BridgeNorth Women’s Mentorship & Advocacy Services

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United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls

BridgeNorth Women’s Mentorship & Advocacy Services (BridgeNorth) is a survivor-led organization committed to ending sexual exploitation and sex trafficking in Canada. We operate in York Region, Ontario, Canada and serve individuals who are experiencing vulnerability to or who have experienced sex trafficking and/or sexual exploitation. We do this through direct services, public education, and advocacy. We are nationally recognized experts in the anti-human trafficking field.

BridgeNorth is honoured to submit this report to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls. Below, we have answered a selection of the proposed questions. However, before providing our responses, we want to clarify a few items. First, BridgeNorth primarily serves youth between the ages of 12 and 18 who are experiencing vulnerability to or have experienced sex trafficking and/or sexual exploitation. We, therefore, answer the following questions through that lens. Further, we are acutely aware of the impacts of the sex industry in Canada on children and see fit to clarify that children under the age of 18 cannot consent to sell or trade sex, sexual acts, or sexual content. There is, therefore, no such thing as a child prostitute or a prostituted girl. The nuances in this language regularly impact the youth we serve and how they are viewed and treated. We, therefore, will not use the language of “prostituted women and girls” in our submission; rather, we will refer to youth/children who have experienced sexual exploitation or sex trafficking. While a small shift in language, this represents a dramatic shift in how we view trafficked and exploited youth.

**Provide examples of the hidden forms of prostitution, and explain to what extent they are recognized and dealt with as such.**

There are many forms of hidden prostitution in Canada. Traditionally, the vast majority of the sex industry has taken place in person. This still occurs in many places, including in licensed facilities such as massage parlours and strip clubs. These licensed locations are allowed to exist under municipal bylaws, while in many of these places, behind closed doors, women and girls are experiencing violence, sexual exploitation, and sex trafficking. It also occurs on the street, in hotels/motels, in Air BnBs, etc.

In recent years, the sex industry has moved increasingly online, particularly for women and girls experiencing exploitation/trafficking in the sex industry. This occurs through:

* Pornography;
* Social Media where youth are experiencing various forms of exploitation including the solicitation, consumption, distribution, and commercialization of child sexual abuse images. For example, on Snapchat, adult exploiters connect with children to manipulate, coerce, or offer something in exchange for explicit images, videos, and messages;
* Online Platforms such as Only Fans where individuals, including children, can receive payment for their sexual images and videos;
* The Dark Web where many individuals connect for the purposes of purchasing sex from adults, exploiting children for sex, and for the purposes of trafficking individuals.

**Describe the profile of women and girls affected by prostitution in your country, and provide disaggregated data, where possible.**

In our experience, those impacted by trafficking/exploitation in the sex industry are typically young females who have experienced marginalization, oppression, and discrimination. They have often experienced physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse and/or neglect in childhood, been involved in the Child Welfare System, experienced mental health challenges, and have experienced housing precarity or homelessness. These individuals often have a number of intersecting experiences across their lives which have contributed to vulnerability – many experiences which have been caused by the oppressive systems in Canadian society (such as colonization, racism, classism, etc.).

Furthermore, trafficked/exploited, individuals experience significant trauma and violence, among other adverse experiences. Post-trafficking, individuals often experience depression, anxiety, PTSD, suicidal ideation, and a wide array of other resulting mental health challenges. We are seeing individuals who now face life-long adverse impacts because of the trafficking/exploitation they experienced in the sex industry.

Demographic data for BridgeNorth clientele:

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| --- | --- |
| * 89% female
* 3% other gender
* 8% male
 | * 86% aged 12-17 years old
* 9% aged 18-29 years old
 |

**What forms of violence are prostituted women and girls subjected to (physical, psychological, sexual, economic, administrative, or other)?**

Those impacted by trafficking/exploitation in the sex industry live through physical, sexual, emotional, and structural violence across their lives from the experiences that create vulnerability through their experiences in the sex industry, and even after they have exited.

Individuals in Canada’s sex industry are subjected to incredible levels of violence and an inherent risk of violence at the hands of traffickers, sex purchasers, gang members, law enforcement, systemic forces and others. This includes (though is certainly not limited to):

* Physical and sexual violence at the hands of sex purchasers.
* Physical and sexual violence at the hands of traffickers and their affiliates.
* Non-consensual distribution of sexual images or videos – these images may be used as advertisements for sexual services, sold for profit, or used as blackmail. This is particularly common for children who have shared intimate images/videos with someone they believed to be their romantic partner.
* Physical, sexual, and systemic violence (including discrimination) at the hands of law enforcement and other systems. For example, women who have been trafficked and are arrested on trafficking charges when they were always victims of the crime, not perpetrators.

Upon exiting the sex industry, individuals may face further violence, including:

* Discrimination in a number of systems, including medical, justice, shelter and housing, child welfare, employment, etc. For example, many survivors have shared incredible discrimination in medical care where they are refused medical care, misdiagnosed, accused of substance use or sex selling, and overall denied dignified treatment due to their history of being exploited or trafficked.
* Denied employment or housing. As well as termination of employment or housing when an employer or landlord learns of their past experiences of trafficking/exploitation.
* Exploitation of their trafficking story, where the individual’s story is used without consent or adequate remuneration.

