

# Introduction to the Harms of Anti-Trafficking

The [harms of anti-trafficking?](#)

While often well-intended, anti-trafficking campaigns carry a host of problems:

Human trafficking—specifically, sex trafficking—has become a **moral panic** in recent years.

- A moral panic is **“the outbreak of moral concern over a supposed threat from an agent of corruption ... out of proportion to its actual danger or potential harm.”**<sup>1</sup>
- Many anti-trafficking organizations deliver **sensational claims** of traffickers lurking around every corner. There have **only been 92 prosecuted trafficking cases** in Canada from 2006-2018.<sup>2</sup> (12 years!)

Police-reported trafficking stats are inflated due to an overbroad definition of trafficking and “trafficking related activities” that can include everything from assaults to thefts to property damage.<sup>3</sup>

- These bad stats are then used to fuel the moral panic, circulating for years despite being debunked.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, many **sound criticisms of the anti-trafficking complex** are dismissed as heartless “pro-trafficking” sentiments. This is not the case; critics of anti-trafficking campaigns **want to prevent human trafficking** as much as the next person.

**To help you better understand, we've provided a summary of problems present in many current anti-trafficking campaigns, organizations, and movements—and some solutions.**

1 Goode, E. & Ben-Yehuda, N. (2011). “Grounding and Defending the Sociology of Moral Panic,” chap. 2 in *Moral Panic and the Politics of Anxiety*, ed. Sean Patrick Hier. Abingdon: Routledge

2 Millar, H. & O'Doherty, T. (2020). [Canadian Human Trafficking Prosecutions and Principles of Fundamental Justice: A Contradiction in Terms?](#)

3 Millar, H., O'Doherty, T., & Roots, K. (2017). [A Formidable Task: Reflections on Obtaining Legal Empirical Evidence on Human Trafficking in Canada](#). *Anti-Trafficking Review*, (8).

4 Hall, C. (2014, September 5). [Is One of the Most Cited Statistics About Sex Work Wrong?](#) The Atlantic.

# 1. CONFLATION

The first major problem is the **conflation of sex work with human trafficking**.

Sex work is the exchange of sexual services for money or goods, between **consenting adults**.

Human trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the **threat or use of force** or other forms of **coercion**, of **abduction**, of **fraud**, of **deception**, of the **abuse of power** or of a **position of vulnerability** for the purpose of **exploitation**.

**Abolitionist** organizations and movements—those who advocate for ending all sex work, either as the sole focus of their work or as part of a larger mission—have **co-opted trafficking rhetoric** and use it to **brand all sex workers as exploited, powerless, and passive victims** of sexual exploitation. This strikes a chord for two reasons:

**A. Stigma around sex:** It's easier for some people to accept that women are universally coerced into sex work, versus accepting the reality many chose to do this (bearing in mind people's unique circumstances afford them greater or fewer choices).

**B. Moral appeal:** Who wouldn't want to help the exploited? If you think all women engaged in sex work are trafficking victims, a natural impulse is to fix the problem. Abolitionists also conflate sex work with child sexual exploitation—two distinct things—further appealing to morality and heartstrings by employing “save the children” rhetoric as an argument against sex work.

SWAN knows **from working with women engaged in sex work** this approach is misguided, infantilizing, and dangerous. **When sex work is criminalized, predators can act with impunity**. Conflating sex work and human trafficking means social stigma and bad policy decisions that **hurt sex workers AND do not help actual trafficking victims**.

## 2. HOT TOPIC

Some groups may **take advantage of anti-trafficking efforts** to further their agendas:



**Opponents to im/migration** can argue that stricter laws and policies are needed to prevent traffickers from entering or im/migrants from being trafficked into Canada

- Anti-im/migrant narratives can include **unsubstantiated claims** of (racialized) traffickers entering Canada to exploit local women and girls in addition to the narrative of passive im/migrant victims being brought to Canada for exploitation
- Sex workers are also treated as traffickers when they **push back against being labelled** a victim



**Faith-based groups**, similar to abolitionists, may use trafficking rhetoric to condemn sex work for **moral reasons**



**Politicians** benefit from the moral panic and can use trafficking as an **election platform position** (because, again, who wouldn't want to support trafficking victims?)



