



CANADIAN  
WOMEN'S  
FOUNDATION

FONDATION  
CANADIENNE  
DES FEMMES

# SEXUAL EXPLOITATION/ TRAFFICKING:

## ESSENTIAL LEARNINGS FROM THE GRASSROOTS

Anti-Trafficking Grants Program  
Evaluation Summary  
2016-2021

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## INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Women's Foundation addresses the conditions that make sexual exploitation/trafficking possible in Canada, including gender injustice, poverty, precarious housing and homelessness, racism, and the impacts of colonialization and intergenerational trauma. These systemic factors form the root causes of all forms of gender-based violence.

Applying an intersectional feminist lens to sexual exploitation/trafficking means understanding systemic barriers based in racism and discrimination that underpin most institutions in Canada. We work in solidarity with First Nations, Inuit, and Metis groups and leaders to call for the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' Calls to Justice.

For women, girls, and Two Spirit, trans, and non-binary people most affected, community-based services and supports are essential in the journey toward safety, healing, and rebuilding lives. The Canadian Women's Foundation funds community-based gender justice programs with a multi-year, holistic, and flexible approach, supported by progressive policies and a feminist model to philanthropy. The programs we fund provide housing and shelter support, counseling, training and education, employment and income security, and community connection.

At the same time, the Foundation addresses social policy and practices to reduce systemic discrimination, barriers, and stigmatization. In a continual learning process, we work side-by-side with partners and grantees to prioritize the safety, rights, and human dignity of women and gender-diverse people.

It means that we ensure those who identify as experiencing trafficking receive services and supports that recognize their realities. It also means that we support those who do not identify as experiencing trafficking, but may experience coercion, violence, and/or exploitation and want assistance.

Amongst other considerations, we consider these important factors.

- **Language:** "trafficking" is an indistinct term defined and measured in many different ways. Those who conflate sex work with trafficking do not define and measure it the same as those who do not.

- **Harms to sex workers:** attending to partners and grantees who are experts in these issues, we have developed a stronger understanding of the shortcomings and potential harms of anti-trafficking laws and policies, particularly those that focus on policing, prosecution, and prison. Sex workers identify many ways they can be harmed by these policies and pressured to identify as “trafficking victims” to avoid being criminalized and charged. As is the case for other forms of gender-based violence, strategies that focus on policing, prosecution, and prison are inadequate to reduce and prevent violence or increase safety for women and gender-diverse people.
- **Effective approaches** to sexual exploitation/trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence are community-based, specialized, non-judgmental, and trauma-informed. They offer wraparound support and are tailored to meet the needs of people who are at higher risk of victimization, including Indigenous, Black, and racialized women, migrant women, and underhoused and homeless young people. They “start where people are at” and focus on what they uniquely need to find safety, healing, and community connection.

The work of the Foundation today focusses on supporting community-based gender justice programs to meet survivors “where they are at”.

## SUMMARY OF PROGRAM EVALUATION INSIGHTS

Canadian Women’s Foundation launched the Anti-Trafficking Grants Program in 2016. Between 2016 and 2021, we granted funds to eight community-based programs in Canada to address sexual exploitation and trafficking.

**Five Rebuilding Lives grantees** support survivors of trafficking to heal, regain strength, build skills and confidence, and achieve economic security. These include:

1. Mettre fin à l’exploitation sexuelle des femmes immigrantes, Mouvement contre le viol et l’inceste (MCVI) in Montréal, Québec
2. Strengthening Our Journey, Fort Frances Tribal Area Health Services (FFTAHS), in Fort Frances, Ontario
3. Transitions Alumni Program, Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc. (Ndinawe), in Winnipeg, Manitoba
4. Housing Program, Elizabeth Fry Society of Northern Alberta, in Edmonton, Alberta
5. OnyxWorks, PLEA Community Services Society of BC, in Vancouver, British Columbia

**Three Collaboration grantees** work together to share resources, provide coordinated responses, and/or to advocate for policy change. These include:

1. Trafficking & Exploitation Services System (TESS), in YWCA Halifax, Nova Scotia
2. Towards Justice for Trafficked Non-Citizen Women, Canadian Council for Refugees

(CCR), in Montréal, Québec

3. Migrant Women's Rights Project, Barbra Schliker Commemorative Clinic, in Toronto, Ontario

The following summary is based on a multi-year evaluation of these programs' learnings and impacts, conducted by InsideOut Policy Research.

