

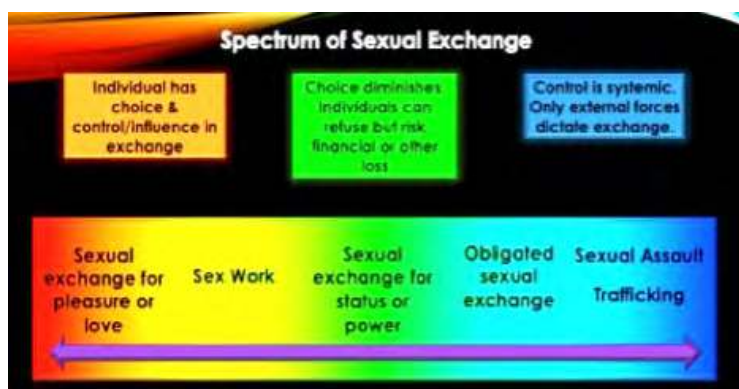
Supporting Sex Workers' Safety

Sex work can be defined as “the exchange of money for sexual services provided by a consenting adult” (Living in Community, 2018). Sex workers include women, men, and transgender and non-binary individuals. About 80-95% of sex work takes place indoors, while only 5-20% is street-based. Some sex workers experience high rates of violence, but rarely report that violence to police.

Street-based sex workers and sex workers who are marginalized by society on the basis of race, gender identity, poverty, mental health and/or substance use concerns are particularly at risk of violence and discrimination.

Sex work is stigmatized and, while it is not illegal in Canada, many of the activities associated with sex work (purchasing, advertising, receiving a financial or material benefit, procuring, and communicating) are, as outlined in Bill C-36. These restrictions often force sex workers into risky or unsafe situations.

Living in Community, an innovative community initiative in Vancouver working to change the conversations about sex work, describes the Spectrum of Sexual Exchange, from empowerment (choice) to exploitation (no choice). This spectrum makes clear that trafficking (for the purposes of sexual exploitation) is different from sex work, and is a violation of human rights.



Steps to cultural competence with sex workers:

- Treat sex workers the way you would treat anyone else.
- Respond to the sex worker's stated needs, not the fact that s/he is a sex worker. Sex work is something a person does, not who a person is.
- Monitor service provision to ensure that individuals are not harassed by other people using your services.
- Be aware that exiting from the sex trade is a process. The need to deal with emotions and life issues, the need for survival, job possibilities and life skills and the need to find support to make that change all take a long time. There are no quick fixes.
- Familiarize yourself with and use appropriate sex work terminology.
- Do you have resources on hand to offer sex workers? If not, are you aware of community organizations that do?
- Reach out and ask questions if you encounter a situation you are unsure of. Contact a sex work support organization in the community.
- Encourage your colleagues to adopt high standards for service delivery to sex workers. Have a zero tolerance attitude to negative attitudes and language about sex and sex workers – both from staff and clients.
- Work with your colleagues to create a compassionate work environment.
- Identify actions you can take that recognize, respect and nurture the unique cultural identity of sex workers and safely meet their needs, expectations, and rights.

From: Living in Community's *Curriculum for Change: Responding Effectively to the Needs of Sex Workers*

“In too many places around the world sex workers are without protection of the law, and suffering awful human rights abuses. This situation can never be justified. Governments must act to protect the human rights of all people, sex workers included. Decriminalization is just one of several necessary steps governments can take to ensure protection from harm, exploitation and coercion.”

Tawanda Mutasa, Senior Director for Law and Policy, Amnesty International Secretariat



Photo: Sally T. Buck. Red Umbrella March for Sex Work Solidarity
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What Sex Workers Need:

- To be recognized as full citizens
- To be listened to without being judged
- To be taken seriously
- To be integrated into the community
- To have their human rights recognized and respected
- To have access to public services without discrimination
- To have access to work-related social services

Thank you to Living in Community for permission to reprint the guidelines on this page from *Curriculum for Change: Responding Effectively to the Needs of Sex Workers* (2017).

Making Your Agency More Accessible to Sex Workers - Some Key Considerations

- **Policy** – Do you have policy or practices that support diverse populations of sex workers? Does a sex worker have to “out” themselves to receive services?
- **Physical Space and Environment** – Is your office space accessible and welcoming to sex workers? Are inclusive, relevant materials and resources made available?
- **Organizational Culture** – What language is used to refer to sex work and sex workers? Has your staff received sex work-specific training? Are there unspoken beliefs or values about sex work that could be a barrier? Are sex workers aware of your services, and do they feel welcome accessing them?
- **Information Management** – If a client discloses that they are a sex worker, is this information written in their file? Is clients’ personal information shared with other programs, departments, or external agencies (e.g., police, [Ministry of Children and Family Development])?

Additional Resources:

Living in Community

<https://livingincommunity.ca/>

Addressing Violence Against Sex Workers

World Health Organization (2013)

https://www.who.int/hiv/pub/sti/sex_worker_implementation/swit_chpt2.pdf

Sex Workers at Risk: A Research Summary on Human Rights Abuses Against Sex Workers

Amnesty International (2016)

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol40/4061/2016/en/>

Decriminalization of Sex Work: Feminist Discourses in Light of Research

Jacqueline Comte (2014)

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jacqueline_Comte/publication/257771229_Decriminalization_of_Sex_Work_Feminist_Discourses_in_Light_of_Research/links/02e7e5360febdbc15f000000/Decriminalization-of-Sex-Work-Feminist-Discourses-in-Light-of-Research.pdf