

SEX WORKER HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS OPPOSE POLICE OPERATION NORTHERN SPOTLIGHT

PRESS RELEASE – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 9, 2018 -- We are individuals and organizations deeply committed to the health, safety and human rights of all people involved in the sex industry and write to inform you of the profound harms — including to those individuals who are at heightened risk of human trafficking — that have resulted from Operation Northern Spotlight.

We urge law enforcement agencies cross Canada to refrain from any future participation in this national anti-trafficking initiative and to instead develop anti-trafficking campaigns through meaningful consultation with sex workers to ensure any future anti-trafficking campaigns uphold the human rights of people in the sex industry.

Since 2015, numerous police and law enforcement services across Canada have participated in Operation Northern Spotlight in a claimed effort to fight human trafficking. Campaigns such as Operation Northern Spotlight have perpetuated great harms on sex workers by wrongfully equating sex work with sexual exploitation and trafficking. By casting a wide net, police involved in Operation Northern Spotlight have approached, detained and harassed numerous sex workers where there has been no evidence of coercion, exploitation or human trafficking.

When police raid indoor sex work establishments or pose as sex workers' clients in their efforts to "rescue" human trafficking victims, sex workers have repeatedly experienced this as a form of intimidation, harassment, surveillance, and a gross violation of privacy that has further entrenched fear and distrust of police services.

For Asian sex workers, who may not speak English and have no reason to trust police, such raids and often warrantless incursions into their homes and workplaces are especially frightening. In particular, law enforcement collaboration with Canada Border Services Agency also often result in anti-immigration tactics such as arrest, detention and deportation, which push sex workers further into isolation.

Operation Northern Spotlight has also undermined sex workers' health and safety. To avoid the greater scrutiny and law enforcement surveillance, interrogation, harassment, detention and arrest associated with such campaigns, sex workers are forced to work underground — or stop working altogether — reducing their capacity to earn money and their ability to negotiate safer working conditions with clients and with third parties. Campaigns such as Operation Northern Spotlight have intensified an already hostile relationship between sex workers and the police and deterred those in the sex industry from turning to law enforcement if violence or exploitation occurs.

In a survey of Asian sex workers in Toronto and Vancouver, 95 per cent of respondents indicated that they never seek help from law enforcement — even if they are experiencing violence, abuse, harassment or exploitation. In Toronto, not a single respondent indicated that they trusted the police. By alienating sex workers, Operation Northern Spotlight discourages those in the sex industry from reporting actual cases of human trafficking to law enforcement, frustrating the ultimate objective of such campaigns. It also places

much needed resources into anti-trafficking investigations rather than into other desperately-needed initiatives for sex workers.

We call upon law enforcement to stop participating in Operation Northern Spotlight, and to put an end to the overall operation. In addition, we ask that police:

- Stop using anti-trafficking initiatives to justify the intrusion of law enforcement in places where consensual sex work is done, including indoor sex work businesses;
- Review existing anti-trafficking policies and programs that equate sex work with human trafficking, and revise policies to remove assumptions that sex work — absent coercion — is a form of trafficking or sexual exploitation;
- Stop engaging with Canada Border Services Agency in anti-trafficking investigations, if the actual objective is to address human trafficking rather than to enforce immigration or sex work criminal laws; and
- Provide support for Access without Fear/Sanctuary City policies that allow migrants to receive essential service such as health care without fear of deportation.

If law enforcement are genuine in their efforts to support victims of human trafficking, they must work with sex workers to develop best practices to help and support trafficked persons while protecting the safety, dignity and human rights of all individuals in the sex industry.

The Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform formed in 2012 and is composed of sex worker rights and allied groups and individuals in cities across Canada: Calgary, Edmonton, Hamilton, London, Longueuil, Montreal, Kingston, Québec, Sault Ste. Marie, St. John's, Toronto, Vancouver, Victoria, and Winnipeg. Members work together to fight for sex work law reform, sex workers' rights, and community well-being.

Member groups include: Angel's Angels (Hamilton); Action Santé Travesties et Transexuel(le)s du Québec (ASTTeQ) (Montréal); BC Coalition of Experiential Communities (Vancouver); Angel's Angels (Hamilton); Butterfly Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Network (Toronto); Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (Toronto); Downtown Eastside Sex Workers United Against Violence (SWUAV) (Vancouver); Émissaire (Longueuil) FIRST (Vancouver); Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project (Toronto); Maggie's Indigenous Sex Workers Drum Group (Toronto); Migrant Sex Workers Project (Toronto); PEERS (Victoria); Projet Lune (Québec); Prostitutes Involved Empowered Cogent Edmonton (PIECE) (Edmonton); Providing Alternatives, Counselling and Education (PACE) Society (Vancouver); Rézo, projet travailleurs du sexe (Montréal); Safe Space (London); Safe Harbour Outreach Project (S.H.O.P.) (St John's); Sex Professionals of Canada (SPOC); Sex Workers Advisory Network of Sudbury (SWANS) (Sudbury); Stella, l'amie de Maimie (Montreal); Stop the Arrests! (Sault Ste. Marie); Strut! (Toronto); Supporting Women's Alternatives Network (SWAN)(Vancouver); HIV Community Link Shift Program (Calgary); West Coast Cooperative of Sex Industry Professionals (WCCSIP) (Vancouver); Sex Workers of Winnipeg Action Coalition (Winnipeg).

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