the sex industry, and it is their perspectives, suggestions, and requests that are enumerated throughout this toolkit.

First invoked by the South African disability rights movement in the 1990s<sup>1</sup>, the slogan “nothing about us without us” was a prominent slogan of the HIV crisis in the 1970's and is now used broadly in the context of social justice. It aims to promote the inclusion of voices and perspectives of marginalized communities in the decision-making processes that affect them. It emphasizes the importance of autonomy

and self-representation for marginalized groups, as well as the need for those in power to acknowledge and respect the agency of those they aim to serve. It is crucial that non-sex workers listen to PWLLE in the sex industry because the former are often subject to significant stigma and discrimination, and their voices are often silenced or ignored — even in conversations that are meant to be about or for them.

In speaking out and advocating for themselves, sex workers aim to increase understanding and acceptance of their profession, as well as to improve their working conditions. Sex workers also want to be recognized as valid and important members of society who deserve the same rights and protections as other workers. Among sex workers who have experienced trauma and other negative health outcomes, speaking



*“nothing about  
us without us”*





out can be an important part of the healing process. When their stories are heard and their experiences are validated, they can begin to feel empowered and reclaim agency over their lives.

## Service provider responses

The community service workers and health care providers with whom SafeLink Alberta spoke with to develop this toolkit asked for help in three broad areas:



Increased knowledge about language and terminology, the landscape of Alberta's sex industry, and the difference between sex work, sexual exploitation, and sex trafficking.



Safety planning and how best to help someone whom they suspect is being trafficked.



Best practices for supporting sex workers who are using substances.

As such, this toolkit offers guidance in these areas and suggests best practices for supporting and respecting sex workers as human beings by creating safe spaces for them to access community resources.

### CONSIDER THIS

01

“There is still a need for some providers to learn how to better converse with, diagnose, and care for people in sex work jobs”<sup>2</sup>



# Sex Work [seks-wurk] noun

At SafeLink Alberta, and following the guidance of the International Labour Organization, we believe that sex work is work. According to the Canadian Public Health Association, "sex work" refers to the "consensual exchange of sexual services between adults for money or goods."<sup>3</sup> Further, it involves "individuals [of all genders], and can be undertaken in a variety of venues, such as working as escorts, from private homes, in strip clubs, in brothels, and seeking clients in public locations"<sup>3</sup>

## LEARN MORE

SafeLink Alberta's Education team regularly offers 'Sex Work 101: What is Sex Work?' as a 2 hour training. Register for an upcoming training on the SafeLink Alberta website.

The term 'sex work' reflects a recognition that sex work is a form of labour and can be a legitimate occupation, and that sex workers, like all workers, have rights and deserve to be protected from violence, discrimination, and stigma. The term was coined and is used by PWLLE in the sex industry. It is not appropriate to use other terms, such as "prostitute" or "whore," which are often stigmatizing and derogatory.

## Demographics

Because sex work is a stigmatized and criminalized activity, accurate data collection on the demographics of sex workers remains a challenge. As with all economic sectors, however, the sex industry is a complex and multifaceted one that involves individuals from a wide variety of socio-economic, ethno-cultural, and educational backgrounds as well as a range of gender and sexual identities. Further, reasons for engaging in sex work are often complex and multifaceted. However, recent research indicates that "compared to other Canadian workers, Canadian sex workers are younger, more likely to identify as women, be Indigenous, and not be heterosexual. They are also less likely to have finished high school or own their own home, or to be currently married or living common law".<sup>11</sup> Some sex workers may engage in sex work as their primary source of income, while others may do it to supplement their income.



## Types of Sex Work



Definitions for the above may vary somewhat depending upon the person you're working with and their experiences; we recommend asking directly, or reaching out to another sex worker or service provider for more information.



## Historical Context

A thriving adult consensual sex industry has existed in Alberta since the beginning of colonial settlement in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Although technically illegal at the time, the Northwest Mounted Police and, later, various fledgling municipal police units, tended to ignore the buying and selling of sexualized services for several reasons, not least of which is that members were among the most frequent buyers.<sup>5,6</sup> Additionally, sex workers, whose “entertainments” were the only available source of leisure activity for the hundreds of unattached men who arrived in Edmonton and Calgary daily to build a province, were highly valued because they kept mischief down and morale up.<sup>7</sup> Because their clientele came from all echelons, Alberta’s early sex workers also served as key informants; they could easily alert law enforcement of any planned illegal or nefarious activity.<sup>5</sup> For these and other reasons, sex workers and law enforcement officials enjoyed a mutually beneficial, if not entirely companionable, relationship until just after World War II.

Historically, sex industries in Calgary, Edmonton, and other urban areas throughout Alberta were brothel-based; groups of women would all work together, affording both increased safety and professional camaraderie.<sup>5</sup> As police surveillance increased in the early to mid-twentieth century, brothels gradually disappeared, along with the women’s autonomy and control over their working conditions. Although sex workers were in high demand during and immediately after World War II by soldiers stationed at and demobilized to military installations across Alberta, the focus in the

second half of the twentieth century was to eradicate Canada’s sex industry — a lofty goal that sex workers, researchers, and activists have argued for many decades is unattainable.<sup>8</sup>

Sex workers and law enforcement once held a mutually beneficial, even companionable relationship.



## Alberta Today

This historical trajectory has contributed to the typical understanding fueled by the news and popular media of sex work as in person, full service, and street-based (think: Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*). However, while pockets of this more conventional approach to sex work do remain, Alberta's sex industry has largely moved online. This reflects a global trend in not only the methods of buying and selling sexual services, but also of the types of available sexual services.<sup>9</sup>

Because the overwhelming majority of the advertising, selling, and provision of sexualized services in Alberta now happens via digital platforms, it is important to understand that you will likely never know that someone is a sex worker unless they tell you. In fact, if you see someone you suspect to be doing sex work in public, the chances are very high that that person is engaged in street-based sex work (e.g. where sex workers meet clients in public spaces). Street-based sex work is often associated with individuals who are experiencing homelessness, poverty, and/or other forms of economic or social vulnerability.

Most sex workers in Alberta today, even those who are engaged in in-person, full-service work, are not street-based; they are likely providing private, tailored services such as escorting, "domming," "sugaring," or a "girlfriend experience".<sup>10</sup> They may also work as erotic performers in clubs. When asked, "What has sex work looked like for you?" our respondents named not only in-person, full service work, but also the creation of kink and erotic content in the form of live and/or on-demand pictures and videos, "camming," the provision of telephone based sexualized services, and membership in sex worker-friendly on-line platforms that enable sex workers to offer subscriptions, clip sales, private messaging, live streaming, and videos.



Today, the majority of services within the sex industry are provided online via digital platforms.

# Sex Work ≠ Sex Trafficking

Sex work is the consensual exchange of sexual services for goods or money; it is not the same as sex trafficking. Although mainstream media often conflates the two, human trafficking is a human rights violation.<sup>12</sup>

The United Nations defines human trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of people through force, fraud, or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit.”<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Alberta’s Action Coalition on Human Trafficking (ACT) defines trafficking as “the act of forcing, coercing, or deceiving an individual into selling sex or labour for the personal gain of another”.<sup>14</sup> This includes labour, sex, and organ trafficking.

According to ACT Alberta, trafficking requires three elements:<sup>14</sup>



Action - such as transportation, receipt, transfer, harbouring, or recruitment.



Means - such as threats, abduction, abuse of power, force, coercion, or fraud/deception.

**AND**



Purpose - such as forced labour, removal of organs, sexual exploitation, servitude, or slavery.

What is often referred to as ‘sex trafficking’ is often in reality a description of poor working conditions for sex workers. Examples include the unfair distribution of earnings, lack of autonomy in working hours, lack of choice in clients, and dangerous working locations. These are conditions that are unjust, violent, and exploitative, but they do not meet the conditions of trafficking.



It is important to note that the conversation around trafficking is not apolitical. It evokes imagery of random kidnappings to be harboured for sexual purposes and is strongly associated with Black men taking white women as part of the reproduction of the myth of 'white slavery'. It may also create images of south Asian women being coerced across borders to become helpless within the sex industry. Although the language being used to communicate these ideas seeped in anti-Black racism and xenophobia has changed, the roots remain intact. The impact of this moral panic on our policies has led to Black sex workers being charged with their own trafficking – not to mention the disproportionate rates of policing that Black sex workers experience due to criminalization.

Establishments where im/migrant Asian sex workers conduct business are disproportionately targeted for raids, where not only are there rarely, if ever, human trafficking cases found, but sex workers are being deported due to our current laws. Not only is it foundational to understand that sex work is not the same as sex trafficking, but it is vital that the discourse around sex trafficking itself be examined and critiqued.

This is not to say that there are no instances in which people are forced into the sex industry beyond the extent to which we are all forced to work to survive. However, the issue at hand is not around sex work, it is around forced labour; and the continued panic on sex trafficking is actively harming sex workers, especially im/migrant and Black sex workers.