**Describe the linkages, if any, between prostitution and the violation of the human rights of women and girls.**

The sex industry violates many human rights of women and girls. First, the sex industry is inherently violent and involves exploitation and trafficking, which violates an individual’s right to the security of person, freedom of movement, right to identification (often traffickers steal the individual’s identification), right to work, free choice of employment and to just and favourable conditions of work.

When we consider children who are being exploited and trafficked in the sex industry, and we look at the Convention on the Rights of the Child, we see a host of other rights violations including, the right to life, survival and development (trafficking impedes a child’s ability to develop in “the best possible way”), identity, protection from kidnapping, protection from violence, protection from harmful work, protection from harmful drugs, protection from sexual abuse, protection from sale and trafficking, and protection from exploitation.

**How is the issue of consent dealt with? Is it possible to speak about meaningful consent for prostituted women and girls?**

It is simply not possible to speak about meaningful consent for “prostituted girls.” Children under the age of 18 cannot consent to sell or trade sex, sexual acts, or sexual content (images/videos) for anything, whether that be money, drugs, shelter, food, gifts, etc. This is according to Canadian law, and international standards of childhood and consent.

**What measures are in place to assist and support women and girls who wish to leave prostitution?**

There is still a lot of work to be done to assist and support women and girls who wish to leave prostitution.

Federal legislation (PCEPA)[[1]](#footnote-2) has created exit opportunities for those who wish to leave and it has resulted in the beginnings of a shift whereby our government sees the need to support those in the sex industry to leave. Since the implementation of PCEPA, there has been an increase in funding directed toward supporting individuals to exit, resulting in an increase in the following measures:

* Dedicated anti-human trafficking police officers in most jurisdictions.
* Dedicated human trafficking prosecutors in the Provincial Court Systems.
* Dedicated anti-human trafficking support services across the country (including peer support programs, safe houses, shelters, transitional homes, group programs, counselling, case management, education, employment, etc.).
* Creation of the Canadian National Human Trafficking Hotline.
* Dedicated free lawyer for victims and survivors of human trafficking in Ontario, funded by the province of Ontario.
* Dedicated anti-human trafficking workers in many Children’s Aid/Family Children’s Services agencies in Ontario.

Most of these measures are relatively new. This means they are learning and expanding, and we expect to see an increased impact of these measures in the decade to come.

However, there remain many gaps for those who wish to exit the sex industry:

* Transportation to help the individual leave.
* Planning support to help an individual make the decision to leave.
* Easy access to identification when the individual’s identification has been taken from them.
* Adequate housing, particularly emergency housing and housing which is specialized in human trafficking and therefore accessible to victims/survivors.
* Affordable housing – this is a crisis in all of Canada and is particularly impacting the vulnerable, including those wishing to exit the sex industry.
* Services for victims/survivors with children.
* Justice teams to support an individual through the court process when needed.
* Specialized anti-human trafficking services which are relevant and accessible to those who have been trafficked/exploited.
* Peer support services.
* Adequate and accessible mental health services – most mental health services are either expensive, only available for 3-6 months post-trafficking, or available only after years-long waitlists.

**What are the obstacles faced by organizations and frontline service providers in their mission to support victims and survivors of prostitution?**

BridgeNorth continues to face many obstacles in our efforts to support victims and survivors of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking.

Successful advocacy, education and awareness efforts have increased recognition of trafficking and higher demand for services than we are able to fund. Lack of predictable, stable government funding prevents long-term planning for the growth required to meet increased demand for service. Funders require meeting service delivery targets but don’t recognize the operational costs needed for physical premises and good governance, including required measurement and reporting. Salary budgets are stretched to add headcount, foregoing spending on adequate benefits coverage and retirement savings plans for staff doing difficult work with the possibility of experiencing vicarious trauma. Staff resources are required to chase grants/respond to calls for proposals where many applicants compete for limited funds. High inflation rates in 2023 challenged the charitable giving environment and individual donations decreased.

Working with other agencies to coordinate services is also a significant barrier. We continue to observe an incredible and concerning lack of survivor-informed practices in other agencies with human trafficking-specific services that are not, in fact, accessible to these exact individuals. These services have strict:

* Referral criteria which exclude the vast majority of victims/survivors.
* Rules surrounding phone use, meeting attendance, program participation, behaviours, curfews, etc. that are unrealistic for a young person who has been living independently, with little to no rules, on the street, and/or with a trafficker.
* Consequences for youth for exhibiting behaviours that we, as a survivor-led organization, understand are expected behaviours for trafficked/exploited youth. It can take months to build the trust necessary to get a youth off the street and into safe housing only to lose them again when they’re discharged to the street for being unable to immediately adhere to stringent rules.

**What recommendations do you have to prevent and end violence associated with the prostitution of women and girls?**

We recommend the following measures to improve support for trafficked/exploited women and girls:

* Prioritize funding for survivor-led and survivor-focused services, projects, and programs.
* More meaningful engagement of survivors at all levels (governmental and non-governmental).
* Improved understanding of trafficking/exploitation across sectors.
* Improved coordination of services across all levels of government.
* Address the systemic and structural issues which continue to create vulnerability to trafficking/exploitation.
1. Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA), 2014: <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/annualstatutes/2014_25/page-1.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)