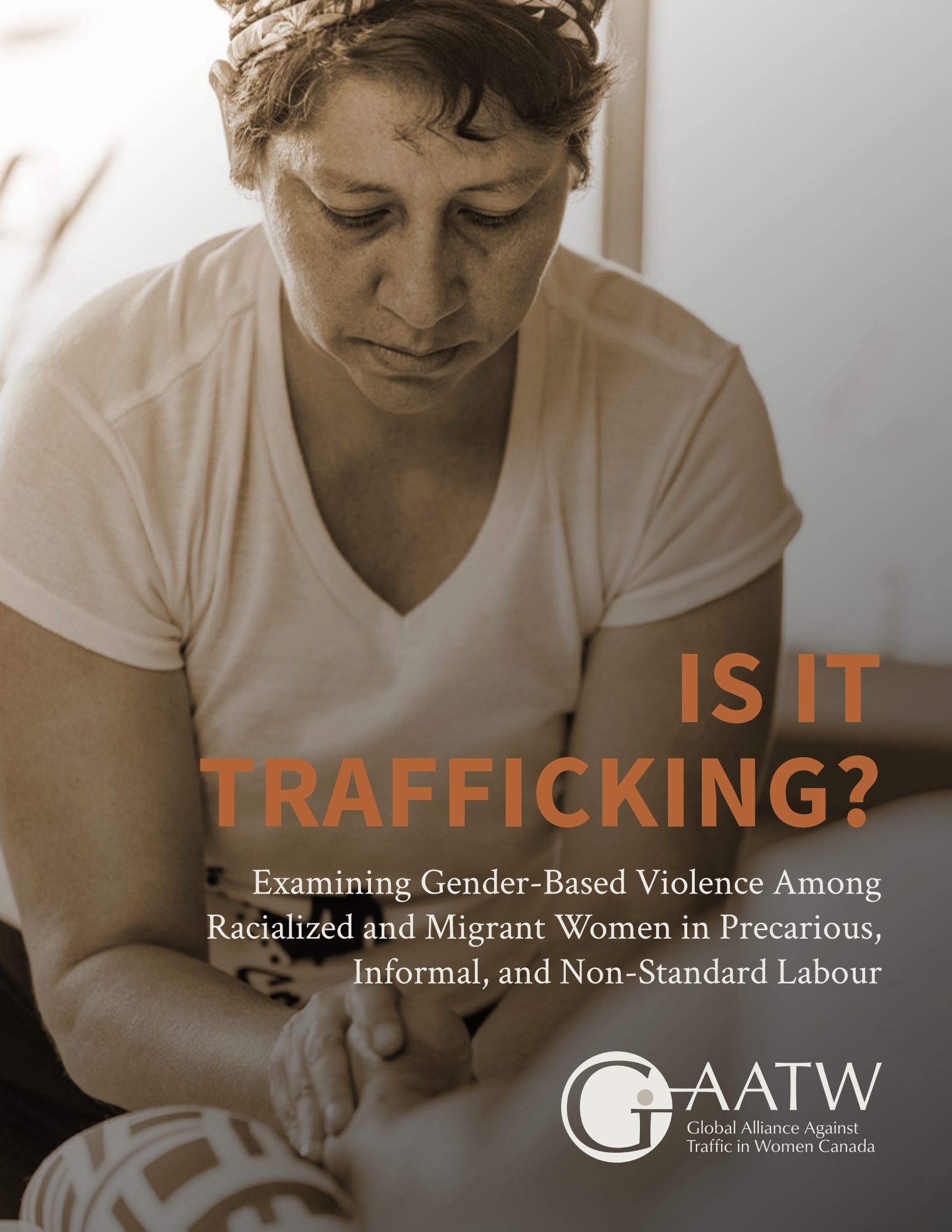

IS IT TRAFFICKING?

Examining Gender-Based Violence Among Racialized and Migrant Women in Precarious, Informal, and Non-Standard Labour

GAATW
Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women Canada

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Executive Summary

Background

Since the early 2000s, Canada has witnessed a growing political and institutional focus on combatting human trafficking, accompanied by increased government funding for law enforcement and service organizations tasked with identifying and assisting victims.[1]

While anti-trafficking efforts are often framed as a response to gender-based violence (GBV) and exploitation, they exist within a broader landscape of systemic inequality that shapes the lives of racialized and migrant women in Canada.[2]

Throughout the country, women working in precarious, informal, and non-standard forms of labour, such as domestic work, agriculture, hospitality, and the sex industry, regularly experience violence, harassment, and exploitative working conditions. Across these sectors, many women report long working hours, forced and unpaid overtime, unsafe or inadequate housing, lack of appropriate health and safety measures, low or irregular pay, and withholding of documents.[3]

For migrants, exorbitant recruitment fees may place them in debt bondage and create an additional layer of vulnerability.[4] Others are denied medical attention following workplace injuries, and subjected to discrimination, verbal abuse, and physical and sexual assault from employers, managers, or clients.

Yet, despite these shared patterns of abuse and precarity, the attention they receive by the state and community organizations, including the way the women are approached and supported, can vary significantly. For example, if substandard living and working conditions are experienced by women working in agriculture or domestic work, they are usually framed as employment violations or labour exploitation.[5] By contrast, when women in the sex industry encounter similar harms, their experiences are almost always framed as human trafficking – regardless of their own understanding of their work or circumstances.[6]

This uneven application of the trafficking label reflects deeper tensions within Canada's anti-trafficking framework, which often obscures the structural conditions that produce vulnerability across all forms of non-standard, informal, or precarious labour.[7] At the same time, the choice among service organizations to name certain experiences of gender-based violence as human trafficking or not is rarely questioned or discussed in the extant literature.

It is within this contested political and policy landscape that our study emerges.

The purpose of this research project is to document the experiences of gender-based violence among racialized and migrant women who work in precarious, informal, and non-standard jobs in four provinces – British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, and one territory, the Yukon – as well as of service providers and advocates that support them.

More specifically, this study aims to understand whether the women see themselves, or are seen by the state and service providers, as victims of gender-

1 Katrin Roots, Ann De Shalit, and Emily van der Meulen, "Understanding Human Trafficking: An Examination of Discourses, Laws, Policing, and Migrant Labour," in *Trafficking Harms: Critical Politics, Perspectives, and Experiences* (Toronto: Fernwood Publishing, 2024), 1-33.