**Even nonprofit organizations** are re-branding themselves as trafficking experts (without any credentials or experience to back this up) to secure some of the enormous amount of **anti-trafficking funding** from government

## 3. STEREOTYPES

**Sensationalized** anti-trafficking campaigns tend to **utilize particular imagery** to depict an **“ideal victim.”**

- This is usually a young, white, cis-woman or child with middle socioeconomic standing or an exoticized, infantilized BIPOC woman (the “other”) needing rescue.

The **stereotypical perpetrator** is often an imposing BIPOC man who is a stranger to the victim (disregarding that most sexual crime involves someone already known to the victim, like a partner, family member, or friend).<sup>5</sup>

These depictions have a disastrous effect on racialized, gender diverse, and lower socioeconomic status people by **creating a narrow understanding** of who can be victimized and who is a likely suspect.

- Impacts include **increased profiling and surveillance of BIPOC** and sub-par or **no resources** being made available for marginalized communities experiencing exploitation.

The **hyperfocus on sex trafficking** completely omits the problem of **labour exploitation/trafficking** occurring in Canada.<sup>6</sup>

- This affects primarily BIPOC im/migrants from Global South countries (countries in the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania that are predominantly lower-income and marginalized compared to their counterparts in the "Global North")<sup>7</sup> who provide labour in sectors like seasonal agriculture.
- Despite their enormous contributions to Canadian society, **politicians do not devote the same energy** to temporary foreign workers' rights and safety as they do to **potential sex trafficking victims**.

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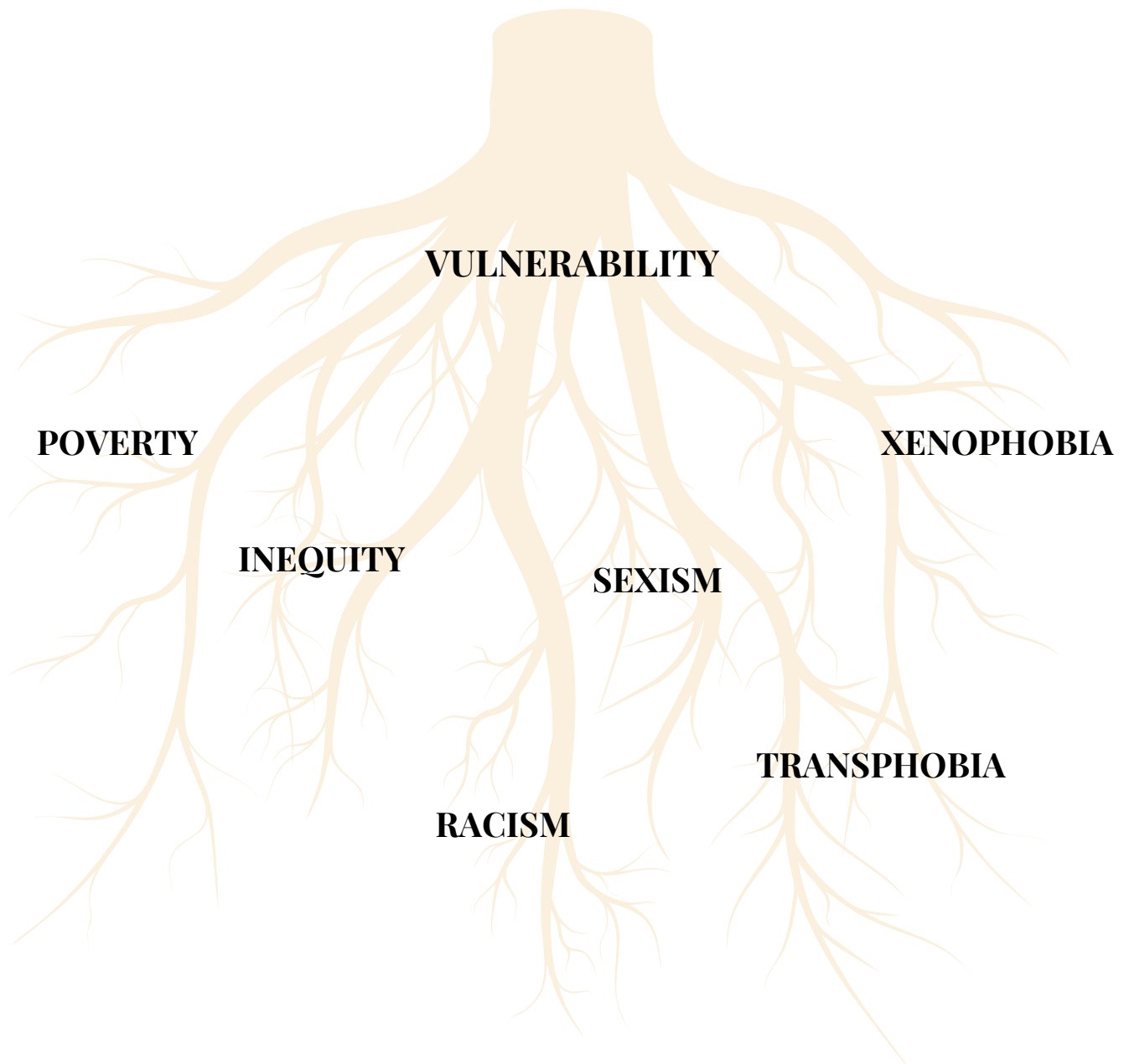
<sup>5</sup> Government of Canada (2022). [3.4 Characteristics of Crimes of Sexual Assault and of its Victims](#).

