The Women’s Equality Coalition is a Canadian-based coalition of women’s organizations that provide support, services and advocacy for women who have experienced prostitution and other forms of male violence. The coalition includes Indigenous, Francophone and Anglophone women’s groups with decades of experience advocating for the rights and freedoms of women and girls. Coalition members were intervenors in the landmark cases: [*Canada (Attorney General) v. Bedford*](https://rapereliefshelter.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Factum-The-Womens-Coalition-for-the-Abolition-of-Prostitution-Supreme-Court-of-Canada-.pdf) *(2013),* [*R. v. Barton*](https://rapereliefshelter.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Intervener_Women-Equality_bradley_barton.pdf) *(2019),* [and *Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform v. Attorney General*](https://rapereliefshelter.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Factum-Womens-Equality-Coalition-1.pdf) *(2023).*

Canada’s Legislative Approach

Canada’s legislative version of the Nordic Model, the [*Protections of Communities and Exploited Persons Act*](https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/annualstatutes/2014_25/page-1.html) *(PCEPA),* came into effect in 2014. However, it is impossible to judge the effectiveness of the current laws since enforcement across Canada has been [inconsistent](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00010/tbl/tbl02-eng.htm) with some police forces (such as the Vancouver Police Department) publicly declaring that [“Sex work involving consenting adults is not an enforcement priority.”](https://vpd.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/sex-work-enforcement-guidelines.pdf) While it is hard to determine cause and effect, it is worth noting that after *PCEPA* came into effect, homicides with prostituted victims in the years following the legislative change [decreased](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00010-eng.htm#a4), even as the overall homicide rate increased.

Demographics of those in Prostitution:

In the 2023 Ontario Superior Court decision of [*Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform v. Attorney General*](https://www.canlii.org/en/on/onsc/doc/2023/2023onsc5197/2023onsc5197.html), Justice Goldstein acknowledged that:

“Women are the majority of sex workers; Women from marginalized populations, and especially Indigenous women, are over-represented in the sex industry, particularly the street-based commercial sex industry.”

Recent [Statistics Canada](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00010-eng.htm#a4) crime-reported data indicate that the vast majority of homicide victims are women (94%) and that 43% of victims were between the ages of 12 and 17 with the median age of female victims being 18.

The Department of Justice Canada’s 2022 “[A Review of the Measures to Address Prostitution Initiative (MAPI),](https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/rmapi-epmlcp/pdf/RSD_RR2022_Measures_Address_Prostitution_Initiative_MAPI_EN.pdf)” that utilizes frontline anti-violence service provider’s client data, further reinforces that “the majority (94%) MAPI clients were women and girls; gender diverse people accounted for about 2% of all MAPI clients. Indigenous peoples represent about 5% of the population in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017) but accounted for 16% of the MAPI clients. Over 40% of the MAPI clients were young adults aged 20 to 29 years. About 6% of MAPI clients were minors, younger than 18, at the time of data collection.” Additionally, “childhood abuse was frequently cited as a common characteristic among MAPI clients, and more than half of the interviews brought up childhood sexual abuse as a key factor. Clients who had experienced some form of violence prior to entering the sex trade was commonly observed. The effects of colonization and intergenerational trauma are crucial factors that make Indigenous peoples vulnerable to involvement in the sex trade and to being physically and/or psychologically coerced by others into providing sexual services.”

The landscape of prostitution varies greatly in Canada and includes street-based solicitation in impoverished neighbourhoods, so-called massage parlours that feature racialized, primarily Asian, women, and out-calls to condos and hotels. If defined as the exchange of sexual services for a material benefit, there are many hidden forms of prostitution that take place in Canada. Women may enter prostitution for the purpose of paying for particular things such as tuition or daycare fees and may not be seen as part of the industry. From our respective frontline work, we know women will exchange sex for: a place to stay or the provision of drugs, alcohol, and/or cigarettes.

Other forms of prostitution that Canadian women and girls are encouraged into are facilitated through the internet and are often known euphemistically under other terms such as “[sugaring](https://www.vancouverisawesome.com/opinion/opinion-sugar-daddy-is-a-new-term-for-the-same-old-oppression-3525951)” (such as [Seeking Arrangements](https://dailyhive.com/vancouver/sfu-ubc-top-universities-sugar-babies-canada)) or “camming” (such as OnlyFans).

Connection to Pornography

Many linkages exist between pornography and prostitution that mutually reinforce the other. Pornography informs the sexual acts that men who purchase sex request, or force, of women in prostitution. One example is the evidence in the trial of Bradley Barton, a Canadian man who was convicted of killing Cindy Gladue, a prostituted woman, and revealed that prior to his encounter with her, he [watched violent pornography](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/accused-killer-bradley-barton-searched-internet-for-details-on-rough-sex-court-hears-1.5892763) that depicted acts similar to those he committed against her and that caused her death.