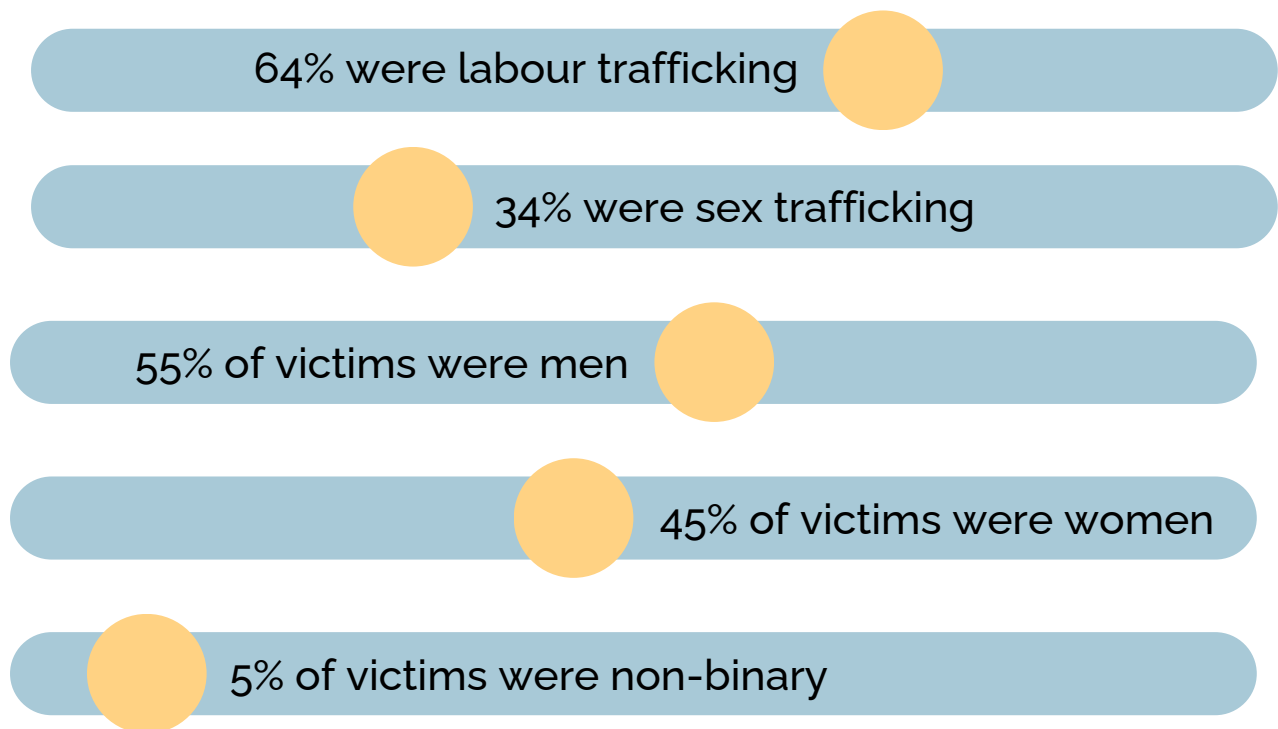
## CONSIDER THIS

02

A literature review of over 700 sources on human trafficking found that less than half contained evidence-based research.<sup>15</sup>



In Alberta, trafficking of all forms is found in both urban and rural settings. According to 2021 data compiled by ACT (Action Coalition on Human Trafficking) Alberta regarding human trafficking, of all cases:<sup>14</sup>



In Alberta, while women and non-binary people are trafficked, likely for exploitative work in the sex industry, the primary victims of human trafficking seem to be largely men who are being trafficked for the purposes of labour exploitation in Alberta's factories and fields. Despite this, though, "[v]ery little is known about trafficking of men and boys, either for sexual exploitation or bonded labor".<sup>15</sup>

Other sites where trafficking victims may be found include nail salons, hotels, and private homes.<sup>16</sup> Traffickers can be anyone: intimate partners, employers, recruiters, family, and agents of organized crime (e.g., gangs).

For support with suspected or disclosed trafficking, we recommend contacting an organization specializing in trafficking information and/or support, such as ACT Alberta, for guidance.

*Sex Workers are allies in identifying sex trafficking*



# Laws Impacting Sex Workers

## PCEPA

Canada's current legislation aiming to address the issue of human trafficking and prostitution is called the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA). Enacted in 2014, PCEPA focuses explicitly on ending the demand for paid sexual services nationwide.<sup>17</sup> With this goal in mind, the legislation makes it illegal to:



It is not illegal in Canada to sell one's own sexual services, however the aspects of the sex industry that are illegal make engaging in the selling of one's own sexual services almost impossible and, for the majority of sex workers, increasingly unsafe.

## LEARN MORE

SafeLink Alberta's Education team regularly offers 'Sex Work 102: Laws and Legislation' as a 2 hour training. Register for an upcoming training on the SafeLink Alberta website.

Research shows that current Canadian legislation causes sex workers to experience significantly reduced access to critical health and sex worker/community-led services<sup>18</sup> as well as “increase[d] aggressive law enforcement surveillance”.<sup>19</sup>

In study after study, sex workers across Canada — including SafeLink Alberta participants — report that since the enactment of PCEPA in 2014, they have experienced a decrease in:



Simultaneously, sex workers have also noted a sharp increase in barriers to police protection and the displacement and isolation of workers, especially those that are street-based. Both have led to an increase in the risk of violence.<sup>20</sup>

More information about PCEPA and the current advocacy efforts to increase safety and autonomy for sex workers are detailed below.



## Im/Migrant Sex Workers

Although *R. v. Bedford* (Supreme Court of Canada) “affirmed the legality of exchanging cash for sexual services and the harms posed to sex workers by criminalizing policies”,<sup>21(p6)</sup> this legality applies only to Canadian citizens and does not extend to im/migrants to Canada. Consequently, it remains illegal for those in “precariously-documented position[s]”<sup>21(p2)</sup> to engage in sex work. This includes: being a refugee, a landed immigrant, on a temporary visa (e.g., work permit, student), or legal permanent resident. In other words, “[t]he federal government forbids foreign nationals from working for an employer offering striptease, erotic dance, escort services, or erotic massages”,<sup>11</sup> and non-citizens can be deported if caught engaging in any aspect of the sex industry (this definition includes roles like bartending or even cleaning at establishments). Sex worker rights advocates argue that this violates the human rights of im/migrants.

For more information, check out the Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform’s information sheet on “Migrant Sex Workers and Sex Work-Related Laws”.



## Municipal Legislation

Calgary Municipal law states that anyone offering "adult oriented" services must obtain a municipal business license to do so. While "adult oriented" is a loose and subjective term, the law means to include the following in that definition:

- *Dates or escorts*
- *Dating or escort agencies*
- *Introduction services*
- *Exotic entertainers*
- *Nude or semi-nude dancers*
- *Exotic entertainment agencies*
- *Nude or semi-nude modelling or model studios*

Adult Entertainment Business Guide  
for the City of Calgary:  
<https://www.calgary.ca/for-business/licences/adult-entertainment.html>

Applicants must complete a statutory declaration, provide proof of employment from a licensed agency, present two pieces of identification, one of which is government issued photo ID, live in Calgary, and agree not to operate between the hours of 2:30am and 7:00am. The minimum cost for a new license in 2023 includes a base fee of \$785 plus an Exotic Entertainer license for \$237. License for an Exotic Entertainment Agency is an additional \$344. Fees do not include costs related to required permits to meet land use approval, or to any third-party approvals or inspections that may be required to obtain the license. Business licenses must be renewed annually.

The cost and list of requirements detailed above is restrictive or prohibitive for many sex workers in Calgary, particularly those of lower income, those who are non-residents, and those who are already over-surveilled, such as Black, Asian, Indigenous, and houseless sex workers.. These barriers perpetuate a cycle of conflict with law enforcement and increase social stigmatization.



# Stigma, Slut-Shaming, and Whorephobia

## CONSIDER THIS

03

Research shows that sex workers who are stigmatized may be less likely to seek medical care or treatment, either because they fear discrimination or because they lack access to healthcare services that are tailored to their needs.<sup>2,22,23</sup>

Fear of stigma and discrimination at the hands of community service workers and health care providers was the largest barrier to care identified by the individuals we spoke with. This corresponds with research, which indicates that sex workers who are stigmatized may be less likely to seek medical care or treatment.<sup>2,22,23</sup>

"Stigma is the single most damaging part of sex work."  
~ Sultry Miss Em

Stigma is defined as "the cooccurrence of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination in a context in which power is exercised".<sup>22</sup> In other words, stigma against sex workers refers to negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours towards individuals who engage in sex work. Broadly speaking, sex work and those who engage in it are "associated with three types of 'taint': physical taint from contact with bodily fluids and bodies, social taint from engaging in servile work and being potentially associated with other stigmatized groups (such as sex work clients, substance users), and moral taint from having their work be perceived as 'somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue'".<sup>2(p330)</sup>

## Assumptions

Reflective of these research findings, our respondents reported experiencing stigma based on the following erroneous assumptions that all sex workers are:

"we didn't all make bad life choices to end up here. I 100% chose this job and LOVE it." - Survey Respondent



*Straight, cisgender, women*

*Uneducated*

*"Survivors" or "victims"*

*Poor, dirty & need saving*

*Drug users*

Stigma can manifest in various ways, including discrimination, harassment, violence, and social exclusion, and is considered a fundamental cause of population health inequalities.<sup>22</sup> For example, the experiences of im/migrant sex workers in Canada are often conflated with victims of human trafficking. This increases both im/migrants' and sex workers' experiences of discrimination and stigma, which then further contributes to obstacles they already face, such as barriers to justice,<sup>24</sup> community services, and workplace safety.

### LEARN MORE

SafeLink Alberta's Education team regularly offers 'Sex Work 103: Stigma and Support' as a 2 hour training. Register for an upcoming training on the SafeLink Alberta website.

Sex work-related stigmatization is a constant in the lives of our respondents. It manifests in three distinct ways:

## 1 Lack of Focus on Mental Health

Respondents pointed out that, contrary to the common assumption that sex work is an easy way to earn extra money, the job involves providing constant emotional and psychological support to clients, which can be exhausting. Interviewees also reported that most service providers tend to neglect this aspect of their work because they do not realize the toll it takes to be 'on' all the time for dates. As is true for the general population, if a sex worker's mental health is in decline, it will be difficult for them to access support – especially if their previous experiences with service providers have been negative.

## 2 Health Care Assumptions

Engaging in sex work is just one aspect of a person's identity; however several PWLLE who participated in this study expressed frustration that service providers too frequently focus in on that one aspect while neglecting to provide them with the holistic medical care and wrap-around support as they would for any of their non-sex worker clients. As one interviewee put it:

*"They can't see the forest for the trees, which is disheartening when attempting to access services."*

Relatedly, respondents were frustrated by frequent questions from service providers about the number of sexual partners they have. Although a care provider's goal in asking about their clients' sexual history is typically to ascertain whether or not that client may be at increased risk for sexually transmitted and blood borne infections, the number of partners is actually irrelevant if patients have the results from a full panel test. Critics of this question – including the sex workers consulted in the creation of this toolkit – also point out that it is too often "used as a way to shame people for having 'too few' or 'too many' sexual experiences".<sup>25</sup>





### 3

## Lack of Inclusive Language

Many of the sex workers with whom we spoke named the lack of person-centred and inclusive language as a major barrier to care. This showed up for them on health care forms that use binary gender categories and when literature, clinic signage, and staff use terms like 'prostitution' or 'prostitute' to refer to sex work and sex workers. These are often a deterrent to seeking care.

