

# Rethinking Red Flags in Anti-Trafficking Campaigns

## IN THE CONTEXT OF SEX WORK

Many anti-trafficking campaigns advertise “**red flags**” that the public should watch out for, in order to **identify and prevent** human trafficking.

Often, these red flags are specific to **sex trafficking**.

With slight variations, depending on the campaign or organization, red flags can include:

- Not speaking English, or having someone else speak on your behalf
- Not wanting to call the police or reveal your immigration status
- Working long hours
- Etc.

Red flags in anti-trafficking campaigns are highly problematic and **cause real harm** to sex workers, especially **im/migrant sex workers**.


Let's learn about why



Popular “Red Flag” 

## 1. THEY DON'T SPEAK ENGLISH

An anti-trafficking campaign might say:



This happens because they have been brought to Canada against their will!

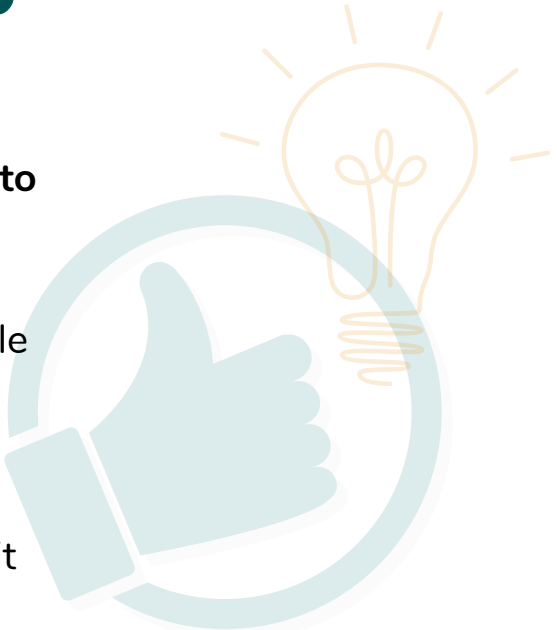
OR...

\*Debbie DuGoode is the intellectual property of Rosanne Lambert ([flippinpictures](http://flippinpictures.com))

SWAN says:

This can happen because **not all im/migrants to Canada speak English.**

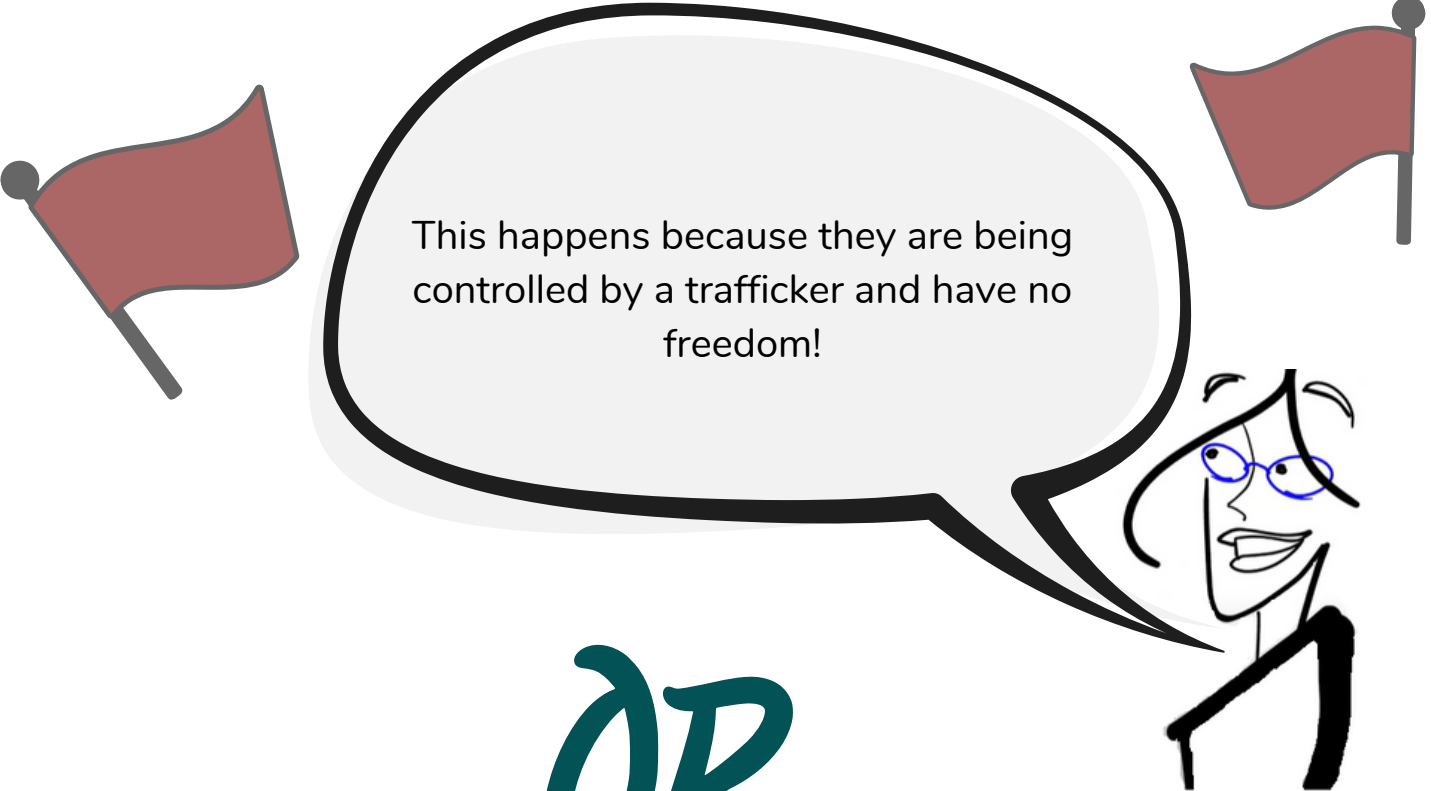
Many im/migrants live in communities of people from their country of origin—everyone speaks their native language and even business signs are in their native tongue. Learning a new language is difficult and time-consuming and it **may not be a priority.**