The Market for Prostitution

The men (known in Canada as “johns”) who solicit women in prostitution are largely invisible in the public discourse about prostitution. It is clear that there’s no singular profile of the men who solicit sex. As Detective Darda with the [Edmonton Police Service](https://edmontonjournal.com/news/crime/sharks-are-circling-on-the-streets-with-edmontons-human-trafficking-and-exploitation-unit) declared: “They could be soccer dads or dentists, businessmen or street thugs; there is no “typical” john.” Looking at data from stings that took place in five cities in Canada ([Vancouver](https://vancouversun.com/news/crime/live-vancouver-police-operation-targeted-sex-predators-preying-on-youth), [Edmonton](https://edmontonjournal.com/news/crime/sharks-are-circling-on-the-streets-with-edmontons-human-trafficking-and-exploitation-unit), [London,](https://globalnews.ca/news/5130054/london-police-release-names-men-charged-john-sting/) [Longueuil](https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2023/06/03/un-projet-pilote-inedit-pour-eduquer-les-clients-qui-achetent-les-services-sexuels-descortes-majeures) and [Sydney](https://www.saltwire.com/cape-breton/news/exclusive-cape-breton-police-complete-second-prostitution-sting-232367/)), the men are of varying ethnicities and range in age from 19 to their 80’s and hold a range of occupations, including: teacher at a girl’s school, school board trustee, pizza delivery driver, working in the medical field, mechanic, plumber and welder.

To put it succinctly, men are responsible for the perpetration of violence against women and girls. In particular, the men who pimp and buy women. Others, such as drug dealers that exploit women’s addictions and police officers who [abuse women](https://globalnews.ca/news/10051582/vancouver-ex-cop-convicted-on-sex-charge-accused-of-breaking-release-conditions/) themselves or ignore their complaints, are also culpable.

The industry of prostitution is supported by individuals and industries that while are not directly involved in the commercial sex transactions, derive financial benefit from its continuation. These include but are not limited to: hotels, AirBnBs, and landlords which provide the location for commercial sex transactions and municipalities that collect [business licence fees](https://www.richmond-news.com/local-news/richmond-councillor-calls-for-crackdown-on-sex-work-in-massage-parlours-7871453) for “adult services.”

Violence Committed Against Prostituted Women and Girls

Society has historically deemed women in prostitution as disposable, their humanity disregarded. A number of recent Canadian cases exemplify this pattern.

In January 2020, 51 year-old [Eustachio Gallese](https://globalnews.ca/news/6603945/quebec-sex-worker-death-guilty-plea/) murdered Marylène Lévesque. At the time, he was out on day parole for killing his female partner in 2006. The Parole Board of Canada had authorized his access to prostituted women, including Marylène, in order to respond to his “sexual needs.”

In February 2020, a 17-year-old boy murdered Ashley Noell Arzaga and stabbed two others who were working at a massage parlour. He was motivated by misogynistic views of women, describing himself as an “incel,” which resulted in the judge ruling the attack constituted [terrorism](https://www.cp24.com/news/toronto-massage-parlour-murder-was-act-of-terrorism-court-finds-in-historical-decision-1.6429474?cache=yesclipId10406200text%2Fhtml%3Bcharset%3Dutf-80404%2F7.578962%2F7.246408%2F7.246408%2F7.281562).

In 2021, 42 year-old [Stephen Bradley Ewing](https://nanaimonewsnow.com/2021/09/28/court-hears-disturbing-cases-of-abuse-toward-vulnerable-nanaimo-area-sex-trade-workers/) plead guilty to charges that included sexual assault causing bodily harm and attempting to choke, in relation to six different women victims. All six incidents began with him agreeing to pay prostituted women for their services before violently attacking them. The victims ranged in age from 15 to 40.

Police in British Columbia have issued multiple warnings advising “sex trade workers to not respond to any requests for services in the area where Curtis Sagmoen lives” due to multiple violent offences against prostituted women, including in 2017, hitting a woman with an All Terrain Vehicle. In 2017, the [remains](https://www.castanet.net/news/Vernon/462419/Curtis-Sagmoen-slapped-with-more-jail-time-for-breach-of-conditions) of an 18 year-old woman were found on his parent’s property but no charges have been laid in connection.

In 2021, 50 year-old Satvir Sanghera [plead guilty](https://www.richmond-news.com/local-news/sentencing-delayed-for-richmond-sex-offender-7888472) to two charges of sexual assault and two charges of obtaining or communicating for sexual services. He originally faced 17 charges including administering a noxious substance, possession of child pornography, distributing intimate images, theft and fraud. He was released on [conditions](https://www.richmond-news.com/local-news/police-release-photo-of-alleged-richmond-sex-offender-3114886) not to have contact with anyone working in the sex trade.