2 Sandra Ka Hon Chu and Robyn Maynard, "Human trafficking law and policy: Exacerbating racial and gendered stereotypes" in *Trafficking Harms: Critical Politics, Perspectives, and Experiences*, eds. Katrin Roots, Ann De Shalit, and Emily van der Meulen (Toronto: Fernwood Publishing, 2024), 103-118.

3 FCJ Refugee Centre and Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, *It Happens Here: Labour Exploitation Among Migrant Workers During the Pandemic*, (2023), 1-54, https://www.canadiancentretoendhumantrafficking.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CCTEHT-%E2%80%93-Labour-Trafficking-Report-ENG-1.pdf

4 See for example: Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, "What are the Risks for Trafficking Associated with Canada's Temporary Visa Programs?," last modified June 19, 2020, https://www.canadiancentretoendhumantrafficking.ca/what-are-the-risks-for-trafficking-associated-with-canadas-temporary-visa-programs/; Lindsay Larios et al., "Engaging Migrant Careworkers: Examining Cases of Exploitation by Recruitment Agencies in Quebec, Canada," *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* no. 6 (2020): 138-157, doi:10.1504/IJMBS.2020.10030063.

5 On this topic, see: Katrin Roots et al., *Human trafficking or migrant labour exploitation? Bridging the knowledge gap,* (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and Wilfrid Laurier University, 2024), 1-36, https://www.wlu.ca/academics/faculties/faculty-of-human-and-social-sciences/faculty-profiles/katrin-roots/traffickingormigrantlabour-researchreport-feb2024.pdf

6 Julie Kaye and Cerah Dube, "Challenging Notions of Benevolence and Protection: Settler-Colonial Anti-Trafficking Policing in Manitoba," in *Trafficking Harms: Critical Politics, Perspectives, and Experiences*, eds. Katrin Roots, Ann De Shalit, and Emily van der Meulen (Toronto: Fernwood Publishing, 2024), 192-213.

7 Sandra Ka Hon Chu and Robyn Maynard, "Human Trafficking Law and Policy," 103-118.

based violence, labour violations, or trafficking in persons, and how effective the different legislative and service frameworks are in addressing their needs.

To this end, between February 2024 and August 2025, we conducted 35 semi-structured interviews. Participants included 21 representatives from 19 organizations across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, and the Yukon, as well as 16 racialized women who work or had previously worked in sex work, agriculture, hospitality, and domestic or caregiving roles.

The women represented diverse backgrounds, including Indigenous and other racialized women in Canada, as well as migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and East Africa.

Key Findings

The women we interviewed recounted harrowing experiences of exploitation and unsafe working conditions that defined their daily lives.

They described severe breaches of employment contracts, including excessive working hours without rest or overtime pay, and the withholding of wages often justified by employers to repay recruitment or Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) fees.

Many reported enduring physical and sexual abuse by employers and clients, as well as being subjected to verbal harassment and even racist remarks by their employers or other workers. They lived and worked in unsanitary environments, faced food insecurity, and were often under constant employer surveillance. Fear of deportation, retaliation from employers, limited English proficiency, stigma, mistrust of police, and a lack of complaint mechanisms resulted in delays in seeking help.

When women did reach out for support, they did not characterize their experiences as trafficking. With the exception of one participant in our study, none identified as victims of trafficking.

Migrant women in particular sought support to secure open work permits, pursue alternative employment, and hold abusive employers accountable. Women engaged in the sex trade often turned to local sex worker rights organizations for healthcare, harm reduction supplies, and community support. Across organizations, migrant and racialized women's experiences of violence and pursuit of justice was understood not as an individual struggle but as a response to the structural constraints of Canada's immigration and labour systems, harmful law enforcement practices, and criminal justice policies.

Racialized and migrant women found crucial support through community and advocacy organizations. We heard about the range of services provided, including information about their legal rights in Canada, assistance with open work permit applications, safe housing, accompaniment to hospitals or court, harm-reduction supplies, and emotional support from staff and peers.

Many organizations also described facilitating referrals to domestic violence shelters, legal aid, and barrier-free medical care to create safer spaces where women could access services without fear that their immigration status or type of work (e.g., sex work) would be disclosed to authorities.

However, despite this large network of services, both the women and the organizations that support them identified persistent systemic and structural barriers that limit access to services. Some organizations highlighted that program eligibility restrictions (such as having documented immigration status, sobriety requirements, intent to transition out of sex work, or compliance with mandatory reporting) exclude many women from services, and represent significant and harmful barriers to women in need of assistance.

The above insights ultimately point to how dominant anti-trafficking, anti-sex work, and anti-migrant rhetoric shape both public understanding of women's experiences with gender-based violence and the delivery of services.

Organizations critical of these narratives were clear that they do not view the women they support as victims of trafficking, emphasizing that such labels can cause harm by oversimplifying women's circumstances and obscuring the structural conditions that produce vulnerability and exploitation. Other organizations noted that they adopt the language the women use to describe their experience, yet also revealed that the women must self-identify as victims of trafficking to receive certain services they offer, even if that label does not reflect how they understand their own circumstances. This requirement demonstrates the tension between women's self-identification as workers navigating systemic injustice and institutional frameworks that compel organizations to categorize them within narrow definitions of victimhood.

As such, through interview questions about organizations' experiences applying for and receiving funding, we observed the ways in which government funding shapes the framing of socio-political issues, dictates the language organizations use, and ultimately determines whose experiences of gender-based violence are recognized or rendered invisible within service delivery models.

Indeed, funding structures both shape and constrain the services organizations can provide and to whom (e.g., documented vs. undocumented workers, temporary workers vs. refugees).

Combined with our findings on the chronic underfunding of essential services such as housing and healthcare – services that are essential to both victims and non-victims of trafficking – this study underscores the need for more critical conversations about the political nature of funding.

Recommendations

The findings demonstrate that the harms experienced by racialized and migrant women in precarious, informal, and non-standard work are rooted in structural inequities rather than isolated "criminal acts of trafficking." Dominant anti-trafficking approaches often fail to address, and can even exacerbate, the conditions that make women vulnerable to exploitation.

Accordingly, participants called for rights-based and systemic reforms that tackle the root causes of exploitation. These include, but are not limited to, granting all migrant workers permanent residence (PR) upon arrival in Canada; providing newcomers with accessible information about their rights; strengthening labour inspection and complaint mechanisms; combatting racism and discrimination; repealing the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA); and decriminalizing sex work. These recommendations demand comprehensive reforms to immigration, labour, social, and criminal justice systems that produce and perpetuate exploitation. By addressing root causes, in addition to providing direct services, we can build stronger and more equitable communities. This approach not only helps prevent trafficking but also promotes justice, healing, and autonomy for all, creating a society where everyone can thrive free from oppression and exploitation.