"Why does it matter how many partners I have, when I'm here for something completely unrelated to my sexual activity?"  
- Interviewee


Erroneous assumptions about sex workers that can lead to stigmatization and discrimination against sex workers are fueled by several interconnected factors,<sup>26</sup> including:


- Moral and religious beliefs: Many people in Canada hold moral and religious beliefs that view sex work as immoral, sinful, or unacceptable. These beliefs can influence how individuals view and treat sex workers and can contribute to societal stigmatization.
- Criminalization: Most activities related to sex work are criminalized in Canada. This can lead to sex workers being viewed as criminals or "deviants," which contributes to stigma.
- Media portrayals: Media representations of sex workers often reinforce stereotypes and negative attitudes. For example, sex workers are often portrayed as drug users or victims of abuse, rather than as autonomous individuals making a choice to engage in sex work.<sup>27</sup>
- Lack of legal protection: As discussed in the previous section, sex workers in Canada lack legal protections and workplace rights. This vulnerability can be used to further stigmatize sex workers as "unworthy" of legal protection or respect or paint them as 'victims' needing to be saved.
- Sexism and misogyny: Sex work is often associated with women, and sex workers are often viewed as having less agency or power than their (usually male) clients. This can contribute to the stigmatization of sex workers as powerless or victimized.





## Consequences


In addition to limited access to health care, the other related consequences of stigma against sex workers in Canada include:

 **Increased risk of violence and exploitation:** Sex workers who are stigmatized may be less likely to seek help from law enforcement or other authorities if they are victimized, fearing that they will be blamed or not taken seriously. This can make them more vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

 **Social exclusion:** Stigmatization of sex workers can lead to their exclusion from society, including housing, employment, and social services.

 **Increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs):** Stigma can prevent sex workers from accessing information and resources to protect themselves from STIs, which can in turn lead to increased rates of infection.

 **Economic hardship:** Stigma against sex workers can limit their employment options and lead to financial instability, which can make it difficult to make a living or leave the sex industry should they wish it.

 **Increased rates of incarceration:** Stigma against sex workers can lead to criminalization and higher rates of incarceration, which can further exacerbate the negative consequences of stigmatization.

### CONSIDER THIS

04

“Sex workers have much higher unmet health care needs than the general population”.<sup>2</sup>



## Sex Work and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the sex work industry in Alberta, as it has in many other parts of the world. Due to physical distancing measures and the closure of or restricted access to businesses, many sex workers have experienced a decrease in clients and income. Many sex workers have also had to adapt to new safety protocols and adjust their services, such as offering virtual sessions or outdoor services, to mitigate the risks of transmitting or contracting COVID-19.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, sex workers who rely on in-person services may be at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 due to the intimate nature of their work and the potential for exposure to respiratory droplets. This has led to increased concerns about their health and safety, as well as the need for additional support and resources.

The pandemic has also highlighted pre-existing issues faced by sex workers, including the stigmatization of their work and lack of legal and economic protections. The stigma and discrimination already faced by sex workers have been exacerbated by the pandemic, with some people blaming them for the spread of the virus.<sup>29</sup> Further, sex workers across Canada have been unable to access emergency income supports that the federal and/or provincial government made available for people whose livelihoods have been impacted by COVID-19.<sup>11,30</sup> Sex workers in Alberta have also reported difficulties accessing healthcare and support services during the pandemic, including testing for COVID-19 and mental health services.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for greater protections and support for sex workers in Alberta and beyond. It has underscored the importance of recognizing sex work as legitimate work and of ensuring that sex workers have access to the same rights and protections as other workers in order to ensure their health, safety, and well-being.



## Perception of Risk

Some researchers and organizations argue that sex work is inherently risky because of its association with poverty, marginalization, and discrimination. They contend that sex workers face higher risks of violence, abuse, exploitation, and health problems than other workers.

It is important to recognize, however, that sex work is work, and this work is no more or less inherently “risky” than any other job. Sex work is complex and diverse, and experiences and risks may vary widely depending on factors such as the type and geographic location of the work and an individual sex worker’s gender, age, immigration status, and other dimensions of identity that operate as social determinants of their overall health. For example, claims that sex workers are particularly vulnerable to contracting sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBIs) are based on little actual evidence. It may be the case that some sex workers are at higher risk of STBBIs,<sup>31</sup> but so are some members of the broader population (e.g., there has been an alarming syphilis outbreak across Alberta since 2019). This is why, in 2019, the Canadian Guidelines on STBBI transmission were updated, removing the section that specifically named sex workers as a high-risk population group.<sup>32</sup> The revised guidelines now focus on the diagnosis, treatment and follow-up of STBBI based on behavioural risk factors rather than any population group.

With regard to an increased risk of assault and abuse, women—regardless of profession, face high rates of Gender Based Violence (GBV). Stats Canada reports that 79% of reports to police of GBV are from women.<sup>33</sup> According to the Canadian Women’s Foundation, if sex workers are at a higher risk, it is because of “severe health and rights inequalities”.<sup>12</sup> If we take a look at GBV among sex workers, we find they align with rates of violence against women in general. For example, a 1998 study of 130 sex workers in San Francisco, found that “82% had been physically assaulted; 83% had been threatened with a weapon; and 68% had been raped” in the course of their work in the sex industry.<sup>34</sup>

The researchers referenced above primarily interviewed street-based sex workers for these studies whose intersectional identities lead to multiple contextual factors (e.g., experiences of poverty, racism, sexism, etc.) that, outside of sex work, put them at an increased risk for violence in a society where gender-based violence is ubiquitous. <sup>35</sup> As noted above, street based sex work is only a fraction of the industry.

In other words, the fact that those interviewed for the study engaged in sex work is not necessarily the primary cause of the high rates of assault and abuse they experienced. Researchers at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine also found that sex workers who have experienced “repressive policing” such as arrest, extortion, and violence from police are three times more likely to experience sexual or physical violence.<sup>37</sup>

Further, while research shows that sex workers do consistently report high levels of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, that same research also shows that the selling of sexual services is not the primary cause of those symptoms. Rather, PTSD symptoms in sex workers are the result of multiple factors, including: workers’ racial identity, their experiences of discrimination and a lack of control over their working conditions, the site of selling sex, and responding to their clients’ perceived sexual entitlement and/or acts of violence.<sup>37</sup> In fact, sex workers involved in SafeLink Alberta’s local study overwhelmingly indicated that it is primarily the ongoing fear and management of discrimination, judgement, and stigma —along with concerns about negative encounters with police—that fuel any mental health problems they may experience.

Sex work is not inherently risky, and any potential harms can be minimized with strategies and supports.

## Moving away from a "risk" mindset

It is crucial to listen to the voices and experiences of sex workers, as well as to engage in evidence-based research and policymaking that accounts for the complexity and diversity of the industry. Many Canadian sex workers and their advocates demonstrate quite convincingly that sex work can be conducted safely, and that it is therefore no more inherently dangerous than other forms of work that are also frequently termed "risky," such as construction work, mining, law enforcement, and frontline healthcare. They argue that any potential risks typically associated with sex work are actually the direct result of the criminalization and/or strict regulation of most aspects of Canada's sex industry under PCEPA. This, in combination with attempts to navigate the resulting social stigma, concerns about negative encounters with police, and the various overlapping identity categories that may negatively affect their health and well-being, are what creates risk for sex workers.<sup>32,37-40</sup>

The potential risks of engaging in sex work are not inherent; they are the manufactured result of political and legal decisions that prioritize the perceived needs of communities over the human rights of individual sex workers and, in the process, reinforce negative stereotypes that produce stigma. But here's the good news: because the risks of engaging in sex work are not inherent, they can be reduced, if not eliminated altogether.

See below for more information on safety planning for sex workers and advocacy efforts to challenge systemic violence.



# Lateral Violence

SafeLink Alberta clients have identified lateral violence among and between sex workers as a significant problem. Lateral violence is a term used to describe harmful behaviours and actions that occur between individuals or groups who share similar social or cultural backgrounds. This type of violence can occur in any community or group, but it is often seen in marginalized or oppressed communities<sup>41</sup> where there is a lack of resources, power, or representation.

Examples of lateral violence can include gossip, spreading rumours, bullying, shunning, undermining, and sabotaging the efforts of others. These actions can have a significant impact on individuals and communities, leading to feelings of isolation, mistrust, and disempowerment.

Lateral violence between and among sex workers is colloquially referred to as “the whore-archy” and is a form of internalized whorephobia that manifests as discrimination against and stigmatization of other sex workers.

Lateral violence is often the result of internalized oppression and can be seen as a way for individuals to express their frustrations and anger in a way that is directed at those who are similar to them.