Popular “Red Flag” 

## 2. THEY DON'T SPEAK ON THEIR OWN BEHALF

An anti-trafficking campaign might say:




This happens because they are being controlled by a trafficker and have no freedom!

OR...

SWAN says:


This can happen because some im/migrants experience **language barriers** or are not **confident** navigating complex systems—like health care—in English.

It's not suspicious to ask for help when you are outside your comfort zone and need assistance from someone who is **more familiar with Canada and the English language**.



### 3. THEY DISTRUST/FEAR AUTHORITY

An anti-trafficking campaign might say:



This happens because they are afraid of getting caught or of repercussions from their trafficker!

OR...

SWAN says:

This might happen because police presence can be very intimidating.

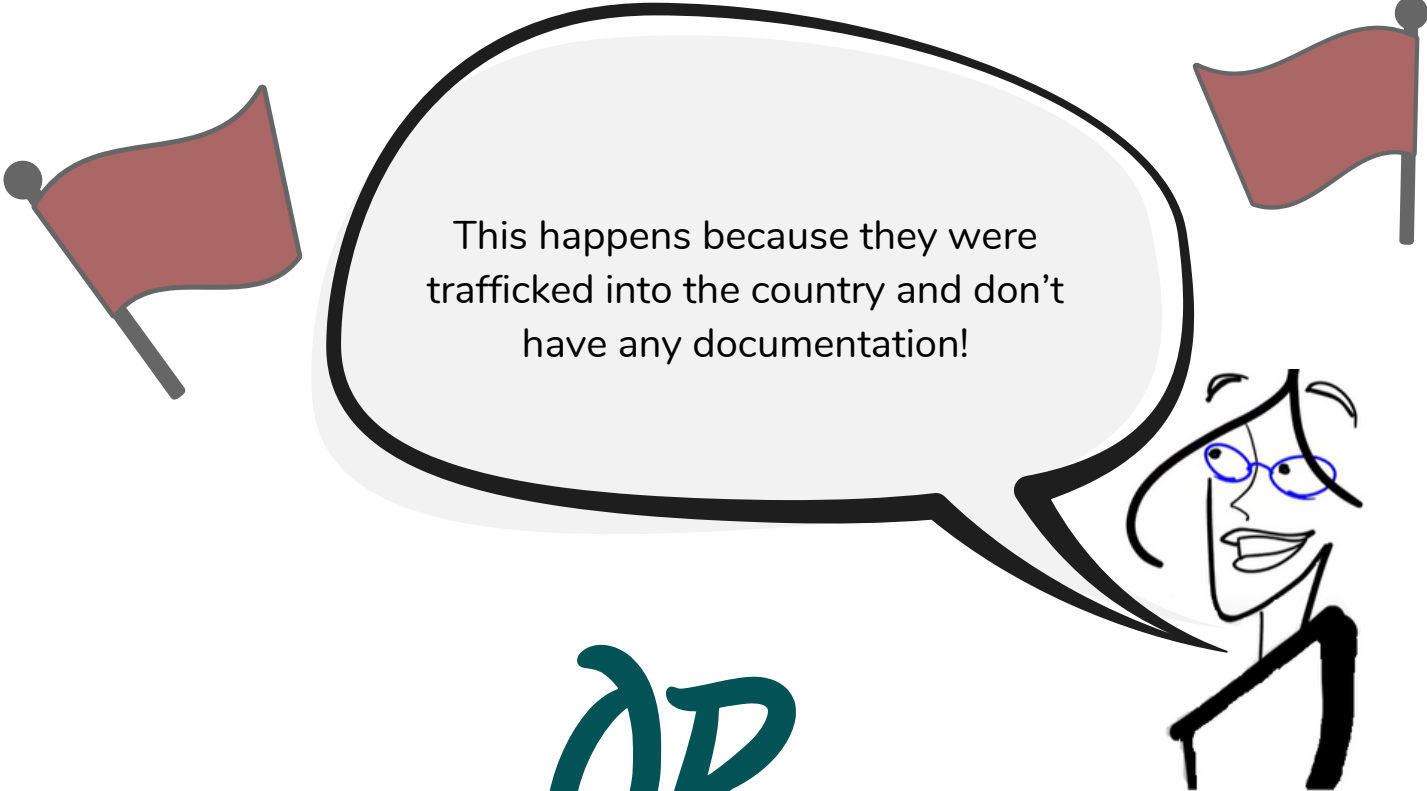
An im/migrant may have **limited English skills**, may have an **existing distrust** of authority from their home country, and/or may be aware that some police officers are more likely to **target people of colour**.

Additionally, im/migrants engaged in sex work are at **risk of criminalization** and may want to avoid law enforcement for this reason.

Popular “Red Flag” 

## 4. THEY DON'T WANT TO REVEAL IMMIGRATION STATUS

An anti-trafficking campaign might say:



This happens because they were trafficked into the country and don't have any documentation!

OR...

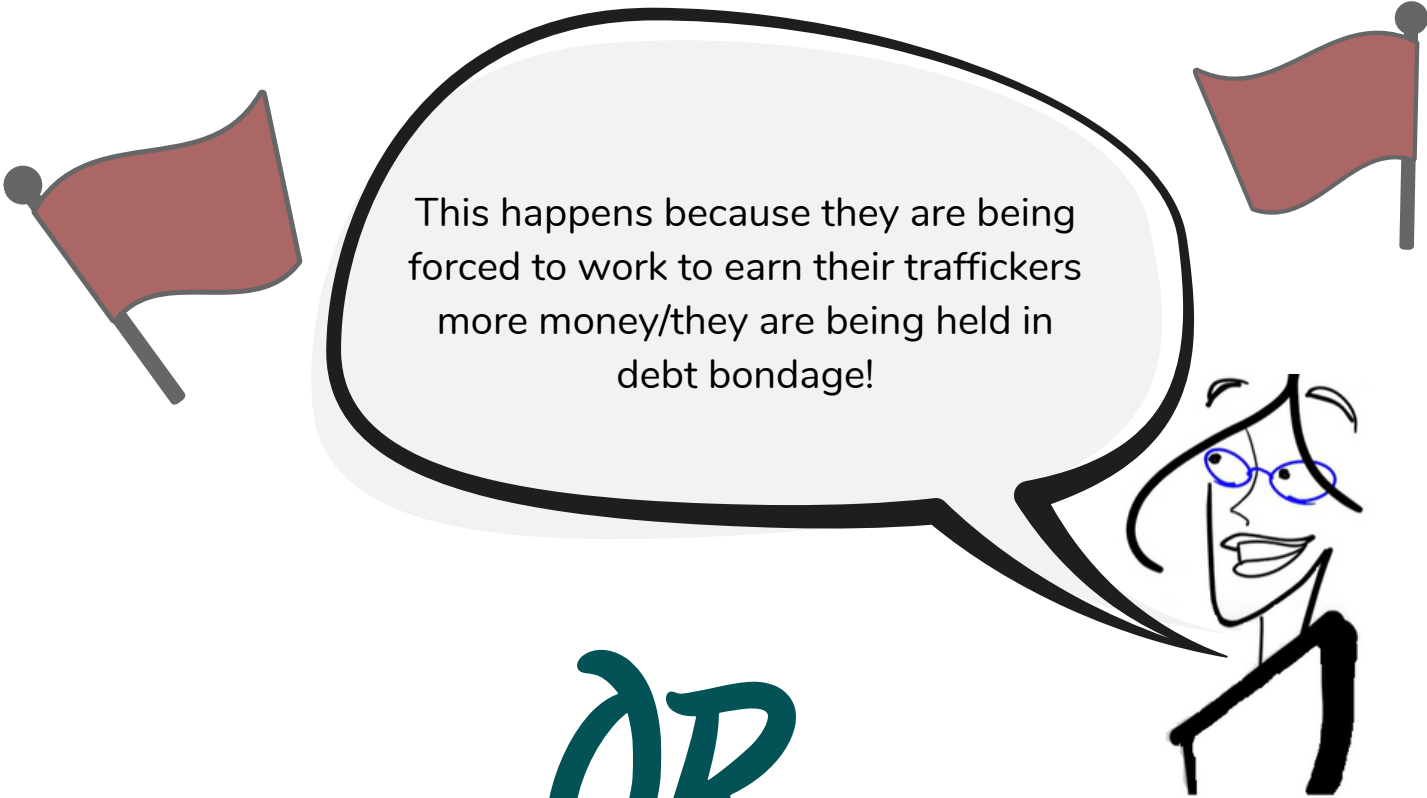
SWAN says:

