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# Toward Women's Equality: Ending Sex Trafficking and Prostitution

*A Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and  
Human Rights*

Submitted on behalf of Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter  
by Laurel McBride  
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Vancouver Rape Relief & Women's Shelter (VRRWS) operates Canada's oldest Rape Crisis Centre and a transition house for women and their children. We are active in responding to women who have experienced any form of sexist attack on the continuum of male violence, some of which are: rape, battery, incest, prostitution, and sexual harassment. The collective is diverse in terms of race, age and class backgrounds. The majority of VRRWS members are women who have experienced some form of male violence in their lives, including prostitution.

The knowledge and authority on male violence against women is derived from responding to 1,200 women on our crisis line and housing approximately 100 women with their children in our transition house each year. Vancouver Rape Relief has been active on the issue of prostitution, locally and nationally, for decades. As a member of the Women's Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution, VRRWS intervened in the Ontario Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Canada in the landmark Bedford case. We appeared before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights and the Senate in 2014 to provide submissions on Bill C-36, which became the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act*.

VRRWS is pleased that the Committee is undertaking a national study on human trafficking in Canada. The historical disadvantage and exploitation of the women and girls who make up the sex trade is deserving of the Federal government and Canadian public's prompt attention. However, we maintain that any analysis of human trafficking must also look at the system of prostitution. It is a mistake to separate sex trafficking and prostitution. Rather, we know that sex trafficking and prostitution work in conjunction to satisfy a system of exploitation that commodifies women as things to be bought and sold on the market. The men who purchase women in prostitution are the same men purchasing women who have been trafficked into the sex trade.

Women regularly call us for help to exit the sex trade. From this front line work, we have observed the common tactics that men employ to keep women from leaving prostitution; including use of violence and financial control. Women have told us how their pimps

threaten to kill them and beat them when they say they are leaving. A suite of threats are used to keep women submissive and within their control, these include; gang affiliations, harm to women's families, child apprehension, and the ability to find them in shelters via other women.

Stats Canada stated in their 2016 report on 'Prostitution Offence in Canada' that between 1991 and 2014, that 294 prostitutes were victims of homicide in Canada. It is clear that women in prostitution are routinely targeted by men to assault and murder. Claims that it is laws that criminalize the purchase of sex that are responsible for violence against women are unequivocally false, rather it is the men who make the decision to be violent who are culpable. As the Oppal inquiry revealed, serial murderer and John Robert Pickton, operated in a de facto decriminalized "orange light zone" in the downtown east side of Vancouver. It is clear that the hands-off approach on the part of the Vancouver Police Department allowed him to take the lives of many more women.

### **Recommendations**

1. We urge the Canadian Government to finally enact our current prostitution laws, the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act* passed under Bill C-36, on a national scale. The Vancouver Police Department have publicly stated that they would not arrest johns even after the law criminalizing the purchase of sex was passed. We call on the federal government to ensure that RCMP and municipal police forces make the purchase of sex, and women's equality, an enforcement priority.
  
2. Exiting services must be funded, expanded, and accessible for all women wanting to leave prostitution when they make the decision to. It is necessary that it includes provisions for:
  - Safe, supportive and affordable housing
  - A livable income
  - Access to detox on demand and recovery programming
  - Mental health supports and medical care

- Access to various levels of education
  - Childcare
  - Pardons for non-violent crimes related to prostitution: the cost to get a pardon is prohibitive and has a real impact on the ability to find gainful and meaningful work
3. A complete decriminalization of the women in the sex trade. This includes the removal of Section 213(1.1) in the criminal code that maintains a way to criminalize those in prostitution if they are next to a school ground, playground or daycare centre.
  4. Canada must end the criminalization of trafficked women and establish an achievable route for landed immigrants to gain legal status. As we frequently work with immigrant women, we have created relationships with lawyers who call us to let us know when an immigrant woman is held in detention. It has become part of our job to present in front of judges and argue for the liberation of these women and instead to place them in our transition house. We state that trafficked women do not belong in cells but instead they should be treated as victims of male violence against women and therefore be offered the necessary services to be protected and helped. Access to affordable legal representation is essential for this. Legal Aid must be adequately funded to respond to growing demand for immigration, family, and criminal law involving male violence against women.
  5. We also recommend that translation services be available throughout all government institutions. Women survivors of the sex trade who do not speak fluent English need to be able to engage with police, immigration and welfare in their own language. Institutions publicly say this is offered but we know this is not a service that is consistently applied in practice.