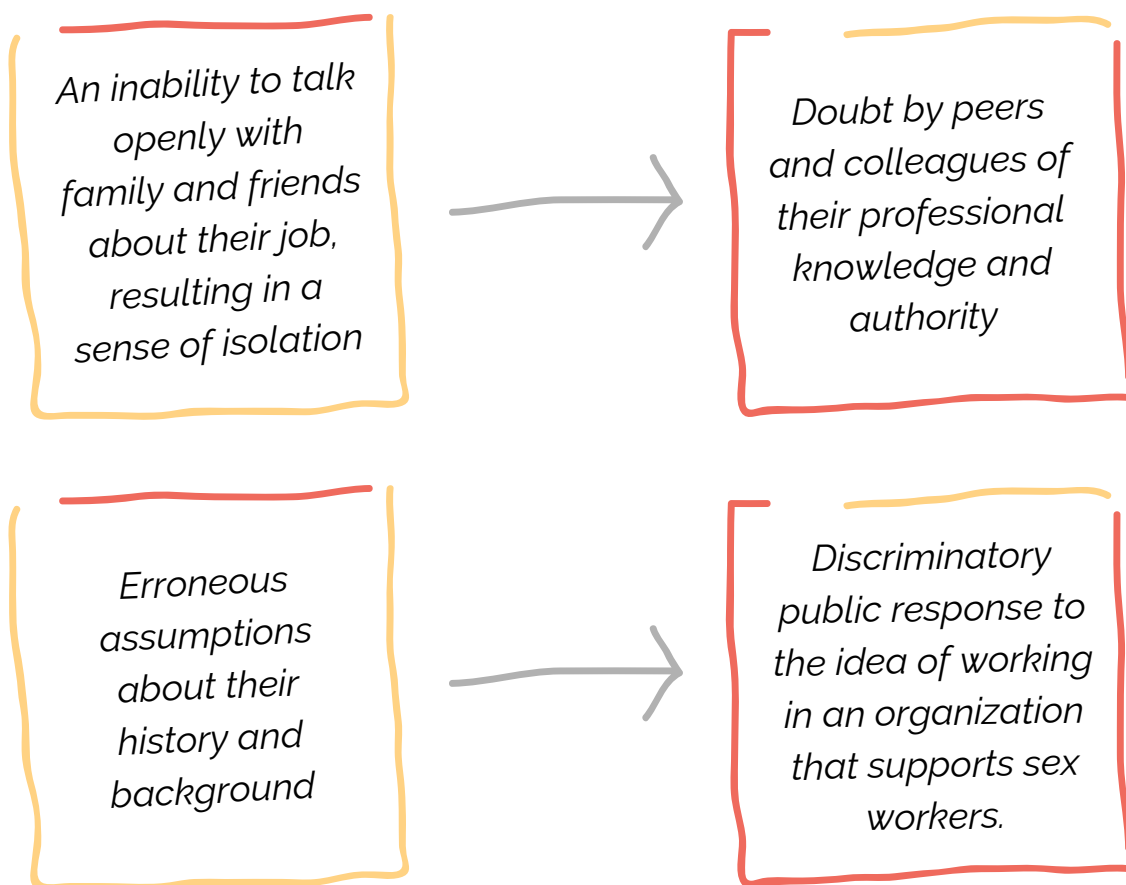
It is important to recognize and address lateral violence in order to promote healing, build stronger communities, and work towards social justice and equity.



## Courtesy Stigma

Another form of lateral violence that may affect the supports and resources available to sex workers is courtesy stigma, also referred to as “stigma by association.” This type of lateral violence “involves public disapproval evoked as a consequence of associating with a stigmatized individual or group.”<sup>42(p618)</sup> It occurs in systemic and interpersonal ways, shaping not only the workplace environment of community service workers and health care providers (including the range of resources made available to staff to carry out their work activities), but also how staff perceive the support—or lack thereof—of their colleagues.

Systemic courtesy stigma frequently manifests as unstable funding and “inadequate resources to support human resource needs and program development, as well as a sector-wide lack of allied resources to which to refer clients for complementary support”.<sup>42(p686)</sup> In the work activities of individuals, and at the intersection of their job and private lives, interpersonal courtesy stigma often manifests as:

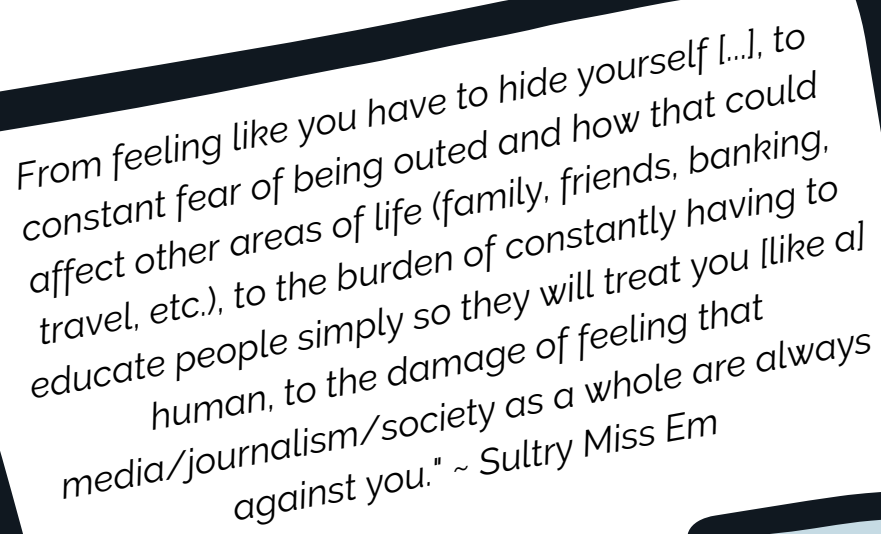




## Stigma by Association

Data indicates that some workers are more vulnerable to courtesy stigma than others depending on their identities and/or social location (e.g., gender, education level, skin colour, or having formerly worked in the sex industry).<sup>42</sup>

It is possible that avoidance of courtesy stigma related to perceived and/or real association with the sex industry may prevent local service providers from offering sex worker-friendly supports and resources. This certainly has been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>29</sup> When courtesy stigma negatively affects community service and health care providers to the degree that they are hesitant to work with those engaged in the sex industry, thus reducing the quantity of resources and services available, it can prevent sex workers from accessing the supports they need.



From feeling like you have to hide yourself [...], to constant fear of being outed and how that could affect other areas of life (family, friends, banking, travel, etc.), to the burden of constantly having to educate people simply so they will treat you [like a] human, to the damage of feeling that media/journalism/society as a whole are always against you." ~ Sultry Miss Em

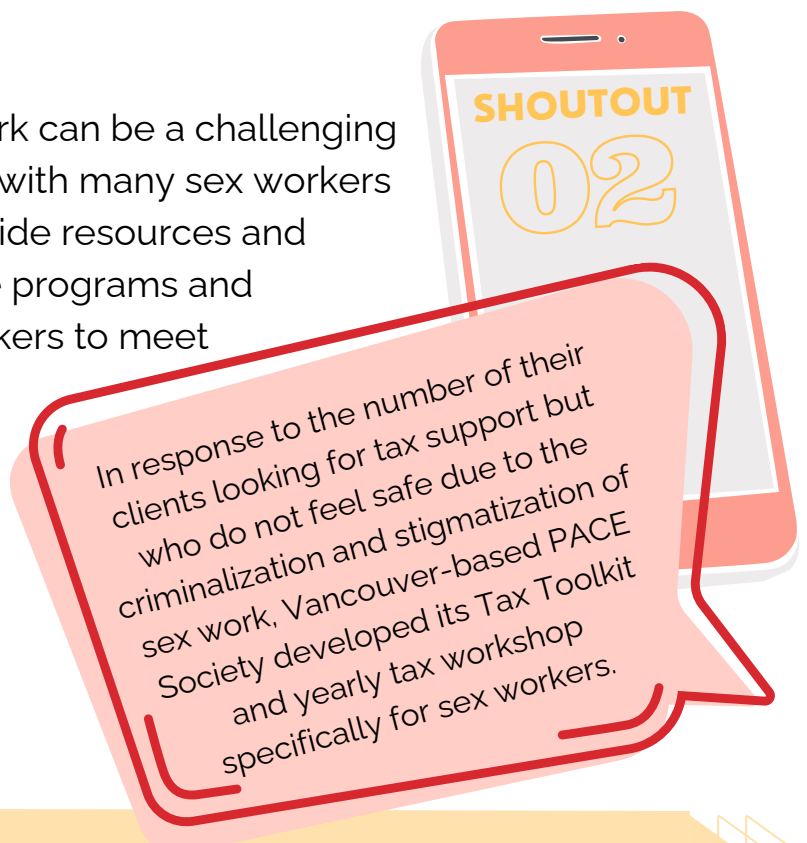




# Supporting Sex Workers

As a service provider for sex workers, there are many types of support you can offer:

- **Medical support:** Provide comprehensive medical care, including preventative care, testing, and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, reproductive health care, and mental health care.
- **Emotional support:** Many sex workers experience stigma and discrimination, which can take a toll on their emotional health. Offer emotional support by providing a safe and non-judgmental space for them to discuss their experiences and feelings.
- **Legal support:** Sex work is often stigmatized and criminalized, which can make it difficult for sex workers to access legal support. Provide information and resources about their legal rights and where they can seek help if they experience violence, harassment, or exploitation.
- **Community support:** Provide resources and referrals to community organizations and support groups that work with sex workers. Encourage them to build connections with other sex workers who can provide support and camaraderie.
- **Financial support:** Sex work can be a challenging and unpredictable profession, with many sex workers facing financial instability. Provide resources and referrals to financial assistance programs and services that can help sex workers to meet their basic needs and achieve financial stability.



## Service Provider Attributes

*When asked what it is that makes them want to connect and/or continue connection with a service provider, SafeLink Alberta study participants listed the following desirable attributes they look for:*

- *Has a basic understanding of sex work and the sex industry*
- *Isn't caught off guard when sex worker identity is disclosed or discussed;*
- *Is curious and open to learning more; and*
- *Avoids value-based questions rooted in stigma and assumptions.*

## Shifting Perspectives

Like any other job, sex work can be an employment choice made out of a range of options, and individuals often make choices that they feel are the best for them depending on their specific, individual context and circumstances. The most commonly reported reason that people enter the sex industry is a desire and/or need for increased economic resources.<sup>43</sup> Relatedly, the goal of meeting basic needs is frequently cited, as engaging in sex work can provide better income and more variety and flexibility than working in other employment roles. In addition, engaging in sex work can better enable a person to be in control of their earnings, which can then be used to meet personal goals such as financial independence or earning a post-secondary degree.