Some migrants may not have documentation to be in Canada—but this **doesn't mean they were trafficked.**

Also, selling sex is “[decriminalized](#)” in Canada **only for citizens and permanent residents.** This means that anyone on a visitor's visa, work permit, study permit, or without documentation cannot legally do sex work and is **at risk of deportation.**

## 5. THEY WORK VERY LONG HOURS

An anti-trafficking campaign might say:



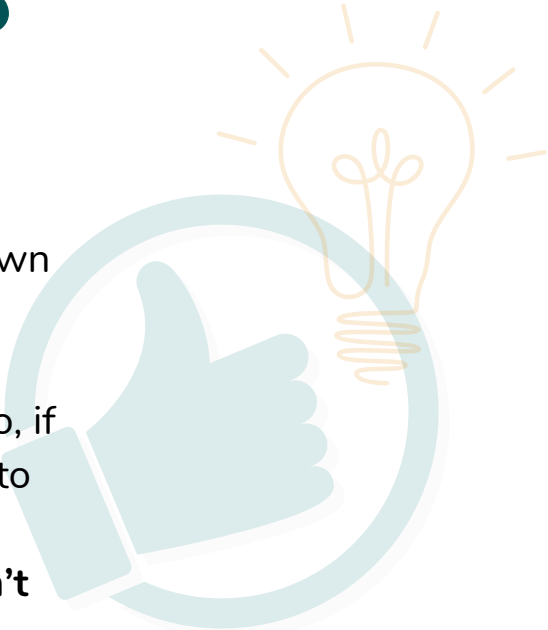
This happens because they are being forced to work to earn their traffickers more money/they are being held in debt bondage!

OR...

SWAN says:

This can happen because sex work is very flexible and those engaged in it can set their own working hours.

