

**House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Trafficking**

**Reducing Societal Harm as an Important First Step by Wanda Taylor, Executive Director**

**On behalf of Stepping Stone Association:**

**In 1989, two teenagers made headlines when they were found murdered, their cases had been unsolved. These two teenagers were involved in the sex trade. Both were killed by a john. Residents felt something had to be done to help keep girls safe. A program was formed out of the Elizabeth Fry Society, a nationwide organization that helps women involved in the justice system. The program consisted of a few volunteers walking the night streets, offering support, information, and harm reduction materials to street-based sex workers. Two years later, with a continual and increasing need to remain a visible presence on the streets, that program branched off to form its own organization, called Street Based Services for Women and Youth.**

**Someone saw a need, a gap, and they filled it. What began as a street service without a home office, is now almost 30 years later, an organization that not only provides that same street outreach, but has expanded to provide an exiting program, court and corrections support, personal and professional development, and advocacy for equal access to community resources. That organization, now called Stepping Stone, is the oldest organization in Canada that provides services and supports to this highly stigmatized population. That includes individuals currently and formerly involved in the sex trade, those at risk, and individuals who are of have been trafficked.**

**We know that there are multiple and complex reasons why individuals end up in the sex trade. One of those ways is by choice, which as of 2014 is legal for a consenting adult in Canada under Bill C-36. Advocate groups who demand that this lifestyle is not a choice for anyone, only serve to silence the autonomy and human rights of the individuals who demand to be left alone to choose any lifestyle they want. These groups drown out and silence the voices of those whose choices are not in line with their own.**

**Another way individuals end up involved in the sex trade comes as a result of societal factors that limit their life choices, such as poverty and lack of opportunities due to systemic oppression, homophobia, and racism. Often times that involvement leads to a never-ending circle of other challenges, like addictions and homelessness. Lastly, there are those who did not choose to enter the sex trade, but found themselves involved by way of coercion, manipulation, or force, which are the trafficked individuals I am focusing on for the purposes of this presentation. Because when society sees a person involved in the sex trade, they don't see their story, or the circumstances that brought them there. They see the *stereotypes and judgements* that we, as a society have perpetuated: that they are sexual deviants. That they were all abused as children. That they are drug addicts. That they are bottom feeders of society and only know how to make *bad* choices. Those are just a few. These are the kinds of beliefs that fuel the exclusion of this population from important dialogue and policies that effect their lives. People never seem to see the insurmountable challenges these individuals face when trying to exit or trying to flee a dangerous situation. Those struggles are often invisible from the outside, but very real and very painful for the individuals trapped in a life of forced violence, abuse, and terror. Such beliefs also make *our* work challenging when trying to help them access community supports.**

**Two of the biggest challenges in our work at Stepping Stone is advocating for their human rights and dignity, and in fighting for them to have equal access to the same services we all enjoy, without judgement. It brings to memory the case of a woman who began accessing our services. She was later identified as a victim of trafficking. The perpetrator was her partner. She lived in fear of her life each and every day. We provided support to her out on the streets, and support at the Centre around trauma and abuse through our programs. We were working with her on personal development and healthy relationships, and her goal of returning to school. Reporting him was not an option for her, she feared for her life. There were no assurances that she could be protected. Law enforcement acknowledge they *also* do not have the resources to provide that *much* needed protection to women in this situation.**

**There was no place for us to send her where she could be safe. Shelters were full and over crowded, our housing contacts had long wait lists. Then one weekend, she was raped by a john. She called our staff in the middle of the night. We attended the hospital where a kit was done. There was obvious skepticism on the part of some hospital staff when it was revealed during questioning that she was involved in the sex trade. And when she found the courage to report the incident to police, there was a glaring lack of sensitivity to her experience because she was in the sex trade. In fact, the statement “We know her, she’s just a prostitute from the stroll” was overheard coming from the hallway outside the room. The woman got up and walked out of the police station. Her rapist was never prosecuted.**

**This person I am referring to is the many women who have walked through the doors of Stepping Stone. And that story represents a combination of the many crippling experiences that they have expressed to us in trying to access support and services to move forward with their lives. There is a need, a few serious gaps. Someone needs to fill them. In focusing on solutions, we need to recognize that these gaps have very real and often devastating effects on the individuals fighting to get out of a trafficking situation. Community services, law enforcement, equal access to health care, housing, these should not be areas where we have to fight and advocate for understanding, sensitivity, and for tangible support. *These* should be systems of support that propel their lives forward. These *should not* be areas that create barriers to their efforts. But unfortunately, they can, and they do. Every day. In the tough work being done at the grassroots level, we have concluded some very important and fundamental things in our understand of human trafficking:**

- **That the solution is not as simple as *yanking* someone out. This can possibly place them in greater danger, especially if their safety from the trafficker cannot be guaranteed**
- **That *more* needs to be done to educate society about who a trafficked victim is and what they look like...they can be any person at any age at any time in any place.**
- **That trafficked victims haven’t *consented* to the use of their bodies for sexual services, and that there *are* differences between consenting adults who choose this lifestyle and**

those who are forced in to it. So, judgement about a whole population and their involvement in the sex trade harms and does not help them

- That while the law identifies all individuals under 18 as trafficked victims, not all youth identify as being a victim, or as being trafficked. So, we need to better understand how to reach them because *that* demographic is least likely to reach out for help
- We know that recruiters are not just pimps anymore. Increasingly, they are also boyfriends, teen peers, women and girls, and even professionals working with vulnerable young people. So, more awareness is needed to ensure that youth *understand* human trafficking, that they are provided with the *tools* they need to protect themselves from being groomed, and that they know *who* to protect themselves from.
- That all the programs and services in the world will be for naught if we cannot provide a place for victims to go while they receive wraparound services and attempt to rebuild the pieces of their shattered lives. Safe houses and long term affordable housing are not suggestions, they are absolute requirements and a fundamental part of the solution.
- And finally, that financial support cannot be small pockets of money in the form of project funding. A long-term solution to the elimination of human trafficking *must* be matched by a long-term commitment to *funding* those vital and concrete solutions.