Critical life events, such as developmental, long-term and/or acute trauma or abuse can also cause a person to choose to become sex worker. Some research showed a correlation between those who are a part of this subgroup additionally experience multiple forms of abuse.<sup>44</sup>

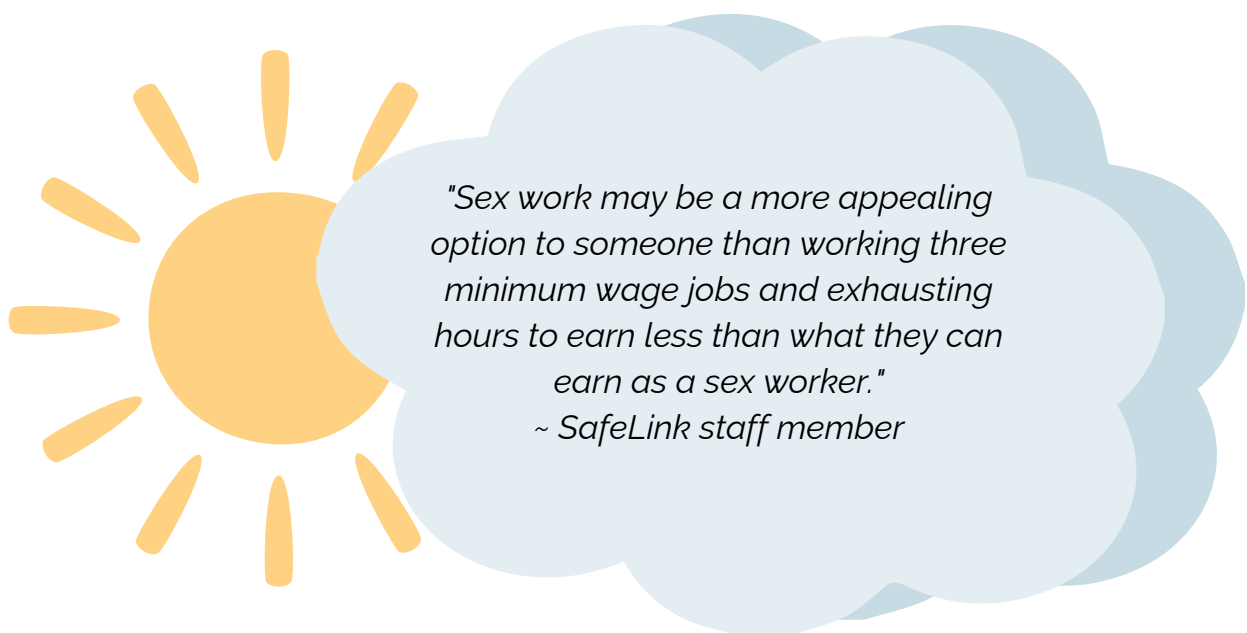
Sex work may also be a way of adapting to barriers to stable, sustainable mainstream employment, such as having a criminal record, a physical disability, and/or a mental illness.



*Becoming a sex worker for the reasons listed above usually involves what sociologists call 'constrained choice'. In other words, these individuals are faced with limited employment options or alternatives due to external factors such as social, economic, and/or political constraints.*

Those experiencing constrained choice may choose to enter the sex industry as the best choice out of a range of unappealing options. It is important to remember that making this choice may not necessarily be harmful; we do not tend to think about people who are underemployed as being exploited or harmed, and sex work could be no different.<sup>45</sup>

Engaging in sex work also holds personal appeal for some. Earning a decent living in the sex industry does not typically require a specific educational background or a minimum number of years of experience. Being a sex worker can also allow for greater control over one's working conditions (e.g., hours, location, clients, services rendered, etc.). Additionally, many sex workers report enjoying their work, which can facilitate creative expression of their sexuality and an exploration of sexual desires in ways that are often not possible within the current social norm of heterosexual, monogamous relationships.<sup>46</sup> Sex work can also be empowering and engender a sense of autonomy.<sup>47</sup>



## Non-Judgmental, Comprehensive Care

A sex worker who seeks out community-based resources and supports has a right to and should be accorded the same degree of respect and care as any other patient, client, or participant. Confidentiality, respectful interactions, dignity, thorough health evaluations, and, when necessary, referrals to specialized services are included in this. However, as our respondents shared, the stigma and discrimination that many sex workers experience in health care settings, along with the threat of police involvement, often deters them from seeking care or disclosing their line of work or employment status.<sup>2,24</sup>

To ensure they receive the proper healthcare treatments, such as STI screening and instruction about safer sex practices, it is customarily advised or expected that sex workers declare their profession to their healthcare provider.<sup>27</sup> However, because sex work is not inherently dangerous or harmful, it may not always be required for sex workers to reveal their line of work to their care providers. Whether a sex worker discloses their occupation or not, healthcare professionals have a duty to make sure that all of their patients—including sex workers—are treated with respect and dignity.<sup>23</sup>

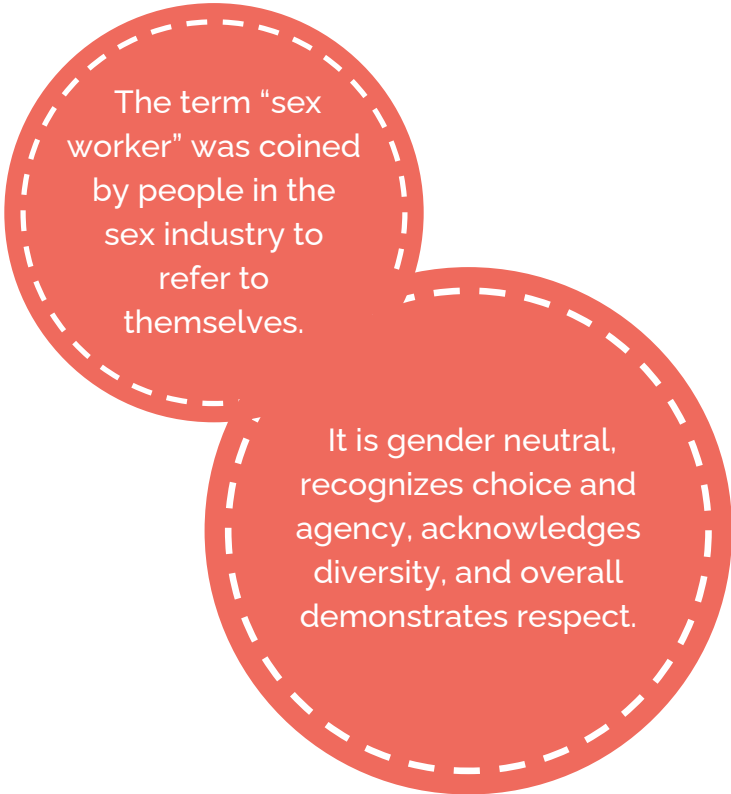
It is generally accepted among community service workers and health care providers that, in the words of US-based physician Nkem Chukwumerije, "equitable health care requires inclusive language."<sup>48</sup> But what does that actually mean, especially when it comes to working with people engaged in the sex industry?

## Language Matters

It is important to remember when working with all marginalized communities that “language is fluid and malleable; it drives social attitudes, rather than simply expressing them”.<sup>49</sup> In other words, the language we use and how we speak about people and concepts can either invite people into a relationship or further stigmatize and separate them. Although seemingly a simple idea, it is important to be mindful that language really does matter.

As we work towards building just societies, community driven language and our understanding of the most appropriate words to use in each situation continues to evolve. Using person-first language is best practice in reducing stigma and creating inclusive communities. People who engage in sex work are, first and foremost, people, and should be defined and treated as human beings rather than by their current situations and/or perceived experiences of oppression.

Language should also be used mindfully and with intention. For example, slang terms related to sex work and the sex industry might be appropriate for rapport development within the community of people involved in the industry. Using street terms (or the colloquial language of a community) can communicate common ground and reduce power dynamics between a service provider and a service user. However, using slang terms with non-community members, such as government officials or people in positions of power while doing advocacy work can sometimes discredit the message.



The term “sex worker” was coined by people in the sex industry to refer to themselves.

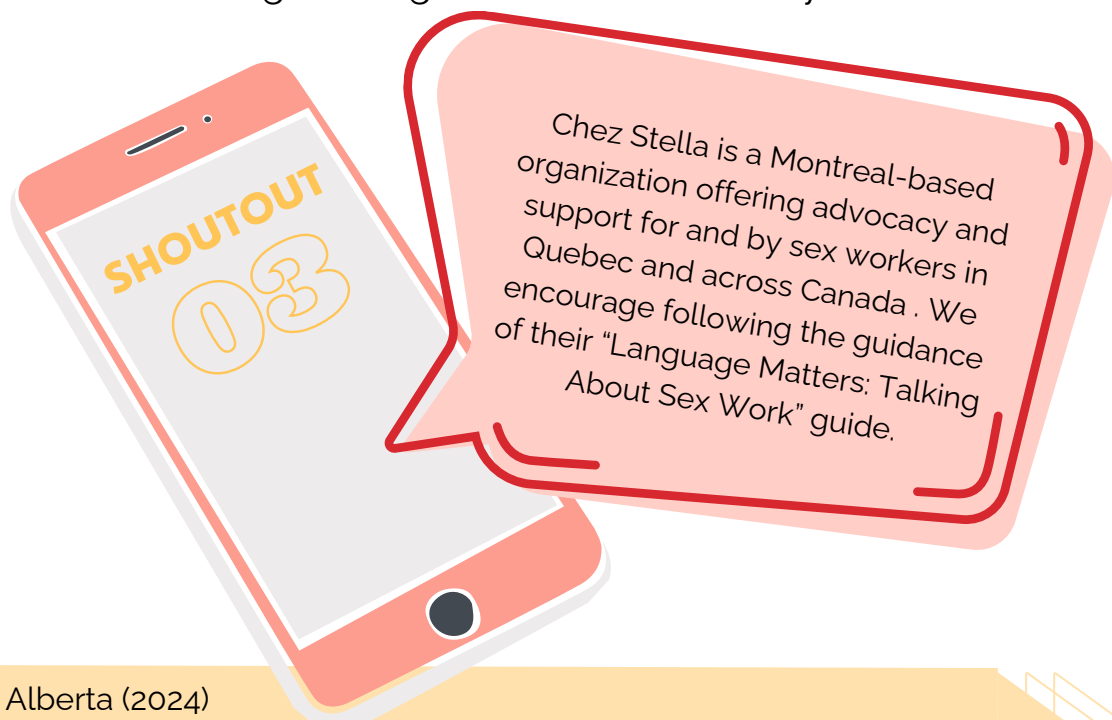
It is gender neutral, recognizes choice and agency, acknowledges diversity, and overall demonstrates respect.



Sex workers may often use colloquial terms like “whore,” “slut,” “prostitute,” or “hooker,” when self-identifying. These types of words can be self-empowering, however coming from others, they can unintentionally re-enforce negative self-image or dangerous stereotypes a person may have about themselves. Correcting someone on terms they use for themselves may not be appropriate; in some circumstances service providers can utilize strength-based words to help the people they are serving to consider alternative identities and ways to think differently about themselves or others. In others, it can cause harm.