### **Factors That Increase Individual and Community Vulnerability to Sexual Exploitation/Trafficking**

- Experiences of trauma and violence and poverty
- Colonization and resulting intergenerational trauma
- Precarious immigration status and the impacts of immigration and refugee policies and practices
- Involvement in the child welfare system, lack of healthy social connections, and the prevalence of online exploitation
- Gaps in relevant services and supports and a lack of specialized intervention and prevention services to meet peoples' needs

### **Common Needs of Survivors**

- Access to safe and stable housing
- Access to mental health services
- Structured, supported opportunities to develop life skills
- Connection: trusting and healthy relationships, connection to culture and community, and a sense of identity and belonging
- Validation to build or restore self-confidence, sense of self-worth, and sense of personal agency
- Safety, both the feeling of safety and access to safe spaces and places

### **Features of Strong, Effective Community Services to Address Sexual Exploitation/Trafficking**

- Long-term, individualized, and holistic, providing wraparound supports
- Flexible and non-judgmental
- Trauma-informed and culturally-safe
- Relationship-based
- Strengths-based, empowerment and peer-based
- For programs accessed primarily by Indigenous women and youth, connection to culture is a strong theme

## Barriers to and Enablers of Effective Network Collaboration Between Programs

### Challenges and barriers

- Staff turnover, which leads to diverted time, disruption of established relationships, and loss of members most committed to collaboration work
- Ideological differences and lack of value alignment on how to define and frame “trafficking”, often rooted in different and polarized ideological perspectives on sex work
- Misalignment of priorities/mandates: based on ideological differences, which drives different and conflicting goals and objectives, and based on differences in member organization specialization and expectations
- Gaps in membership: in broad-based regional and provincial/territorial representatives, in Indigenous organizations and communities and diverse cultural and ethnic groups, and key social and healthcare sectors
- Funding barriers, which lead to organizations getting tied to siloed mandates, few funds for networking and collaboration, and organizations being pitted to compete with each other

### Enablers of effectiveness

- Value alignment supported by partnership agreements and clear, transparent values and goals
- Adoption of a Community of Practice model that prioritizes value alignment, creates a safe space for learning, and facilitates mutually supportive relationships
- Applying principles of cultural safety
- Consistent leadership by a “backbone” organization
- Recruitment of members who are passionate and supported by their organizations to participate
- Strong group cohesion through regular and informal communication and emotional support
- Focus on building trusting relationships
- Openness to an iterative working process

## Impacts and Outcomes of Grantee Programs

### Community outcomes

- Increased community awareness and understanding of sexual exploitation/trafficking
- Reduced stigma towards people with personal lived experience of sexual exploitation/trafficking
- Improvements in the landscape of local services and supports

## Family outcomes

- Family reunification (e.g. for criminalized women who regain custody of children, for migrant women with successful immigration outcomes)
- Intergenerational healing (e.g. where parents can pursue education and careers and make progress on their own healing journeys)

## Individual outcomes

### *Socio-economic wellbeing:*

- Access to employment
- Engagement in or completion of education and training
- Access to safe, affordable housing
- Successful immigration outcomes

### *Emotional and psychological wellbeing:*

- Increased social connectedness
- Increased self-esteem and sense of self-worth
- Increased sense of self-efficacy and optimism
- Increased sense of safety
- Progress along a healing journey
- Increased cultural connectedness

### *Life skills development:*

- Greater capacity for self-advocacy
- Skills for independent living
- Financial literacy
- Household management skills
- Employment readiness / work skills
- People skills / interpersonal communication skills