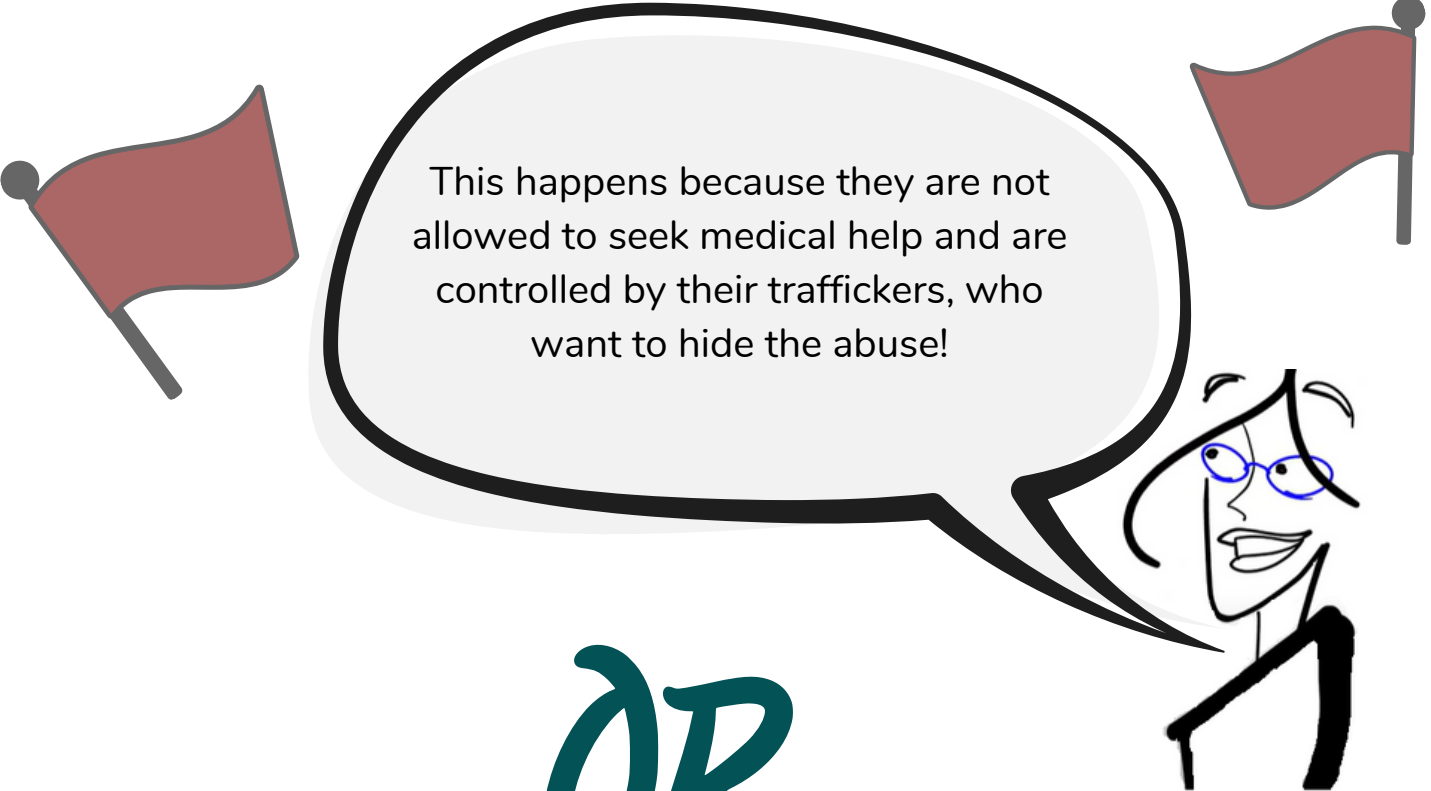
Sex workers get **paid per client, not hourly**. So, if business is slow, they may work longer hours to **optimize their income**. Many self-employed people work long and strange hours—it **doesn't mean they are being exploited** (beyond the systemic demands of capitalism).



Popular “Red Flag” 

## 6. THEY DON'T ACCESS MEDICAL CARE

An anti-trafficking campaign might say:




This happens because they are not allowed to seek medical help and are controlled by their traffickers, who want to hide the abuse!

OR...

SWAN says:

This can happen because im/migrants to Canada may **not yet qualify for health insurance** and can't afford expensive medical bills.