While language is ever evolving, the following are current best practice for respectful language:

- ✓ **Sex work or sex worker:** the term coined by people with lived or living experience of sex work to refer to themselves. This language also centers the labour of sex work.
- ✓ **Sex industry:** acknowledges sex work as a legitimate occupation and a sector that includes various roles within it. Much like any other industry, sex workers do not work in isolation.
- ✓ **Selling a service:** as an alternative to ‘selling your body’. Individuals employed in many occupations use their body for work or to perform services (e.g. an actor, a gymnast, a bartender, a construction worker); to use this language for sex workers alone is stigmatizing and rooted in morality.



# Harm Reduction for Sex Workers

SafeLink Alberta defines harm reduction as the policies, strategies, and programs focused on reducing the harms caused by social, medical, and environmental inequalities which influence how people engage in higher risk activities associated with sexual activity and substance use. Harm reduction is an evidence-based approach to public health that encourages engagement and support without judgement by focusing on reducing the harms associated with certain behaviours rather than eliminating the behaviours themselves.<sup>50, 51</sup> Harm reduction emerged in the 1980s as a public health response to HIV and injection drug use, and has more recently been expanded into work with people engaged in sex work.<sup>36, 50, 52</sup>

In alignment with the SafeLink Alberta principles of harm reduction, strategies for supporting sex workers may include:

## **1** Utilization of an evidence based public health approach

Provide contraception and STBBI testing and treatment.

Provide safer sex supplies such as internal and external condoms, lubrication, dental dams, etc. for the prevention of STBBIs.

Provide safer sex education.

## **2** Promotion of human rights

Treat people with dignity and respect, and allow for autonomy and choice.

Advocate for the complete decriminalization of Canada's sex industry.

## **3** A focus on reducing harm

Focus on mitigating potential risks rather than eliminating behaviours.

Include safety planning strategies\*.

## **4** Pragmaticism and practicality

Focus on the problem at hand; what the individual is seeking support for.

Identify barriers to care (such as finances, transportation, caregiving, communication tools, etc.) and work with the individual to minimize these. Address social determinants of health.

Acknowledge that you likely work with sex workers already, regardless of whether or not they have explicitly disclosed this to you.



**5**

## **The meaningful engagement of PWLLE**

Listen to people with lived and living experience and identify ways to include them in levels of service design, delivery, and evaluation.

Connect sex workers to peer support opportunities and/or social support services.

Engage in personal and professional development opportunities that include people with lived or living experience of sex work.

**6**

## **Utilization of a non-judgemental and value neutral approach**

Learn to identify and challenge implicit bias within yourself and others regarding the sex industry.

Recognize that, like any other client, sex workers are seeking a service from you to meet a need, and sex work may or may not be relevant. Reserve judgement and don't make assumptions.

**7**

## **Adaptation and innovation**

Offer services that are responsive to the needs of community. Reduce barriers such as fees and admission criteria.

Offer services in places where sex workers congregate, such as a local stroll (street based sex work location), or utilizing a hub model where a variety of services can be accessed in one location. Consider developing partnerships between community based organizations and mainstream health services.

\*With regards to safety planning, it is important to note that many strategies sex workers may employ to keep themselves safe are currently illegal in Canada, some of which are outlined above under Laws Impacting Sex Workers - PCEPA and below under Advocating for Change. Current legislation also deters sex workers from reporting or seeking police support when needed.

Legal safety planning options can include strategies mentioned above, such as sterile supplies for the prevention of pregnancy and STBBIs and access to low barrier testing and contraceptives, strategies to meet basic needs (housing, financial, and food security), and emotional and peer support. Despite the law, sex workers often work in pairs, ensuring someone knows of their activities and location, utilize local bad date reporting sites, and negotiate services and meeting locations.





## Substance Use

The relationship between sex work and substance use is complex and can vary depending on individual circumstances and broader societal factors. It is important to note that not all individuals involved in sex work use substances, and not all individuals who use substances engage in sex work. However, research has shown that the two can co-occur, and that those involved in sex work may be at a higher risk of substance use related harms.<sup>53, 54</sup>

Some individuals may use substances as a coping mechanism to deal with the physical and emotional demands of sex work, including stigma and discrimination, violence, and the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections. Substances may also be used to numb emotional pain or provide a temporary escape from difficult life circumstances. Conversely, some individuals may turn to sex work as a means of supporting their drug use. In these cases, sex work may be seen as a way to earn quick money to fund drug use and may become cyclical.<sup>55</sup>

There are also many structural factors that contribute to the intersection of sex work and substance use, including poverty, lack of access to healthcare and social services, and criminalization of both sex work and illicit drug use. Addressing these underlying factors is essential to reducing the harms associated with both sex and substance use. Further, the criminalization and marginalization of sex work and substance use can exacerbate the harms associated with both practices. For example, sex workers who use drugs may be more vulnerable to violence and exploitation, as well as arrest and incarceration. Similarly, people who use drugs may face additional stigma and discrimination if they also engage in sex work, and may be less likely to access harm reduction services and supports.

Following other researchers, public health agencies, and social advocates, SafeLink Alberta calls for the decriminalization of both sex work and substance use; decriminalization would allow for greater safety and autonomy for people who engage in these practices and would reduce the harms associated with criminalization.



# Harm Reduction for Substance Use

For sex workers using substances, harm reduction strategies include:

- 1** *Provision of sterile needles and substance use equipment, connection to safer consumption sites, and safer use education*
- 2** *Connection to STBBI testing and treatment*
- 3** *Considering approaches to intentional substance use, such as drug testing, not using alone, and carrying Naloxone*
- 4** *Offering a variety of choices, including options that are not abstinence based*

Research has shown that these and other harm reduction interventions for sex workers can lead to a noticeable decrease in the spread of HIV and other STIs, as well as mitigate other health and social harms. Harm reduction can also improve the safety and working conditions of sex workers and can help them to access healthcare and social services.<sup>50, 52, 56, 57</sup>

It is important to note that harm reduction should not be seen as a substitute for addressing social inequalities, such as poverty, lack of access to education and job opportunities, and discrimination. However, harm reduction can be an effective way to support the health and safety of sex workers while pursuing the larger systemic changes.

## LEARN MORE

SafeLink Alberta's Education team regularly offers 'Harm Reduction 101' as a 2 hour training. Register for an upcoming training on the SafeLink Alberta website.

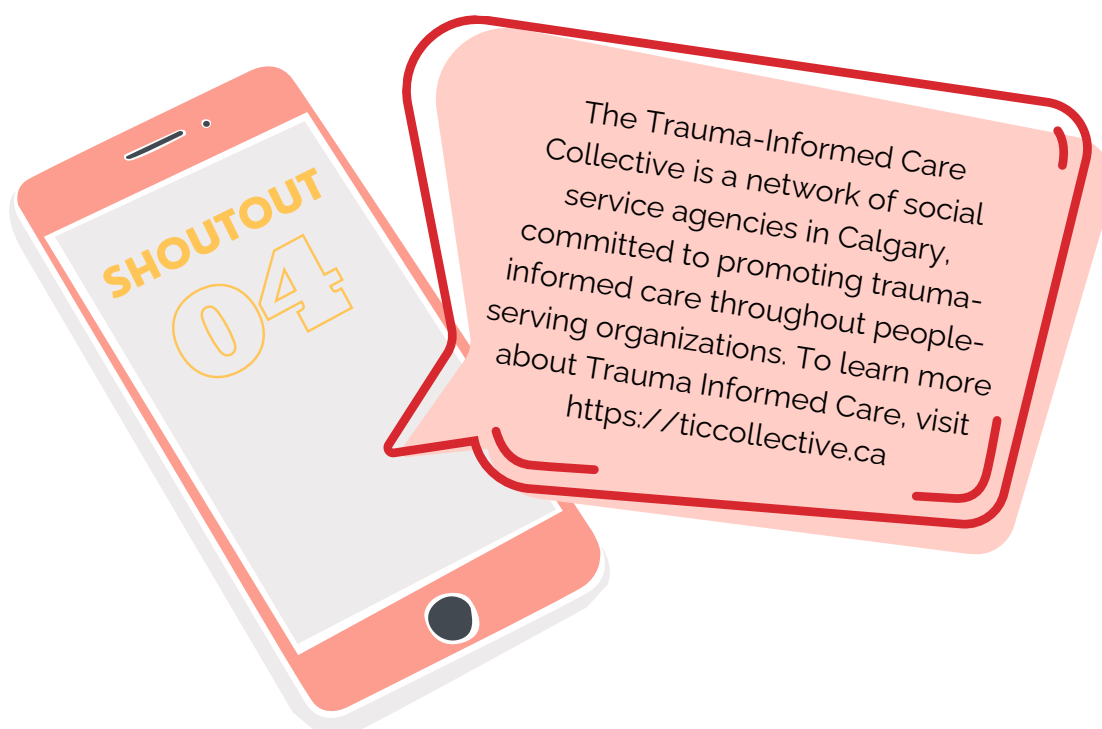


# Mental Health

For a variety of reasons, offering sexual services can be solitary and emotionally demanding. As discussed throughout this toolkit, sex workers can also experience prejudice and stigma, which can cause or aggravate mental health conditions. It is essential that sex workers have equitable access to mental health services and supports if and when they want them.

There is a clear need for best practice guidelines for mental health providers, as sex workers themselves continue to shoulder the education of health care workers. Themes identified by sex workers, community agencies, and academic research, include:<sup>58</sup>

- 1** Any practice supporting sex workers must be trauma informed. Some trauma informed practices include: treat every client as though they could be engaged in sex work (default to a non-judgemental approach to sex work and be conscious of the statements you make and the language you use - don't assume that the person before you is not engaged in sex work); understand your own biases towards sex work and educate yourself about how stigma and discrimination affect sex workers; and accept sex work as a legitimate occupation.



**2** If a client chooses to share that they are a sex worker, affirm and validate their experiences. Recognize that this disclosure may have been met with harmful or judgemental responses in the past, and that sex workers may internalize stigma.

**3** Let the client lead; do not over or under-estimate the significance of engaging in sex work. If they are seeking support for personal or professional matters, stick to that and do not involve their work unless that is what the client is seeking support for. If it is relevant to their mental health care, a few things that could be explored include internalized stigma or sex negativity, experiences of stigma, motivations for engaging in sex work, and the potential impacts of sex work, as an emotionally demanding job, on mental wellbeing.

