

Language Matters

CONTENT WARNING: SOME OF THE WORDS, PHRASES AND TERMS IN THIS DOCUMENT ARE OFFENSIVE.

There are a number of terms that have had long-standing ties to sex work and/or the im/migrant population, but these are outdated, offensive, and with repeated use can perpetuate stigma tied to the industry.

WHAT ARE SOME OBVIOUS EXAMPLES?

- Film
- Television
- Novels

THERE ARE ALSO LESS OBVIOUS EXAMPLES

- [Anti-trafficking campaigns](#)
- Various levels of government
- Journalism
- [Social Media](#)



WHY CAN IT BE INACCURATE TO USE 'HUMAN TRAFFICKING' IN THE CONTEXT OF SEX WORK?

It is common for the current narrative to conflate sex work with human trafficking, but this is not accurate. This conflation is something you may see in **anti-trafficking campaigns**.

Words, phrases and terms to watch for

WORDS

- Prostitute
- Hooker
- Variations of hooker, like “ho” or “hoe”*
- Whore
- Prostituted woman
- Harlot
- Streetwalker
- Slut

WHY?

These terms tend to buy into a stereotype that contributes to the general oversexing of the industry. The circumstances by which someone ends up working in the sex industry are complex, varied & nuanced.

*[As PACE explains](#), ho/hoe is African American Vernacular English and is used by some sex workers but is not acceptable for people outside of the Black sex worker community to use.

ADDITIONAL NOTES FROM SWAN

- Asian women tend to be highly fetishized when it comes to sex work.
- Other racialized groups have different experiences with anti-sex work bias/anti-trafficking, however SWAN’s expertise is with the Asian community, therefore we can only speak about the Asian community.

Conflating being "illegal" with being a sex worker

This is not in line with SWAN's belief that sex work is work

SWAN invites you to read a backgrounder on the [Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act](#) for more information

SWAN also recommends reading this backgrounder about [Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations and sex work prohibition](#)

WORD CHOICES THAT CHAMPION THE RESCUE MENTALITY

Example

- Use of the word "victim"
- "She's been preyed upon"
- "She's been taken advantage of"
- "She's been exploited"
- "She's been prostituted"

Why?

The topic of sex work is incredibly nuanced and complex. Each person engaging in sex work brings a variety of life experiences and perspectives.

It's about rights not rescue.

SYMPATHETIC WORD CHOICES CAN ALSO PERPETUATE STEREOTYPES

They forced her...

Oh, that poor girl!

She's so defenseless!

A closer look...

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS HEADLINE? WHAT ABOUT THE LINE BELOW IT?

Crime

Wednesday, 28 Sept. 2023

Caught in the sex trade

Investigators say women rescued after major crime bust at "modern day brothel"

Consider complexities. There are macro factors that might result in someone entering the sex trade. For instance, their credentials may not be recognized in Canada, so they may only have access to minimum wage or low-paying jobs. Instead of choosing the former, they may opt for sex work because the hours are flexible and they can make more money.

We have also observed a narrative in which sex work is not someone's true first choice: that they're engaging in sex work because it's being done to survive.

The details **do** make a difference.

"Is this really her first choice?"

Ultimately, it depends on the person and their individual lived experiences. Everyone is unique.

Updating job credentials can be expensive. Along with the financial commitment, not everyone may have the time to repeat a course, certification, or degree over again.

Cultural and language barriers. The way something is carried out in Canada could be different in another jurisdiction.

They've experienced discrimination. This could pertain to race, culture, beliefs, and/or sexuality.

Other economic factors. It's becoming costly, for instance, to live in Metro Vancouver. Rather than choosing between tuition or rent and food, perhaps sex work was the best option at that time.

Dehumanizing words and phrases

Well, she honestly **deserved it because...**

I think she's a **total whore**

Eww...you're being such a **slut** right now!

Words hurt.

To say someone deserves to be injured—or killed—is dehumanizing.

Using terms historically tied to sex workers as punchlines in jokes is cruel, and **perpetuates stereotypes.**

EVEN THE TERM 'SEX WORK' HAS ITS OWN LIMITS

Not everyone who works in this industry refers to themselves as a sex worker.

'sex work'
'human trafficking'
'sex trafficking'



these are all
different things

Please note: Not everyone's primary identity centers around their job. Not all who engage in sex work will self-ID as a sex worker, despite the broad language that is sometimes used to refer to this community.

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