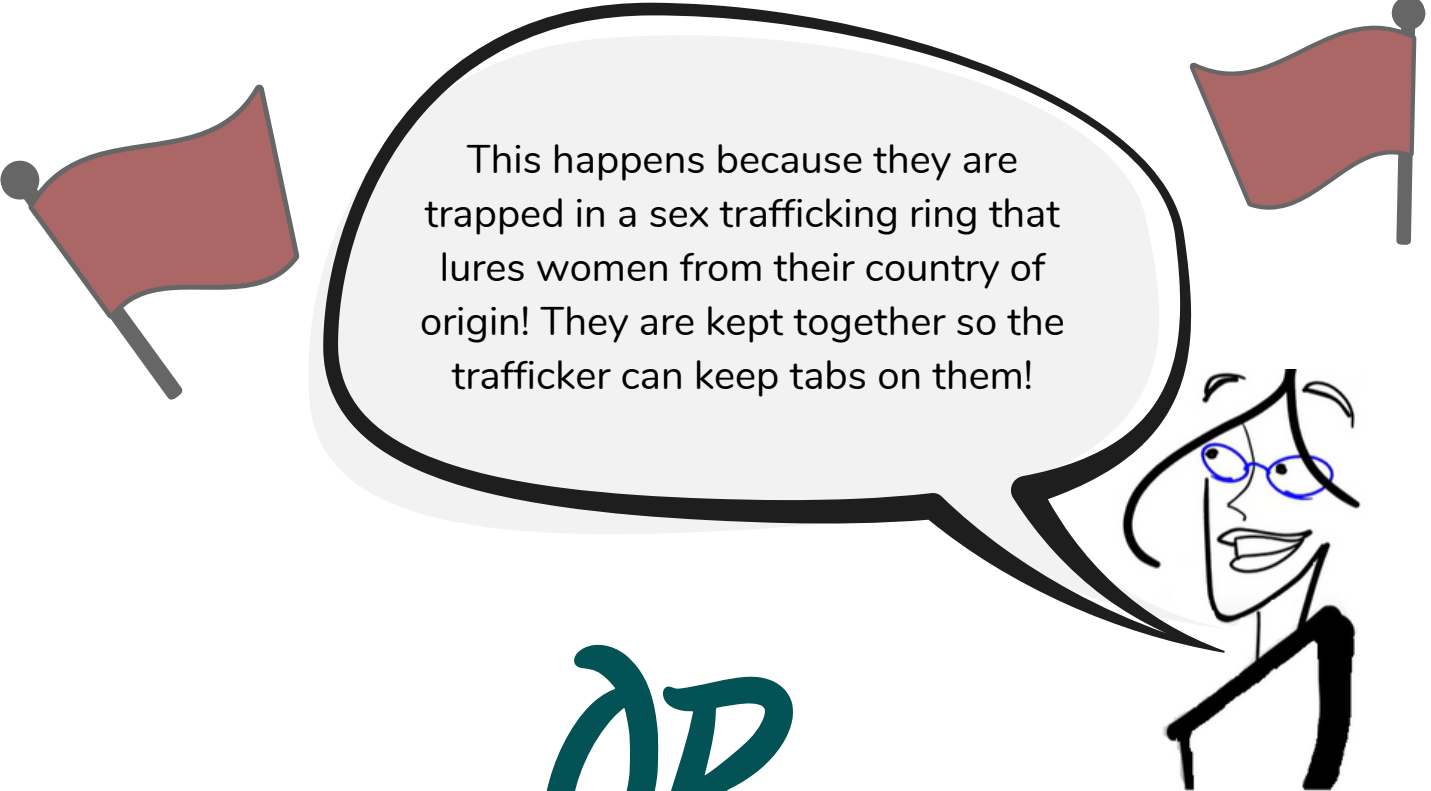
Additionally, if someone is **undocumented** they may be wary of outing themselves by trying to seek health care (**which usually requires showing ID and answering personal questions**).



Popular “Red Flag” 

## 7. THEY WORK WITH PEOPLE OF ALL THE SAME NATIONALITY

An anti-trafficking campaign might say:



This happens because they are trapped in a sex trafficking ring that lures women from their country of origin! They are kept together so the trafficker can keep tabs on them!

OR...

SWAN says:

This can happen because, in order to **reduce isolation** in a foreign country, many im/migrant sex workers choose to work together.