### Community Voices

SafeLink Alberta survey respondents overwhelmingly want health care providers to know that they are human beings who provide legitimate, fee-based sexualized services. As is the case with any other, they may struggle with mental health and emotional wellness issues that are not directly related to their work, such as: financial or housing instability, self-esteem or acceptance, relationships, grief, parenting, life transitions, and more. Understanding this and being able to connect sex workers with the resources they need is crucial.

Respondents also indicated that one of the most important characteristics that keeps them coming back to a particular mental health care provider is the ability of the provider to establish trust and to provide a safe and non-judgmental space for sex workers to discuss their experiences and feelings; to work together to build a strong therapeutic alliance.



Offering mental health supports to sex workers necessitates a dedication to addressing the specific difficulties that sex workers encounter. Mental health care professionals may significantly enhance sex workers' mental health and wellbeing by acquiring the unique approach, abilities, and knowledge required to engage with them successfully.

The kind of support best suited will depend on individual needs. It's important for healthcare workers to understand that different types of sex workers may require different types of support depending on their specific circumstances. Some examples include:

*Indoor sex workers may have more control over their work environment, but may still face challenges such as discrimination, stigma, and social isolation. They may require support with building social networks, accessing healthcare, and developing business skills.*

*Trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit sex workers may face additional discrimination and marginalization due to their gender identity and expression. They may require support accessing healthcare, legal assistance, and community building.*

*Street-based sex workers may face higher risks of violence, harassment, and exploitation due to the nature of their work. They may require support with safety planning, access to housing, and legal assistance.*

*Sex workers who offer services in a digital setting may face unique safety and security challenges, such as online harassment or stalking. They may need support with cybersecurity, risk management, and safety planning.*

*Migrant sex workers may face language barriers, legal challenges, and social isolation. They may require support to navigate immigration laws, access healthcare, and build community connections.*

Sex workers may have different needs based on their individual circumstances; it is important to provide and/or be able to refer individuals who are sex workers to a range of services and supports designed to meet those needs.



## Job Transition

Transitioning jobs within the sex work industry or to another employment industry holds many of the same challenges as any job transition. If you have an established rapport, work to understand why the individual wishes to transition and what supports they are seeking, and allow that to guide you. Avoid judgements or biases around choices you wish the individual would make; recognize that there may be grief attached with any significant life change, even an exciting one, and allow for choice and autonomy. Some considerations may include:

### Transition within the sex industry

- There are many options within the industry. Consider which may best suit the needs of the individual at this point in time. Is the primary consideration income? Geographical location? Anonymity? Safety? Accessibility? Hours of work? Desire to learn a new skill?
- Which skills does the individual have that are transferrable? What might they need to learn?
- Are there practical considerations, such as a need for internet access or videography equipment?

### Transition to unemployment or another industry

- What needs were met through sex work? What needs were unmet? Why did the individual begin as a sex worker?
- What skills are transferrable to another industry? Does the individual have an employment reference or interview experience?
- Is there an option or interest to transition gradually? To engage in sex work part time or maintain a shorter list of hours or regulars while building new knowledge, skills, and references elsewhere?

Avoid phrases such as “exiting” sex work. This language is not used when referring to other job transitions, and can reinforce negative stereotypes about sex work.

For additional support, connect with programs dedicated to sex worker supports, such as the SafeLink Alberta Shift program in Calgary



# Organizational Change

This section is intended primarily for leaders within social service organizations seeking to better support sex workers through intentional services. Leaders who are working to influence change but who may not be in a position of authority to enact it may find this information helpful in efforts to propose programming changes and shift agency culture.

For general providers such as medical practitioners, mental health providers, housing workers, food security workers, legal representatives, accountants, neighbours, friends, etc., sections on Organizational Readiness and Peer Support may not be as relevant. The latter sections, Professional Development and Advocating for Change, are relevant to all.

## Organizational Readiness

At an agency/organization level, the best way to support sex workers is through collaboration with and/or the meaningful involvement of people with lived or living experience (PWLLE) in the sex industry at all levels of program development, delivery, and evaluation.<sup>59</sup> Recognizing and honouring the expertise of PWLLE and incorporating that expertise within the organization is the most effective way to enhance the pathways to care within social service organizations and to create systemic change.<sup>59</sup> While some of these best practices require only relatively simple modifications at a program level, others are considerably more complex and may require consideration of organizational readiness for change.<sup>59</sup>

Organizational readiness is an assessment of preparedness to undergo change, including consideration of the resources needed, potential barriers to success, and any change management needs.<sup>59</sup> A readiness assessment usually assesses the following: project goals and objectives; expectations and concerns; leadership support of the project; ability to adapt to change; ways to minimize potential project failure, project governance and decision making; and other critical project needs.<sup>59</sup> This will likely need to include advanced planning for any financial and budgetary impacts.



In implementing the practices identified within this toolkit, some areas for consideration include:

◆ **Value Alignment:**

Do your organizational values align with the principles of harm reduction and trauma informed care? Are these values applied in practice as well as theory?

Are existing team members supportive of this work or are there change management considerations to undergo? Do teams have the capacity for additional training in areas such as unconscious bias?

**Organizational Culture**

In efforts to shift organizational culture, consider consulting stakeholders with various experiences. This may include service users, client facing employees, leadership, volunteers, community leaders, community partners, etc.

◆ **Financial and Human Resources:**

Do you have the resources to add peer employment roles within existing teams?

Do you have the resources to provide sufficient cash honoraria when appropriate? Are your accounting and approval systems able to support cash transactions?

Who are the stakeholders involved in making decisions and in implementing any changes? Who is missing from those conversations?

Do your leaders have the capacity to take on the mentorship and support of new employees with lived or living experience?

Do your client facing teams have the capacity to be flexible with their service delivery approach and with each other?



## Peer Based Service Delivery

Peer based service delivery is a programming approach that includes people with lived and living experience as peer support workers. Best practice is to compensate these individuals financially, ideally as employees. For providers where this approach may not be feasible, such as providers who offer general services rather than dedicated sex worker supports, other ways to meaningfully incorporate PWLLE can be utilized. Consider, for example, personal and professional learning and advocacy opportunities or programming and referral partnerships with community based organizations who are led or supported by sex workers.

Organizations looking to utilize a peer-based service delivery model should consider their organizational approach prior to onboarding PWLLE in either paid or volunteer roles in order to mitigate and reduce harms that could unintentionally be caused by biased policies and practices, culture, or a lack of knowledge on how to work with PWLLE.<sup>59</sup>

Employers should focus on increasing equity and capacity building for PWLLE, as well as the possible redevelopment of organizational policy to promote equitable, anti-racist, and transparent practices throughout the organization.<sup>59</sup>



It is crucial to include sex workers in planning and decision-making processes in order to develop procedures and services that respect their rights and are attentive to their needs. Based on community-based participatory action research (CBPR),<sup>60-63</sup> below are a few ways to include sex workers in planning and decision-making:



**Consultation:** to ensure that sex workers' viewpoints are incorporated into planning and decision-making processes, consult with advocacy groups and organizations led by sex workers. To do this, it may be necessary to organize focus groups or meetings to get opinions and feedback from sex workers.



**Representation:** include sex workers in working groups, advisory committees, and boards that are in charge of planning and decision making. This enables sex workers to directly contribute their ideas and viewpoints and may help to meet their demands.



**Training and Capacity Building:** provide sex workers with training and capacity-building opportunities so that they may actively engage in planning and decision-making. This could entail offering instruction in public speaking, policy analysis, or advocacy techniques.



**Compensation:** ensure sex workers are adequately compensated for their time and knowledge when they contribute to planning and decision-making processes. This acknowledges the importance of their contributions and may help people who work in the sex industry overcome financial obstacles.



**Accessibility:** ensure sex workers may participate in planning and decision-making processes, with particular attention to those who might encounter challenges relating to language, transportation, or caregiver duties. This can entail providing language interpretation services, transportation, or child care.



**Collaborative Feedback:** allow sex workers the opportunity to comment on the supports and services that affect them, including regular feedback methods like focus groups or surveys.

Service providers can ensure that sex workers' needs are satisfied and that their perspectives are heard by directly involving them in planning and decision-making processes. This can facilitate the promotion of their well-being, security, and autonomy, as well as the development of services and supports that are more useful to the sex work community.



## Professional Development

Undergoing professional development for employees at your organization to prepare them to offer respectful, non-judgmental, harm reduction supports and services to sex workers requires careful planning and thoughtful execution. It is important to begin by assessing staff training needs: what is the current level of knowledge and skills among your team related to sex work and the unique needs of sex workers? It may also be helpful to conduct a needs assessment survey, focus groups, and/or interviews to identify areas where staff may need additional training and support. Consider assessments of implicit bias.

In seeking a training provider, consider connecting with local sex worker-led organizations or other experts to see if they provide training or have any recommendations. Prioritize trainings that center the voices of people with lived and living experience of sex work.

It is also important to foster a supportive workplace culture that is supportive of sex workers and their needs. Given the broad misunderstanding of the sex industry and the widespread stigma and discrimination sex workers experience, a cultural shift in your organization may be necessary. Encourage staff to challenge their own and others' assumptions and to provide non-judgmental, compassionate care to sex workers. Further, maintaining cultural competency amongst staff will require ongoing support in the form of refresher trainings, opportunities for staff to attend conferences or other learning events, and the creation of a safe space for staff to discuss any challenges they encounter in their work with sex workers. By taking these steps, you can prepare your team to competently offer support to sex workers and create a more inclusive and supportive workplace culture.

### LEARN MORE

SafeLink Alberta offers policy and practice consultations for organizations seeking to better support sex workers in our community. Contact [education@safelinkalberta.ca](mailto:education@safelinkalberta.ca) to learn more.






## Advocating for Change

Meaningful support for sex workers cannot exist independent of efforts to change policies that perpetuate stigma and violence. The Canadian Public Health Association, Human Rights Watch, Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, the American Civil Liberties Union, Parliament's Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, hundreds of scholars, dozens of sex worker rights organizations (including SafeLink Alberta), and PWLLE in the sex industry all agree: it is time to decriminalize sex work.<sup>3,20,64-66</sup>

SafeLink Alberta supports the decriminalization of sex work and opposes the continued implementation of Bill C-36, Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, and sections of the Immigrant and Refugee Protection Regulations in addition to all other municipal, provincial, and federal legislation that imposes violence on sex workers. As an active member of the Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform, SafeLink Alberta (identified under the program name Shift, Calgary), supports and continues to advocate for the 49 recommendations for law reform as outlined in the CASWLR's Safety, Dignity, and Equality: Recommendations for Sex Work Law Reform in Canada (2017).