The study further underscores the need for all levels of government and funders to re-examine how anti-trafficking resources are allocated, ensuring that efforts to "combat human trafficking" do not reinforce the very inequalities they seek to eliminate.

Introduction

Introduction

This research report documents racialized and migrant women's experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) while working in precarious, non-standard, and informal labour.

Concentrating on the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the Yukon Territory, this study investigates whether experiences of GBV are conceptualized as trafficking (either by the women themselves or by the organizations supporting them) and evaluates the extent to which existing services and policies addressing both GBV and trafficking effectively respond to their needs.

Based on 35 semi-structured interviews with racialized women and organizations that provide support, the study provides a comprehensive perspective on the challenges faced and services available.

The motivation for this 30-month research endeavour originated from discussions that took place during a 2022 meeting of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) Canada's Board of Directors. At that meeting, Board members reflected on the ways in which GBV pervades the work that women do in low-wage, non-standard forms of labour and how such experiences are sometimes labelled "trafficking" (both inside and outside the sex industry).

In connection with GAATW Canada's commitment to address human trafficking while reducing the harms of the rescue industry, these reflections prompted consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of addressing experiences of GBV through an anti-trafficking lens.

As long-time academics and practitioners in the fields of women's rights and anti-trafficking, we have observed that, **for some GBV service providers, the term "trafficking" encompasses all commercial sex work, whereas others differentiate between sex work and trafficking. Similarly, some service providers use the term "trafficking" to describe labour exploitation across sectors such as domestic work, agriculture, and manufacturing, while others appear to make distinctions between trafficking and labour exploitation**.

As such, the concept of "trafficking" is used differently and applied rather inconsistently in both the development and delivery of GBV services.

THE 2022 BOARD MEETING RAISED CRITICAL QUESTIONS SUCH AS:

Are only specific situations considered trafficking? Who decides, on what grounds, and for what purposes? Does categorizing an experience as "trafficking" lead to better support for racialized and migrant women in accessing the services they need?

These questions, alongside the broader need to understand how GBV service providers interpret and apply Canada's anti-trafficking framework in relation to violence in non-standard labour sectors, highlighted the need for this research project.

This report begins with a concise overview of the relevant literature,[8] followed by an outline of the methodology used to collect and analyze the data. In this section, we discuss the number of research participants interviewed, questions asked, and the limitations of this study.

8 A full bibliography is provided at the end of the report.




We then present and analyze the main findings as they relate to racialized and migrant women's experiences with GBV while working in informal and precarious work.

After detailing the problems women face, we outline the services that organizations provide to address the women's needs and offer a critical discussion of when, how and why organizations choose (or choose not) to label the women's experiences as "human trafficking."

In addition, we consider the role that funding plays in shaping the delivery of services, determining the services offered, and who is able to access them.

Drawing on these insights, we provide recommendations aimed at reducing and addressing GBV against racialized women in informal, non-standard, and precarious work. The report concludes with a final critical reflection.

A Review of the Literature

Racialized Women's Experiences with Gender-Based Violence in Informal and Precarious Work in Canada

Given the extensive scholarship on human trafficking, the exploitation of racialized and migrant workers in Canada, and the accessibility and quality of services available to them, this section reviews the literature to trace what is "known" about the topic and highlight areas where our study contributes new insights.

We first engage with contemporary debates within migrant rights literature, documenting the experiences of exploitation among temporary foreign workers and the structural conditions that shape their vulnerability, including the constraints of Canada's repressive immigration system.

In this context, it becomes increasingly evident that GBV and abuse are rarely characterized as human trafficking.[9]

We then turn to critical scholarship on sex work. Here, we examine the harmful conflation of sex work with trafficking and the disproportionate focus of anti-trafficking efforts on "rescuing" women, including migrant and Indigenous women and girls, from the sex industry. **By contrast to migrant labour exploitation, the label "victim of trafficking" is overwhelmingly assigned to sex workers.**

This scoping review allows us to compare how exploitation is understood across sexual and non-sexual labour sectors. Of particular significance, it reveals considerable variation in how the dominant anti-trafficking framework is applied (or not applied) to different forms of precarious or informal labour. Once again, this is rarely interrogated in the extant literature. In this respect, current scholarship provides critical context for our study, illuminates key debates and gaps, and frames the analysis presented in the proceeding discussions.

MIGRANT LABOUR EXPLOITATION

Temporary foreign workers in Canada (typically under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, Temporary Foreign Worker Program, or the old Live-In Caregiver Program) are subjected to some or all of the following exploitative working conditions: long working hours, forced and unpaid overtime, lack of appropriate health and safety measures, inadequate accommodations, low or irregular pay, withholding of documents, and denial of medical attention following a workplace injury or accident.[10] In many documented cases of labour

9 Roots et al., "Human Trafficking or Migrant Labour Exploitation?," 1-36.

10 FCJ Refugee Centre and Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, "It Happens Here," 1-54.

exploitation, migrant workers report discrimination, harassment, physical and sexual assault, as well as verbal abuse from employers.[11] It is also common for migrants to pay exorbitant recruitment fees to come to Canada or to migration consultants inside Canada.[12]

Non-governmental organizations (NGO) and migrant justice organizations often attribute such exploitative working conditions to the structural design of temporary foreign worker programs, particularly closed work permits, the Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA), and the lack of opportunities to obtain permanent residence (PR) within some temporary labour streams.[13]

Although the federal and provincial governments have made changes and policy updates over the years in response to these long-standing concerns, criticisms from academics, NGOs, and advocates have only continued.

A recent example involves the Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers (OWP-V), a non-renewable temporary work permit that allows migrant workers experiencing abuse to seek alternative employment.[14] In practice, workers must secure new employment before the OWP-V expires (typically within 12 months of its issuance).[15]

While this may help some migrant workers leave abusive workplace situations, MOSAIC, an organization in British Columbia that provides support services to migrants and newcomers to Canada, proclaims that the application process "requires time, resources, and knowledge that workers may not have."[16]

This includes proficiency in English or French to properly fill out the application, compile the required documents, and have knowledge of the legal system.[17] Moreover, the OWP-V is limited to those with an already valid work permit and denied to migrants who work for an employer that "regularly offers striptease, erotic dance, escort services, or erotic massages."[18]

These challenges, which are not unique to the OWP-V, illustrate broader concerns that migrant-rights scholarship consistently highlights. **That is, policy updates fail to address the structural and systemic conditions that produce vulnerability in the first place.[19]**

It is often within this context that many scholars and activists argue that such policy shifts are driven less by genuine concern for the well-being of im/migrants and more by immigration management priorities, border securitization efforts, and economic interests shaped by ongoing colonial legacies.[20]

In the context of human trafficking, a migrant worker may be eligible for a Victims of Trafficking in Persons Temporary Resident Permit (VTIP-TRP).