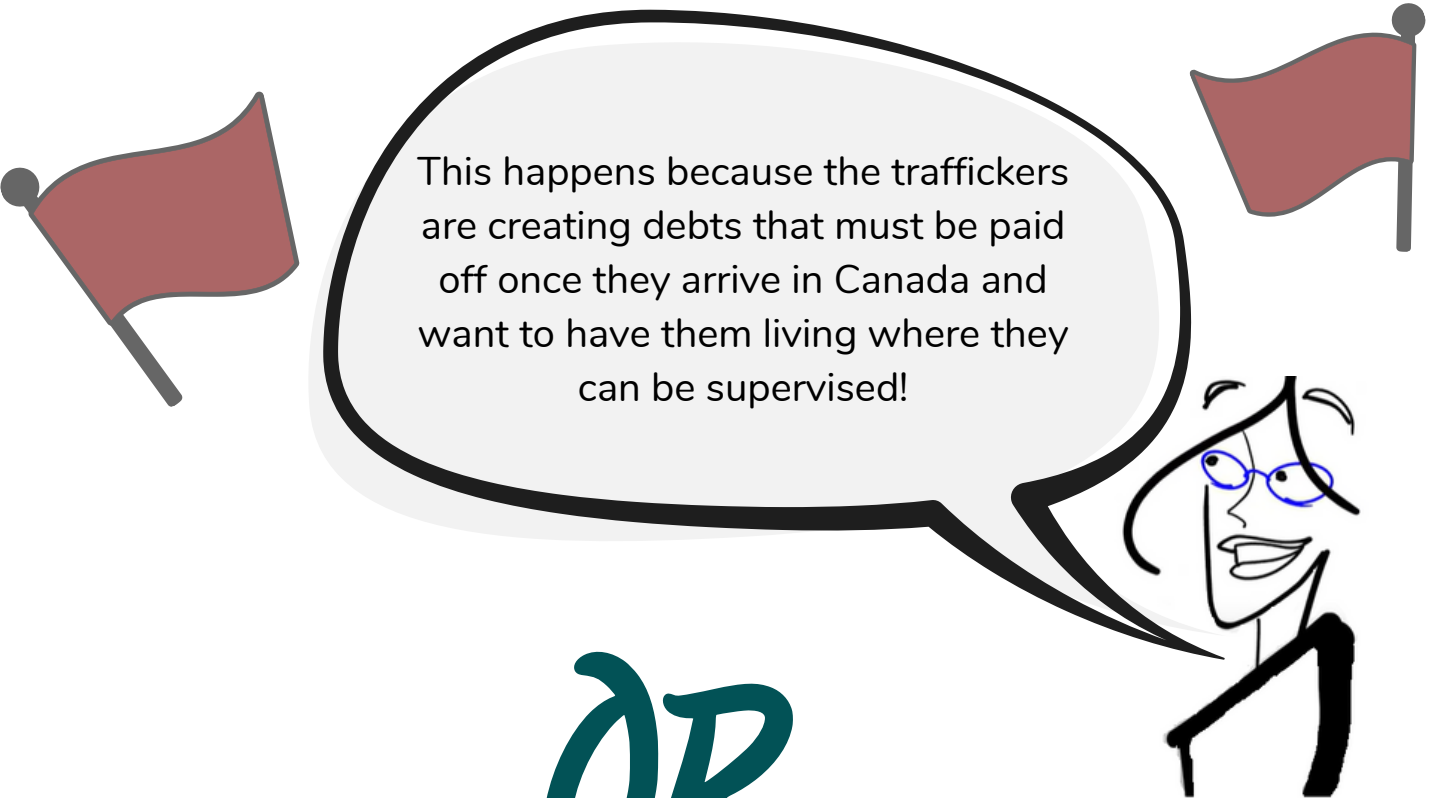
This **increases their ability to communicate effectively** with fellow workers, and it also **keeps them safer on the job**.



Popular “Red Flag” 

## 8. THEY PAID A FEE FOR TRANSPORT AND PRE-ARRANGED HOUSING

An anti-trafficking campaign might say:



This happens because the traffickers are creating debts that must be paid off once they arrive in Canada and want to have them living where they can be supervised!

OR...

SWAN says:

This can happen because **the process of migrating to a new country is not easy**, especially with a language barrier.

Some im/migrants opt for the convenience of having an agent **help them get organized and settled** into their new life.



# Why red flags don't work well...

Most red flags are based on either **stereotypes** or things that are actually **very nuanced**.

Encouraging people to watch for “red flags of trafficking” can lead to:

- Hypervigilance — seeing trafficking around every corner
- Excessive surveillance, especially of marginalized groups
- Reinforcement of stereotypes
- Racial profiling of suspected victims and offenders
- Denial of agency

Rather than encouraging people to “spot the signs” of trafficking, a more effective way to combat and prevent human trafficking is to address the [root causes that make people vulnerable](#) to trafficking in the first place.

To prevent sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, Canada should [repeal PCEPA](#) and remove the [IRPR prohibition on sex work](#) —this would allow sex workers to report violence and exploitation to law enforcement without the risk of criminalization and/or deportation.

## An anti-trafficking campaign with “red flags”... is a red flag

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