### The Nordic Model

As mentioned above, Canada currently follows what is known as the 'Nordic Model'. Under the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, sex work is considered inherently harmful. Per the Act:<sup>67</sup>

-  Parliament of Canada has grave concerns about the exploitation that is inherent in prostitution and the risks of violence posed to those who engage in it;
-  Parliament of Canada recognizes the social harm caused by the objectification of the human body and the commodification of sexual activity;
-  It is important to protect human dignity and the equality of all Canadians by discouraging prostitution, which has a disproportionate impact on women and children;
-  It is important to denounce and prohibit the purchase of sexual services because it creates a demand for prostitution;
-  It is important to continue to denounce and prohibit the procurement of persons for the purpose of prostitution and the development of economic interests in the exploitation of the prostitution of others as well as the commercialization and institutionalization of prostitution;

- Parliament of Canada wishes to encourage those who engage in prostitution to report incidents of violence and to leave prostitution; and
- Parliament of Canada is committed to protecting communities from the harms associated with prostitution;

These statements, enacted into law, deny the autonomy of sex workers, denounce sex work as a legitimate occupation, portray sex workers as victims, and stigmatize sex work as undignified and harmful. Further, by prohibiting the advertisement of sexual services, the purchase of sex, communication regarding the selling or purchase of sex, and the receipt of any material benefit, current legislation effectively criminalizes and oppresses sex workers, particularly those who are over surveilled and criminalized, such as Black, Indigenous, trans, and houseless sex workers.

### Decriminalization

Decriminalization is “[a] legal model that decriminalizes the sex worker, the client, and third parties such as managers, drivers, and landlords, and regulates the sex industry through labour law”.<sup>68</sup> Evidence-based research indicates that decriminalizing all aspects of the sex industry is a better strategy for protecting the human rights of sex workers, and sex workers themselves favour complete decriminalization. Further, in October 2023, a United Nations working group on discrimination against women and girls released a landmark report calling for the full decriminalization of voluntary adult sex work globally.<sup>69</sup>

Decriminalization gives power back to sex workers to conduct their business safely and with autonomy. Decriminalization allows for labour rights, safe working conditions, and increased business accountabilities. It also counters the stigma of criminalization, and minimizes the consequences of reporting exploitation, trafficking, and violence.

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In 2007, 90% of sex workers who responded to an independent survey by the government of New Zealand, felt they had better legal protection after decriminalization.<sup>70</sup>





## Current Action

Canadian sex workers, community organizations, and other advocates are currently aligned in the position that sections of the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act are unconstitutional and that they cause more harm than protection for sex workers. In particular, that the current legislation infringes upon section 7 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Several cases currently sit before various courts across Canada, with the most recent challenge led by the Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform. For updates beyond the time of this publication, please visit [sexworklawreform.com](http://sexworklawreform.com).

As a service provider, you can use your social power and privileges to advocate for the decriminalization of sex work by:



Researching the impacts of criminalization on sex workers' health and wellbeing, and the benefits of decriminalization. Familiarize yourself with the evidence-based research and learn from the experiences and perspectives of sex workers.



Using your platform to amplify the voices of sex workers. Write op-eds or letters to the editor in local newspapers or professional journals, and speak with your colleagues and policymakers to raise awareness about the issue.



Working with local sex worker organizations and other advocates to build coalitions that can influence policy makers and promote change. Be open to working with individuals and organizations that may have different views or approaches to sex work.



Recognizing that sex workers are the experts on their own lives and experiences, and work with them to understand their needs and concerns. Advocate for policies that prioritize the health, safety, and rights of sex workers.



Taking steps to ensure that your clinical practice is welcoming and inclusive of sex workers. This may include providing non-judgmental and compassionate care, using inclusive language, and being aware of the unique health needs of sex workers.
















# Conclusion

Throughout this toolkit, we have amplified the voices of sex workers, allied organizations, and researchers to call attention to stigma and injustices within our current personal, social, and structural systems and to suggest action to reduce barriers to care.

Many Albertans have an inaccurate understanding of sex work and the sex industry that results in harmful stereotypes that too easily and too frequently lead to the marginalization of sex workers and to repeated violations of their human rights. As a service provider, you have the power and social location to enact change. You can do so by:

-  Recognizing that sex work is work, and that sex workers are members of our community with a right to dignity and respect.
-  Acknowledge that you likely work with sex workers already, regardless of whether or not they have explicitly disclosed this to you. Consider how your words and actions may build or demolish trust.
-  Learn to identify and challenge implicit bias within yourself and others regarding the sex industry.
-  Listen to people with lived and living experience and include them in all levels of program design, delivery, and evaluation.
-  Implement trauma informed care and harm reduction practices within your work.
-  Understand that there is nuance to sex work. As with any other industry, there are varying experiences of enjoyment, safety, security, and autonomy.
-  Recognize that, like any other client, sex workers are seeking a service from you to meet a need, and sex work may or may not be relevant. Reserve judgement and don't make assumptions.
-  Seek other personal and professional development opportunities. Commit to ongoing learning and unlearning.

As stated above, the current legal framework for Canadian Sex Workers is marked by criminalization and stigmatization, which not only bolsters harm but hinders access to essential healthcare, social supports and legal recourse. Advocating for sex workers rights is not merely a pursuit of justice; it is a call for a fundamental





shift in our understanding of autonomy, agency, and human rights. By recognizing and respecting the rights of sex workers, Alberta has the opportunity to develop an environment that prioritizes the safety and well-being of individuals who are employed in the sex work industry.

The consequences of harmful actions and assumptions surrounding sex work in Alberta are profound, and they prevent progress towards the creation of a more inclusive and supportive environment for Albertans who are employed in sex work. Effective advocacy and support requires a commitment to educating yourself, building partnerships, and centering the needs of sex workers in your community. By doing so, you can help to promote a more equitable and just society for all.







# Further Reading

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*It's Time to Decriminalize Sex Work*. (2022, January). American Civil Liberties Union.

*Why Sex Work Should Be Decriminalized*. (2019, August 7). Human Rights Watch.

## Learn More about Im/migrant Sex Workers

Vancouver-based PACE Society recommends the following resources for supporting im/migrant sex workers:

- Butterfly: Asian and Migrant Sex Worker Support Network
- Im/Migrant Rights | Sex Worker Rights | SWAN Vancouver Society | Vancouver
- HARMSOF HARMS
- Caught in the Carceral Web: Anti-trafficking laws & policies and their impact on migrant sex workers
- Pathways to Ending Violence Against Migrant Sex Workers

Peers Victoria's fact sheet; Sex Work and Health (2014)

A Handbook for Health Care Providers Working with Clients from Diverse Communities (2017) by Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights

## For Mental Health Providers

Essential Clinical Care for Sex Workers: A Sex-Positive Handbook for Mental Health Practitioners by Theodore R. Burns and Jamila M. Dawson

Antebi-Gruszka, N., Spence, D., & Jendrzewski, S. (2019). Guidelines for mental health practice with clients who engage in sex work. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 34(3), 339–354.

PACE Society recommends the following resources for mental health care professionals:

- Sex Work and Sex Trafficking: Misinformation and False Dichotomies
- Sex Worker Affirmative Therapy: The Role of Minority Stress in Sex Worker Health
- Equitable Care Certification

Mental health practitioners who wish to enroll in self-paced on-line resources:

- Sex Worker Affirmative Therapy: Clinical Competency Guidelines for Psychotherapists <https://www.mnsexualhealth.org/sextherapytraining>
- Equitable Care Certificate (July 2023)

# Additional Resources

## Canada

ACT Alberta (Calgary): <https://www.actalberta.org/>

ANSWERS Society (Edmonton): <https://www.answersociety.org/>

BC Coalition of Experiential Communities: <https://bccec.wordpress.com/>

Butterfly (Toronto): <https://www.butterflysw.org/>

Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform: <https://sexworklawreform.com/>  
Regarding the legal challenge against PCEPA & current allyship opportunities.

Chez Stella (Montreal): <https://chezstella.org/en/home/>

FIRST: <https://www.facebook.com/FIRSTdecrimsexwork>

Maggie's Toronto: <https://www.maggiesto.org/>

Pace Society (Vancouver): <https://www.pace-society.org/>

Peers Victoria Resources Society: <https://www.safersexwork.ca/>

Pivot Legal Society: <https://www.pivotlegal.org/>  
Initiating legal change and providing legal education campaigns, public engagement, and innovative projects.

POWER (Prostitutes of Ottawa/Gatineau Work, Educate and Resist):  
<https://www.powerottawa.ca/>

SafeLink Alberta (Shift program, Calgary): [safelinkalberta.ca/shift](https://safelinkalberta.ca/shift)

Swan (Vancouver): <https://swanvancouver.ca>

Wish Drop-In Centre Society (Vancouver): <https://wish-vancouver.net/>

## Alberta

ACT Alberta: <https://www.actalberta.org/>

Research and information on trafficking in Canada and Alberta.

ANSWERS Society: <https://www.answersociety.org/>

A by and for organization offering training, support, and advocacy.

Shift: <https://safelinkalberta.ca/shift>

Case management support for current or former sex workers. For a list of sex worker friendly therapists, legal advice, tattoo studios, and health care providers in Southern Alberta, please email [shift@safelinkalberta.ca](mailto:shift@safelinkalberta.ca).

Sweet Initiative (Calgary): <https://www.sweetinitiative.ca/>

Identifies gaps in service options to address the distinct barriers experienced by sex workers in Calgary in accessing affordable, sex worker allied services for mental health and social wellbeing.

## International

Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP): <https://www.nswp.org/>

Utilizing mix of pro-active and reactive policy advocacy to support human rights and evidence based approaches to female, male, and trans sex work and strengthening sex worker communities.

New Zealand Prostitutes Collective: <https://www.nzpc.org.nz/>

An advocacy group fighting for the human rights, health, and well-being of all sex workers.

Desiree Alliance: <https://desireealliance.org/>

An American coalition of current and former sex workers working together with supporting networks for an improved understanding of sexual policies and the human, social, and political impacts of criminalization surrounding sex work.



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