This is a special visa that provides legal immigration status in Canada and has recently been extended to

11 FCJ Refugee Centre and Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, "It Happens Here," 1-54.

12 FCJ Refugee Centre and Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, "It Happens Here," 1-54.

13 Tanya Basok et al., "The 'Contract' and its Discontents: Can It Address Protection Gaps for Migrant Agricultural Workers in Canada?," *International Migration* no. 00 (2023): 1-14, doi:10.1111/imig.13121; Rupaleem Bhuyan et al., "Responding to the Structural Violence of Migrant Domestic Work: Insights From Participatory Action Research with Migrant Caregivers in Canada," *Journal of Family Violence* 33 (2018): 613-627, doi:10.1007/s10896-018-9988-x; Kendra Strauss and Siobhán McGrath, "Temporary Migration, Precarious Employment and Unfree Labour Relations: Exploring the 'Continuum of Exploitation' in Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program," *Geoforum* 78 (2017): 199-208, doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.01.008; Elene Lam and Annalee Lepp, "Butterfly: Resisting the Harms of Anti-Trafficking Policies and Fostering Peer-Based Organising in Canada," *Anti-Trafficking Review* 12 (2019): 91–107, doi:10.14197/atr.201219126; Tomoya Obokata, "Visit to Canada," Report of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, Including Its Causes and Consequences, United Nations Human Rights Council, A/HRC/57/46/Add.1 (2024).

14 Government of Canada, "Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers Who are Victims of Abuse," last modified July 12, 2025, https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/work-canada/special-instructions/vulnerable-workers.html

15 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, "What is the Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers?" Government of Canada, https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/documents/pdf/open-work-permit/3668-open-work-permit-for-factsheet-en-no-links.pdf

16 Juan Treviño and Carolina Nuñez, "Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers: Best Practices and Challenges in Supporting Migrant Workers Escaping Abuse," MOSAIC British Columbia Migrant Workers Program, https://mosaicbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Poster-Open-Work-Permit-for-Vulnerable-Workers-guide.pdf

17 Treviño and Nuñez, "Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers"; Danièle Bélanger, Myriam Ouellet, Chenour Oechslin, Geneviève Fournier, Guillermo Candiz, Amanda Aziz, Véronique Tessier, and Kabir Dhillon, *Emergency Exit or Dead End? An Analysis of the Impacts of the Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers in Canada* (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Réseau d'aide aux travailleuses et travailleurs migrants agricoles du Québec, and Mitacs, 2024).

18 Government of Canada, "Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers Who are Victims of Abuse."

19 See: Nalinie Mooten, *Racism, Discrimination and Migrant Workers in Canada: Evidence from the Literature*, (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2021), 1-117, https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/documents/pdf/english/corporate/reports-statistics/research/racism/r8-2020-racism-eng.pdf

20 Bethany Hastie, "To Protect and Control: Anti-Trafficking and the Duality of Disciplining Mobility," in *Disciplining the Transnational Mobility of People*, eds. Martin Geiger and Antoine Pecoud (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 139-157.

victims and their dependents (e.g., their children), and is now valid from 180 days to at least 12 months, with some exceptions.[21]

This extension may be tied to growing pressures from NGOs and migrant rights groups highlighting that the previous standard provided insufficient time for VTIP-TRP holders to secure alternative employment and access support services.[22]

However, research suggests that it remains an incredibly challenging and arduous process for both migrant workers and the organizations supporting them. For instance, **migrant workers face a high burden of proof to demonstrate they were trafficked, and the process is highly discretionary as it is up to the assessing officer to decide whether the migrant worker is, indeed, a victim of human trafficking.**[23]

Despite the significant overlap between the conditions of forced labour, abuse, and exploitation in temporary migrant work and indicators of human trafficking (for example, the confiscation of documents, coercion, and limited freedom of movement), obtaining a VTIP-TRP is widely described as far from a straightforward process.

However, in considering Canada's expressed commitment to combat human trafficking and protect victims, **it would appear that such efforts are reserved for certain labour industries such as sex work.**

This narrow focus limits the recognition of trafficking in other labour sectors, where similar patterns of abuse go unnoticed or misunderstood.[24]

ANTI-TRAFFICKING DISCOURSE

The distinction between conditions of exploitation and trafficking is often blurred, leading to varying interpretations based on the type of work involved.

For example, substandard living and working conditions experienced by women working in agriculture or domestic work are often framed as either abuse or severe exploitation.[25] **By contrast, when experienced by women working in the sex industry, their situation is always framed as trafficking – regardless of how they define their experiences.**

Once again, it appears that the framing of the experiences of racialized women with violence, abuse, and exploitation in low-wage, informal, and precarious work depends on the type of work they do. However, the choice to name these experiences as trafficking or not is rarely questioned or discussed in any of the reviewed literature. One notable exception is a 2024 report that examined the distinctions (or lack thereof) between various terms such as trafficking, exploitation, coercion, force, forced labour, etc., from a theoretical and conceptual perspective.[26]

Both the scholarly and community literature on human trafficking widely recognizes that Canada's anti-trafficking response disproportionately focuses on trafficking in the sex industry (i.e., trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation), neglecting trafficking that may occur in other labour sectors.[27]

21 Government of Canada, *Protection and assistance for victims of human trafficking*, last modified February 2, 2025, https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/application/application-forms-guides/protection-assistance-victims-human-trafficking.html

22 Canadian Council for Refugees, *Report: National forum on human trafficking*, 2019, https://ccrweb.ca/sites/ccrweb.ca/files/trafficking-forum-report-2019_final_-eng_pdf.pdf

23 Canadian Council for Refugees, "Human trafficking and the law: How to protect trafficked persons. A guide for legal practitioners," October 2020, https://ccrweb.ca/sites/ccrweb.ca/files/human-trafficking-and-the-law-a-guide-web.pdf

24 See: Jessica Templeman, "Discretionary Decisions in Immigration: Accessing Temporary Resident Permits as a Victim of Trafficking," in *Trafficking Harms: Critical Politics, Perspectives, and Experiences*, eds. Katrin Roots, Ann de Shalit, and Emily van der Meulen (Toronto: Fernwood Publishing, 2024), 306-332.

