

BRIEF SUBMISSION for the Federal Justice Committee –
February 18, 2022

Title:

Meeting Across the Aisle

The review of the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act has showcased what sounds like two very opposing sides. One side wants PCEPA gone, and sex work decriminalized. The other wants PCEPA upheld and enforced.

I don't think these need to be as contradictory as they currently are. I believe both sides want the same thing – safety.

Anti-PECPA folks are saying that for sex workers to be able to do their work safely, the industry needs to be decriminalized. This will allow for sex workers to advertise, to vet their clients, and to live in a country in which their choice of profession does not allow for landlords, banks, police officers and others to pass judgements and make decisions that can result in homelessness, exclusion, judgement, and other negative consequences. What I am hearing time and time again from these witnesses is that, above all else, they want sex workers to be able to exist safely.

Pro-PCEPA folks are saying that the sex industry is inherently exploitative and dangerous, which overwhelmingly entices vulnerable populations, including young people, the LGBTQIA+ population, Indigenous populations, trauma survivors, those who are struggling financially, with an emphasis on women in all of these populations. They believe that upholding and enforcing PCEPA will allow for individuals who are selling sex to remain free from criminal prosecution, while still having access to services they may require. What I am hearing from these witnesses is that the most vulnerable in our communities deserve to exist safely, without fear of sexual exploitation.

If we now consider this from the point of view that both sides are after the goal of safety, then we must consider the population that each side represents.

The anti-PCEPA crowd paints a picture of an empowered adult, usually female, who is working in an industry she enjoys. They push against the stereotype of a sex worker that involves addiction, lack of choice, or naïveté.

The pro-PCEPA crowd highlights statistics suggesting that the average age of entry into the industry is as young as 12- 14 years old. They describe a victim; often young, or from a marginalized population, with a background of trauma and without full comprehension of the dangers and repercussions of what is happening to them.

In a world where we have become more black and white in our thinking and reaching across the aisle through the 'gray space' is becoming less available, I am here to do exactly that. As a

someone who got involved in the sex industry at age 20, I was neither young and naïve, nor was I really yet an empowered adult. At the time, I was doing drugs, but I was also holding down a managerial job that paid well; I would have been considered a functional addict and certainly not struggling financially. I engaged in sex work behaviour with the belief that I was empowering myself and taking charge of my own sexuality. It wasn't long before my boyfriend took over and what started out as participation, became exploitation. Alternatively, I have had friends over the years who have worked in various subsets of the sex industry for various reasons, including actually enjoying their jobs and wanting to do them.

In order to achieve the greater goal of 'safety', we must first consider how we get there.

I believe we need to first uphold and enforce PCEPA.

It is undeniable that, when PCEPA is enforced, the focus is on protecting the most vulnerable populations who are enticed into the sex industry, without full comprehension of repercussions of their involvement or who fall into the industry due to trauma, addiction, or financial strain. **A lack of choice and comprehension simply does not equal consent.** We need to shore up vulnerabilities within our communities, which means addressing mental health issues, financial disparities, lacking resources for young and single moms, the severely inflated cost of post-secondary education, as well as reconciliation and healing with Indigenous communities and gender inequality. Until those issues are considered handled, we simply cannot open the doors to an industry that preys on vulnerabilities that we know exist across our nation.

The World Economic Forum has suggested that, on its current relative pace, the gender gap in North America can be closed in 61.5 years¹. While that absolutely does not cover all the inequalities and vulnerabilities that result in victims being sexually exploited, we know that the sex industry is gendered, with women and girls overwhelmingly being the 'sellers' and men overwhelmingly being the purchasers.

Therefore, we could consider using gender equality as a primary benchmark. **Until and unless we achieve gender equality, we cannot harmlessly decriminalize prostitution.**

What about, **until and unless we achieve reconciliation with Indigenous peoples we cannot harmlessly decriminalize prostitution.**

Or, **until and unless we implement comprehensive, mandatory education that includes information regarding understanding consent, healthy relationships, and exploitation across the nation we cannot harmlessly decriminalize prostitution.**

¹ "Global Gender Gap Report 2020." World Economic Forum, 2019.

In Canada, we have a 'Coat of Arms' and on it is the text "Desiderantes Meliorem Patriam" meaning 'They desire a better country'². Undoubtedly, people on both sides of this debate desire to help create what they feel is the best version of our country. I believe both sides hold truths and need not be forever mutually exclusive. However, a federal law should protect the most vulnerable populations within that country and the Protections of Communities and Exploited Persons Act does just that. **It is unquestionably, indisputably, and without a doubt critical that PCEPA not only remains intact but is enforced nationwide for the foreseeable future.** If a world exists in which the sex industry can prevail without extreme levels of inequality, exploitation, and predation, we must first work together to create it.

In unity,

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² "Official Symbols of Canada." Government of Canada, 2020. <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/official-symbols-canada.html>.