In 2023, 45 year-old Paul Raymond Theriault Jr., was [arrested on 72 charges](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/cb-man-additional-sex-charges-1.7062658) that include sexual assault and human trafficking, with 18 alleged victims having come forward to report incidents that date back to 2008 up until 2023.

In January 2024, Richard Mantha’s [trial began](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/richard-mantha-calgary-rape-sex-trade-workers-1.7089013). He is facing 20 charges that include kidnapping, uttering threats to cause bodily harm, sexual assault with a weapon, and administering a noxious substance against seven victims, many of whom were in prostitution.

Turning to Statistics Canada, the data reflect the level of [violent targeting](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2016001/article/14670-eng.pdf?st=x0-l1jxI) that women in prostitution face. From 1991 to 2014, there were 294 homicides in which the victim was identified as being in prostitution and in 96% of the cases, the victim was female. Over half of the homicides were reported as directly related to their occupation (57% from 1997 to 2014) as compared to 16% of homicides in which the victims earned money through other “occupations.” Additionally, the data indicate homicide cases involving prostituted victims were less likely to be solved than victims who were not in prostitution.

Prostitution Violates the Human Rights of Women and Girls

The [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights#:~:text=Article%203,liberty%20and%20security%20of%20person.) promises to all people, security (which has been interpreted as including bodily integrity), and protection from degrading treatment (article 3 and  5) whereas both are the essence of prostitution. Furthermore, women and children often resort to prostitution because states have failed to provide them with an adequate standard of living as articulated in article 25 “food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.”

Prostitution counters/denies consent

Canada’s criminal code defines consent as "voluntary agreement” to engage in the sexual activity in question [(273.1)](https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-46/section-273.1-20181213.html#:~:text=273.1%20(1)%20Subject%20to%20subsection,the%20sexual%20activity%20in%20question.&text=(1.1)%20Consent%20must%20be%20present,activity%20in%20question%20takes%20place.). The agreement of a prostituted person to the sexual activity is gained and coerced by a monetary payment or its equivalent. Therefore that “agreement” is not “voluntary” and contradicts the essence of “consent.”

Lack of Data and Research

The only [research](https://rapereliefshelter.bc.ca/lack-of-national-data-on-prostitution-in-canada/) conducted in recent years by a Canadian government agency about the sex-trade relies solely on data extracted from cases related to the Criminal Justice System. It is essential that the government of Canada collect, analyze, and publish data about contributing factors to women and girls’ vulnerability to prostitution, the direct impact of prostitution on women and girls and the overall impact of prostitution on women’s equality.

Landscape of Support Available to those in Prostitution

The current system to assist women and girls who wish to leave prostitution is piecemeal, with too few services available nationally and those in operation lacking adequate resources. This landscape is contrary to the demonstrated need and uptake of those services by women and girls wishing to exit prostitution. Returning to the Department of Justice Canada’s “A Review of the Measures to Address Prostitution Initiative (MAPI)” that assessed the outcomes of publicly-funded services that assisted survivors of prostitution during the period following *PCEPA* coming into effect, the report showed that, “overall, 81% of MAPI clients requested support for exiting the sex trade from MAPI organizations.” Women and girls turned to MAPI-funded organizations for addictions treatment, mental health services, to regain custody of their children, to leave exploitative situations, and to improve their lives for the better.

As reported in MAPI, “the significant lack of safe and affordable housing, as well as emergency shelters, is another critical barrier to exiting the sex trade.” Women and girls wishing to exit are connected to emergency shelter and crisis beds, transitional housing, and support with longer-term housing such as social housing, and finding other safe and affordable housing options.

Over two-thirds (68%) of MAPI clients had a substance abuse issue and 21% of MAPI clients attended some form of substance abuse treatment, which was either delivered by a MAPI organization or was a referral to another service delivery agency. Service providers interviewed reported that addiction to drugs and/or alcohol is one of the main reasons that the women they serve struggle with leaving the sex trade.

The programs have the potential to be highly impactful. It was reported that “64% of clients had experienced a positive change in their lives after involvement with the organization’s programs and services. Only 6% did not appear to have a positive change in their lives after interacting with a MAPI organization.” For a fifth of MAPI clients, they were able to exit the sex trade within the surveyed period.

Ending prostitution

While there are many concrete actions governments can take immediately to combat prostitution, the most urgent and effective ones are through reducing women’s economic vulnerability by providing them with consistent and livable economic support and by holding the men who sell and buy women accountable (via criminalization and other means).