25 See: Zena Olijynyk, "Temporary Foreign Worker Awarded $300,000 for Workplace Abuse, but Denied Tort of Labour Trafficking," Law Times, February 1 2023, https://www.lawtimesnews.com/practice-areas/labour-and-employment/temporary-foreign-worker-awarded-300000-for-workplace-abuse-but-denied-tort-of-labour-trafficking/373365

26 Roots et al., "Human trafficking or migrant labour exploitation?," 1-36.

27 See for example: Alexandra Ricard-Guay, "Labour Trafficking in Canada: At the Margins of the Anti-Trafficking Efforts" (Working Paper No. RSCAS 2016/40, European University Institute, 2016), 1-18; Roots et al., *Human trafficking or migrant labour exploitation?*, 1-36; Sasha Baglay, Idil Atak, and Varka Kalaydzhieva, "Understanding Gaps in Supports for Trafficked Migrants in Canada: A Discursive Analysis," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 25, (2024): 1325-1349, doi:10.1007/s12134-024-01126-z; Hope Restored Canada, *Human Trafficking in the Prairie Provinces: System Responses to Domestic Human Trafficking of Young Girls Within and Across Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba* (Hope Restored Canada, 2023); Obokata, "Visit to Canada."

Indeed, the indicators of human trafficking are associated with the assumed activities in the sex trade, and as Canadian legal scholars have shown, are often criminalized under prostitution laws (namely procuring (s. 286.3 (1) and material benefit (s. 286.2 (1) provisions in the Criminal Code of Canada).[28] Moreover, a vast body of research demonstrates how anti-trafficking efforts disproportionately impact sex working communities, especially migrant and racialized women in the sex trade.[29]

Despite concerns from sex worker rights activists regarding the harms and counterproductive effects of anti-trafficking measures, the government continues to generously fund carceral anti-trafficking initiatives[30] and exclude sex workers from meaningful policy discussions, resource allocation, and decision-making processes, further marginalizing their voices and exacerbating the challenges they face.

A review of the literature shows that **women in both the sex industry and non-sexual sectors such as agriculture, domestic work, and hospitality report remarkably similar forms of exploitation: long hours, restricted movement, unpaid or underpaid wages, and various other forms of abuse. Yet these experiences are often classified and addressed differently.**

Thus, even as many scholars and community organizations critique the disproportionate focus on the sex work sector within anti-trafficking enforcement, they may unintentionally reinforce the artificial divide between "sex trafficking" and "labour trafficking."

By asking "is it trafficking?," our report aims to connect the sex worker and migrant rights and anti-trafficking literature, and to interrogate the motivations behind service providers' choice to use the term "trafficking" or not and the implications of this choice.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE SUPPORT SERVICES

Regarding the services available to racialized women who experience GBV in precarious, informal, or low-wage work, the literature points to limited availability, accessibility, and quality of services.[31]

28 Katrin Roots, *The Domestication of Human Trafficking Law, Policing, and Prosecution in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2022); see also: Julie Kaye and Bethany Hastie, "The Canadian Criminal Code Offence of Trafficking in Persons: Challenges from the Field and Within the Law," *Social Inclusion* 3 no. 1 (2015): 88-102; Marcus Sibley and Emily van der Meulen, "Courting Victims: Exploring the Legal Framing of Exploitation in Human Trafficking Cases," *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* 37, no. 3 (2022): 409-429; Hayli Millar and Tamara O'Doherty, *Canadian Human Trafficking Prosecutions and Principles of Fundamental Justice: A Contradiction in Terms?* (The International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy, 2020), doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.20268.69760.

29 Judy Fudge et al., *Caught in the Carceral Web: Anti-Trafficking Laws and Policies and Their Impact on Migrant Sex Workers* (Toronto: McMaster University, Butterfly, and HIV Legal Aid, 2021).

30 Roots et al., "Understanding Human Trafficking," 1-33; Elya M Durisin and Emily van der Meulen, "Sexualized Nationalism and Federal Human Trafficking Consultations: Shifting Discourses on Sex Trafficking in Canada," *Journal of Human Trafficking* 7 no. 4 (2020): 454-475.

31 See for example: Laurence M. Guilmain and Jill Hanley, "Creative Recourse in Cases of Forced Labour: Using Human Trafficking, Human Rights and Labour Law to Protect Migrant Workers," *International Migration* (2020): 1–14, doi:10.1111/imig.12743; Carlos Colindres, Amy Cohen, and Susana C. Caxaj, "Migrant Agricultural Workers' Health, Safety and Access to Protections: A Descriptive Survey Identifying Structural Gaps and Vulnerabilities in the Interior of British Columbia, Canada," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 7 (2021): 3696–37103696-3710. doi:10.3390/ijerph18073696; Bhuyan et al. "Responding to the Structural Violence of Migrant Domestic Work," 613-627; Susana C. Caxaj and Amy Cohen, "Relentless Border Walls: Challenges of Providing Services and Supports to Migrant Agricultural Workers in British Columbia," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 53 no. 2 (2021): 41-67; Baglay et al., "Understanding Gaps in Supports for Trafficked Migrants in Canada," 1325-1349; Yvon Dandurand, Darryl Plecas, John Winterdyk, and Vivienne Chin, *Assistance and Support Services for Survivors of Human Trafficking: A Qualitative Study* (Vancouver: International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy, 2023).

There appears to be a distinction between services provided by grassroots community-based organizations and those provided by anti-trafficking organizations.

The literature further suggests that **many grassroots community-based organizations operate on a volunteer basis and receive minimal funding**, whereas some services for migrants are provided by municipal or provincial authorities, although they may be restricted to documented migrants.[32]

Moreover, **funding and institutional support for anti-trafficking services seem more readily available, but more difficult for women to access due to stringent bureaucratic admissibility restrictions.** Only one of the reviewed articles explored different routes to supporting migrant workers, such as through human trafficking, human rights, or labour law.[33]

Additionally, much of the literature related to services is based on interviews with service providers and not with women who have accessed services.[34]

There is also a persistent focus on the provinces of British Columbia, Ontario, and Alberta. Indeed, very few studies focus on Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and to our knowledge, none on the Yukon.