<sup>6</sup> See Migrant Workers Centre, [Labour Exploitation & Trafficking in BC](#)

<sup>7</sup> Dados, N., & Connell, R. (2012). The Global South. *American Sociological Association, Contexts*, 11, 12-13.

## 4. ROOT CAUSES

Reactionary “rescue” oriented anti-trafficking campaigns, as well as campaigns that center around sophisticated kidnapers and organized crime, **fail to acknowledge or address the root causes of human trafficking**. Poverty, inequity, racism, and other forms of marginalization are what make people most vulnerable to exploitation of any kind.



## 5. IM/MIGRANT SEX WORKERS

**Our current laws** result in many aspects of sex work **remaining illegal**, creating multi-layered criminalization that forces im/migrant and non-im/migrant sex workers alike to **operate underground**. This increases the risk of **poor working conditions, lack of access to health care** and other resources, and **violence**.

**Im/migrant sex workers** face all the same barriers that other sex workers do in Canada and are **even further disadvantaged** by the immigration prohibition of sex work: While selling sex in Canada is [\(theoretically\) decriminalized](#), this does not apply to those without PR or citizenship. Therefore, any violence or exploitation faced by an im/migrant sex worker is likely to go unreported **in order to avoid potential deportation**.

## SWAN'S RECOMMENDATIONS

**Decriminalize sex work** in Canada to ensure sex workers have access to their basic human rights, including **health and social services** and **access to legal and labour protections**.

**Repeal** the [IRPR](#) and [PCEPA](#) provisions that currently put migrant sex workers at **increased risk of violence**, as well as risk of subsequent **arrest, detention and deportation**.

# To Conclude...

HERE IS A LIST OF THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR  
IN ANTI-TRAFFICKING CAMPAIGNS:



[Interchangeable language](#) (sex work, sex slavery, prostitution, trafficking, etc.)



**Immorality** is the foundation for intervention



**Self-proclaimed** experts



Urban **myths** and viral scarelore



**Raids, rescue & rehabilitation** rhetoric



The **state is the protector** (e.g., law enforcement is the solution to trafficking)



The campaign is predicated or advertised based on a **sole survivor's** story



The **conflation** of child trafficking and the sex industry



**Tragedy porn** is the fundraising strategy



**Anti-sex work** bias

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