## Collaboration outcomes

- Increased awareness and understanding of the issues for collaboration members, key stakeholders (e.g. policymakers, service delivery organizations), and, in some cases the broader community or general public
- Increased capacity to respond appropriately and provide effective services and supports
- Development of new, specialized programs and services for women and youth who have experienced or may be vulnerable to sexual exploitation
- Increased access to crucial services and supports for survivors
- Information-sharing and knowledge-building across agencies, sectors, and regions, collective advocacy
- Increased potential impact of advocacy efforts and greater support for members to maintain involvement and continue to do difficult and challenging work

## Addressing the Trafficking Discourse

- Collaborative grantees are deeply engaged with the issue of trafficking language as cohering around a shared understanding of trafficking is foundational to collaboration work.
- Concerns with trafficking language is more urgent for grantees working with migrant women and seeking to change immigration policy.
- There is a divide between the language grantees apply to service delivery and the way in which organizations are obliged to frame sexual exploitation/trafficking to access funds and generate the attention of policymakers.
- Grantees emphasize the importance of putting survivor needs first, which takes primacy over whether that person's understanding of what has happened to them aligns with an organization's analysis of the issue.
- People may feel forced to shape their stories to meet inclusion criteria for services. For example, migrant women seeking legal remedies may feel they have to play a "perfect victim" role to get the help they need, which reinscribes gendered and racist assumptions. For service providers, this can mean suspending their own analysis and working within a prescribed legal framework.
- "Sexual exploitation" is a preferred term to "trafficking", as viewed within a continuum, as it better resonates with survivors, opens space for a diversity of experiences, and facilitates access to services and rights-based interventions.
- Grantees express concern that energy spent on debating language can distract from the work of supporting people.
- Grantees speak to "who gets to set the narrative" and what consequence it has for survivors. They address policymakers and service providers who can distort reality.
- Grantees represent different positions with respect to sex work. Examining notions of choice and the complexities within them is a notable theme.
- Grantees working with migrant women emphasized a need for focused attention on root causes of people's vulnerability to trafficking and sexual exploitation.

## The COVID-19 Pandemic Context

### Impacts for individuals and communities

- The pandemic amplifies the vulnerabilities and inequities faced by individuals and populations grantees serve
- Risks to health and safety: greater risk of contracting COVID-19; deteriorating mental health; increased vulnerability to exploitation; inability to meet basic needs; increased risk of deportation
- Barriers to services and gaps in services: many people are faced with access barriers due to not having a smartphone, computer, or reliable internet connection
- Economic precarity from reduced employment opportunities and job losses and limited or no access to supports that might mitigate these challenges
- Reduced engagement in services and sense of connection: physical distancing

hampers the ability to deliver relationship-based and person-centred services

### Impacts on service delivery and practice

- Adaptations to project delivery include transitioning in-person services to the virtual environment and adapting their structure and design to better meet the needs of participants under public health restrictions
- Time and resources are diverted to meet pandemic-related needs of individuals served, including:
  - ensuring shelter, food, and clothing needs are met and accessing additional funding to provide technology tools
  - finding creative, safe ways to stay connected with participants in the midst of lockdown and physical distancing requirements
  - intensifying and adjusting advocacy efforts draw attention to disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on populations served
- Constraints on service provision, including:
  - inability to provide the same range and levels of service
  - services undermined as a consequence of organizations and funders diverting funding to the COVID-19 response
  - reduction in collaboration and networking activities with other organizations due to restrictions on in-person gatherings and focus on adapting to the new situation
- Some unanticipated positive outcomes included:
  - benefits of virtual service delivery, such as better engagement with participants who are less comfortable with in-person meetings and have challenges arranging transportation and/or childcare
  - increased reach and beneficial impacts of online training for participants and key stakeholders
  - growth in coalition change efforts to address disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on key populations



# THE CANADIAN WOMEN'S FOUNDATION

is a national leader in the movement for gender equality in Canada. Through funding, research, advocacy, and knowledge sharing, we work to achieve systemic change. We support women, girls, and gender-diverse people to move out of violence, out of poverty, and into confidence and leadership.

Since 1991, our partners and donors have contributed more than \$130 million to fund over 2,500 life-transforming programs throughout the country.

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*For a copy of the full version of this the Anti-Trafficking Grants Program evaluation report, contact [info@canadianwomen.org](mailto:info@canadianwomen.org)*