This demonstrates a significant gap about the studied topic in the Yukon, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and to a lesser extent, Alberta.

Thus, in relation to access to and quality of services for racialized women who experienced GBV at work in the four provinces and one territory under inquiry, our research explores the women's needs for support and their experiences with services and service providers, as well as the different routes that service providers can take to support women (e.g. labour law, anti-trafficking law, migration law, etc.).

By asking "is it trafficking?," our research aims to highlight how different labels, such as "victim of trafficking," "migrant worker," or "sex worker," and the funding allocated for supporting these supposedly distinct groups of women, shape the availability and quality of services and the women's experience with them.

As demonstrated in the preceding discussion, much of the existing literature contributes to a divide that obscures the overlapping and often similar experiences of GBV across sex work and other forms of precarious labour. Consequently, these are framed as distinct issues marked by differing institutional understandings and policy frameworks.

Our study responds to this by treating sex work on par with other precarious labour sectors (e.g., agriculture, domestic/caregiving work, and hospitality) in which racialized women may experience GBV and exploitation.

This approach allows us to examine shared experiences of violence, while also critically engaging with the varying ways GBV is recognized, interpreted, and addressed by service organizations.

32 Caxaj and Cohen, "Relentless Border Walls," 41-67; Baglay et al., "Understanding Gaps in Supports for Trafficked Migrants in Canada," 1325-1349; Bhuyan et al., "Responding to the Structural Violence of Migrant Domestic Work," 613-627

33 Guilmain and Hanley, "Creative Recourse in Cases of Forced Labour," 1–14.

34 Baglay et al., "Understanding Gaps in Supports for Trafficked Migrants in Canada," 1325-1349; Hope Restored Canada, *Human Trafficking in the Prairie Provinces*; Caxaj and Cohen, "Relentless Border Walls," 41-67; Ricard-Guay, "Labour Trafficking in Canada," 1-18.

Methodology

Methodology

This report is based on data from 35 semi-structured interviews conducted between February 2024 and August 2025. This research received ethics approval from the University of Victoria, British Columbia.

Research Objectives

The intention of this research was threefold:

1) To document women's experiences of GBV in precarious, non-standard, and informal work;

2) to understand how the women and service providers define their experiences; and

3) to examine the direct service, legal, policy, and institutional routes that service providers use to support their clients and if these meet the women's needs.

Research Participants

We interviewed two groups of research participants:

1) Racialized and migrant women who have experienced GBV in informal, precarious, or non-standard employment; and

2) Representatives of organizations that provide services to, and advocate for, them.

With the first group, we conducted 16 interviews. At the time of the interviews, the women were living in different locations and working different jobs, but the experiences of violence and exploitation that they described to us had taken place in: Manitoba (*n*=1), Alberta (*n*=3), Saskatchewan (*n*=1), and British Columbia (*n*=11); and in the following labour sectors: sex work (*n*=8), agriculture (*n*=3), hospitality (restaurant, hotel) (*n*=2), and domestic work/caregiving (*n*=3).

Five of the interviewed women were Indigenous, one was a racialized Canadian, and ten were migrants who arrived from: Latin America and the Caribbean (Chile, Mexico, Jamaica and two undisclosed countries; *n*=5), Middle East (Syria; *n*=1), Southeast Asia (the Philippines; *n*=3), and East Africa (Somalia; *n*=1).

At the time of the interview, two of the women were in their late 20s, seven in their 30s, five in their early 40s, one in her 60s, and one unknown.

With the second group, we conducted 19 interviews with 21 people from 20 organizations.[35] Geographically, the interviews were with organizations based in: Manitoba (*n*=2), Saskatchewan (*n*=2), Alberta (*n*=3), British Columbia (*n*=8), and the Yukon (*n*=4).

All but one organizational representative agreed to be referred to by their names and organizations in this report. Two of the women opted to use their real names in the report, whereas the remaining 14 either chose a pseudonym or had one assigned to them by the research team.

Recruitment

The organizational representatives were recruited on the basis of prior familiarity with GAATW Canada, on the guidance of partner organizations, and through internet searches of organizations that fit the eligibility criteria of the research. We contacted them via email with an invitation to participate, which included the purpose of the study and a description of what their participation would entail.

We recruited women primarily through organizations that provide services to them (*n*=10). For instance, we asked both participating and non-participating organizations to share a recruitment poster that briefly outlined the scope of the study and included GAATW Canada's email contact, allowing women to reach out directly to a member of the research team.[36] Other participants expressed interest after seeing information about the study on GAATW Canada's social media accounts and via a mailing list (*n*=3). We also

35 One interview involved three representatives of the same organization; two respondents worked for two different organizations and answered as representatives of both; and two interviews were conducted with two representatives of the same organization.

36 As part of this study's recruitment strategy, the research team created a series of posters that could be easily shared across participating organizations and GAATW Canada's network. One poster specifically invited racialized and migrant women who identify as members of the 2SLGBTQI+ and gender diverse communities. Among the 16 women interviewed, one identified as gender-diverse.

recruited women through referrals from other research participants (*n*=3). Once in contact with a member of the research team, we sent all women more information about the project and what their participation would entail.

We sent all participants a detailed consent form outlining the purpose and goals of the study, what their participation would involve, the benefits and potential risks, how interview data would be collected, used, and stored, how the findings would be shared, and the remuneration offered for participation.

Participants either returned the signed consent form by email or verbally declared their consent to participate in the research at the outset of the interview.

Interviews

We scheduled interviews in advance with the research participants at a time that was convenient for them. We conducted interviews in English over Zoom that lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. We audio-recorded the interviews and a third-party transcription tool transcribed them. Once the transcription was complete, a member of the research team reviewed the audio-recording to ensure transcription accuracy, and when necessary, de-identified the research participant. We sent the organizational representatives the questions in advance, and if indicated on the consent form, they were given the opportunity to review the transcript.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

We asked the women to share some basic information about themselves (e.g., approximate age, ethnicity and, for migrants, country/region of origin, years in Canada, and visa type); the work they have done over the past five to ten years; the problems they experienced; and whether they sought help for these problems (if no – why not; if yes – what help they received and what help they could not receive). We also asked what changes they would like to see in their workplace (e.g., how their work can be made safer). Lastly, we asked the women to share recommendations for the local, provincial/territorial, and federal government, as well as service organizations and the broader Canadian society to prevent other women like them from experiencing similar problems.

The researchers emphasised at the outset that they work for a non-government organization and would not disclose any information about the women (including their immigration status) to Canadian authorities and that they can share as much or as little details about their experiences as they are comfortable with. The researchers asked the women to speak about "problems" to give them more space to describe their experiences. Words like "exploitation," "gender-based violence," "abuse," or "trafficking" were used only if the women used them first.

We asked the organizational representatives to describe their organization's work, particularly with racialized women who have experienced GBV in informal, precarious, and non-standard employment; the problems that women face; and the services the organization provides or cannot provide (and the reasons for the latter). We also asked whether the organization considers the women they support to be victims of human trafficking; the benefits and downsides of using the label "victim of trafficking" and anti-trafficking legislation and services, as well as from what sources its funding comes (e.g., anti-trafficking, violence against women, legal aid, or immigration support funding streams, etc.).

Lastly, we asked them to share their recommendations for what the local, provincial/territorial, and federal governments should do to eliminate GBV against racialized women in precarious employment.




REMUNERATION

All research participants received $80. This amount is fairly standard in research projects as a token of appreciation and to compensate participants for their time (including reading and replying to emails and reading the consent form).

We paid the participants after the interview, and in most cases, via e-transfer. If a research participant was unable to accept e-transfer, which occurred in two cases, we sent the honorarium in the form of a gift voucher for a shop or service of their choice.

Data Analysis

We imported the interview transcripts into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis coding software. However, before coding, members of the research team first independently read and re-read the transcripts, making initial observations and generating preliminary codes.

Based on these early insights, along with our research questions and study objectives, the research team collaboratively developed a codebook to systematically analyze the data. We refined the codebook through an iterative process involving regular team meetings to ensure consistency, accuracy, and alignment with the aims of the study.

The research team analyzed the data using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns within the dataset.[37]

As such, we worked collaboratively to identify themes from recurring responses observed across the interview data. Themes were thus generated through ongoing comparison and discussion, ensuring that they were both analytically robust and grounded in the data.

Limitations

Although we interviewed a relatively wide variety of organizations, it was not feasible to invite and interview all service organizations supporting racialized and migrant women in the geographic areas of the study.

We particularly regret that we did not interview Indigenous organizations and organizations providing services to gig economy workers, despite several attempts to identify and recruit such organizations.

Thus, the report does not reflect all approaches to supporting racialized women who experienced GBV in informal and precarious work, and the available services in the four provinces and one territory.

The number of interviewed women is also relatively small and demonstrably skewed towards those who have lived in British Columbia and those who have worked in the sex industry. Despite support from partner organizations to help extend our reach, we did not successfully recruit women from the Yukon or women who have experienced GBV while working in construction, the gig economy, or other informal, precarious, or non-standard work. Nonetheless, analyzing the experiences of women across four different sectors – sex work, domestic work/caregiving, agriculture, and hospitality – including racialized and Indigenous participants – yields meaningful insights.

Another limitation of this study is that only women who were proficient in English were eligible to participate.

While this requirement was largely due to the research team not having multilingual members, we acknowledge that this study excludes the experiences of women who do not speak English, and whose limited proficiency may increase their vulnerability to GBV and exploitation, as well as additional barriers to receiving help.

37 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

Although two partner organizations offered to facilitate contact with women who speak only Spanish or Mandarin and Cantonese, the research team ultimately decided not to pursue this opportunity for two reasons: firstly, the research team unfortunately did not have the capacity to conduct interviews in languages other than English, as it would have required significant additional time and resources to find qualified interviewers or interpreters, ensure accurate translation of documents (e.g., recruitment email and consent form) and interview transcripts, as well as submitting and awaiting approval from the Research Ethics Board for these modifications of the original research ethics application.

Given the small number of total interviews planned, this was deemed outside the scope of this project. However, the experiences non-English speakers have with GBV in precarious and non-standard work, including their experiences accessing and receiving support services from organizations, should be taken up in future research.

Secondly, while the research team acknowledged that the language barrier significantly increases women's vulnerability and access to services, we did not wish to engage in a "hierarchization of vulnerabilities." We recognize that social structures disadvantage not only non-English speakers, but also women who are Black, Indigenous, undocumented, young or old, disabled, Muslim, indebted, and otherwise marginalized. These intersecting aspects of a person's life create distinct and unique vulnerabilities. Despite this limitation, some of the women and organizational representatives did emphasize the particular difficulties that non-English speakers face at work or when needing assistance.

Lastly, aside from the three women who contacted us through social media posts, all others were referred to us by organizations they were in contact with (or other migrants they knew through organizations). Women who access services may have informal support structures (e.g., community, social connections), as well as adopt more political language when analyzing their experiences of violence or exploitation. Indeed, three women were still involved with organizations in some capacity and shared that they have told their stories to other researchers or the media in the past.

Women who have received help from organizations may also be unwilling to be critical of the organizations and support they have received so as not to appear ungrateful to them. While the consent form emphasized that participation in the research will not affect the women's access to services, it is possible that they may have withheld some dissatisfying experiences with organizations.

Given these limitations, this report should not be used to generalize the experiences of all racialized women with GBV in precarious work in the four provinces and one territory, as well as with access to services, or the experiences of all organizations providing services to them.

That said, as we move on to our research findings in the following section, the analysis is grounded in what our research participants told us, as well as both informed and supported by the extant literature.

Research Findings

Research Findings

In this section, we present the findings that emerged from the interviews.

We begin by summarizing the main problems that racialized women in informal and precarious work experience. We then outline the services that the women need to recover from their experiences of violence and exploitation, as well as the services that organizations provide or do not provide.

Building on this, we reflect on whether the problems the women experience are considered to be human trafficking by support organizations and the women themselves, and offer some critical commentary as to why and when certain situations are categorized as trafficking or not.

In the last section, we reflect on how the funding landscape in Canada shapes both what is (not) considered trafficking and the services that women can receive.

Problems Women Face at Work

Our research participants identified a range of abuses that women are subjected to, including long working hours, non-payment of overtime, lack of paid sick leave and time off, reduced wages, unsanitary and unsafe working conditions, physical, psychological and sexual violence and harassment. These difficulties are compounded by discrimination rooted in racism and harmful stereotypes, which further deepen their vulnerability and shape their experiences of GBV. In the section that follows, we present first-hand accounts of these experiences of abuse as described by the women themselves and the organizations that support them.

LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS

All organizational representatives noted that they support many women who seek help when they receive less money than stated in their contracts, including for not being paid overtime. The women themselves provided some illustrative examples. Fatima, a farm worker in Manitoba, was promised $2,000 a month (excluding overtime) but always received a lower amount, with one month earning only $800. When she or other workers asked about this lower pay, the employer "would tell [them] it was [their] fault. A lot of manufactured reasons."

A few examples of this reasoning Fatima shared were that the workers did not reach their quota (even when they had actually surpassed it, according to her), that they broke equipment, or that their living costs had risen.

Chic, a restaurant worker in Alberta, had to undergo five weeks of training, for only six hours a week at $15 an hour before she could be given more hours. She knew that some of her migrant co-workers, who did not speak English, were not paid during these "training" periods. Cynthia Palmaria from Migrante Alberta confirmed that some employers use "training" as a reason for not paying employees. She said that some of the women who seek help from her organization are told by employers, **"because you're undertrained, we won't pay you [until we] find out whether you're fit to be our employee."** Jen and Susan, both of whom were working in the sex industry, had their earnings withheld by their partners or managers. As Katy Prost from the Sex Workers of Winnipeg Action Coalition (SWWAC) in Manitoba said, "I get all the time from boyfriends, they'll force them to go on the blade[38] and take all the money when they get back."

Organizational representatives also pointed out that women in precarious labour, especially agriculture and domestic work, have to work very long hours,

38 "The blade" is a slang (and rather stigmatizing) expression that refers to an area in which sex work is known to take place.

sometimes 14 or 16 hours a day, with few breaks, and in many cases, no days off, or only one day off per week, and no paid leave even for sickness. In most cases, the workers were not paid overtime. Women confirmed this in practically all sectors. Janet, a domestic worker in Alberta, shared:

> **"I don't have a particular rest time. It's just straight the whole day. I go to my room sometimes just to sit for a minute. And then when I [hear that] the children are on the first floor, I have to go there and wait for them if they need me."**

Janet's contract clearly stated that she would work for eight hours a day, but when she raised concerns with her employers about the additional hours, they told her that "it's normal for a live-in caregiver to work flexible hours."

Furthermore, her days off were not set and were sometimes agreed upon in the morning of the "day off," making it impossible for Janet to make any social plans. Even then, she could take her "day off" only around 11:00AM, typically after she had cleaned and cooked. Janet also disclosed that her employer constantly messaged her when she was outside the house. Since her contract specified a monthly wage, she never received additional money for working longer than eight hours a day.

Brandy, a hotel cleaner in British Columbia, said she was working sometimes 80 hours a week and "only had enough time to sleep, eat, [and] get ready for work." While she was paid overtime, the work was extremely demanding. Yet when workers felt exhausted or sick, they were strongly discouraged from taking time off:

> **"It was either I work or I get fired. […] You can take a day off here or there. Sick leave, maybe a couple of days, but anything more than that, you're pushing it. […] We were told that this is a job that 'thrives on availability and efficiency.' I think those are the words they gave. They told us that we should be thankful that we have these jobs because there are many people who want to take our space, so if any of us slack off, we can easily be replaced. They reminded us repeatedly of how expendable we are."**

Francisca, a farm worker in British Columbia, said she worked seven days a week, 12 hours a day, without any overtime pay. Another farm worker in British Columbia, Camilla, was living in her employer's home and found herself in a complex situation where, after work hours, she was also expected to do shopping, household chores, and even party with her employer-friend-housemate.

Mandy, a migrant sex worker in British Columbia, was forced to work for 14 hours a day by the massage parlour owner. **Notably, she was quick to point out that she chose sex work and felt "it was labour [trafficking] more than the sex trafficking."**

Several interviewees shared that farm workers often live and work in unsafe and unhygienic conditions. At

the worksites, some employers do not provide the necessary equipment to protect workers from pesticides and other chemicals, or appropriate workwear suitable for Canadian weather.

Interviewees who lived in employer-provided accommodations, like some farm workers and domestic workers, complained about their living conditions and access to food.

For example, Fatima, the farm worker in Manitoba, shared that all workers used the same toilet, and at some point, she developed a urinary tract infection. She added that **"the living conditions were horrible. We lived with rats. […] The rats were just everywhere. [The employer] would keep us beside pesticides in the same living environment."**

She also complained that employers did not allow the workers to take the vegetables that were "not pretty enough for the supermarkets." Instead, they had to buy them or stay hungry.

Janet, the Filipino domestic worker in Alberta, also mentioned restricted access to food. She was living with a Muslim family and was not allowed to eat pork or cook her own food. Furthermore, she was used to eating rice three times a day but now had to eat bread, like her employers, which caused her to lose weight. Janet also expressed frustration that her employers did not respect her Christian faith and forced her to pray *salah* (an Islamic prayer). She explained:

> **"Before I turn on the light, I turn off the light, I have to say something. Every time I wash the dishes, they shout at me '[Janet], you have to say [*salah*]'. So, I follow them. But it's not from my heart. They know that I am Christian. Every time I cook, everything that I do, I have to say something, I have to say those words. And if I don't say that, the mama and the elder, the mother, [scold me]. She's very angry."**

It is worth noting here that both Fatima and Francisca said that labour inspectors visited their workplaces multiple times; however, the employers knew about these visits in advance.

In Francisca's case, the workers were told not to come to work (though, it was not clear if all workers or only some), and in Fatima's case, the workers were told to "all look happy and nice, like it was the time of [their] life." "It was not," she added.

Raul Gatica from Dignidad Migrante in British Columbia affirmed that labour inspectors appear to inform employers of upcoming inspections at their worksites.

This allows the employers to instruct workers on how to behave or to make temporary improvements in time for the inspection, thus avoiding punishment for poor living and working conditions.

HARASSMENT AND PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Interviewees spoke about instances of physical violence primarily in the context of the sex industry. Outside the sex industry, only Julie Diesta from the Vancouver Committee for Domestic Workers' and Caregivers' Rights (CDWCR) in British Columbia shared that her organization receives requests for help from migrant women who experience intimate partner violence.

Within the sex industry, almost all participants spoke about women being subjected to severe physical and psychological abuse by their partners, managers, or clients. Two women in particular spoke of beatings, broken jaws, and knocked-out teeth. As Jan, an Indigenous sex worker in British Columbia, stated, "That's what guys do to you." **The violence perpetrated against racialized sex workers must be understood in the context of racist attitudes and patriarchal gender norms, the stigma on women who are seen as "bad," "immoral," or "sexually impure" for engaging in sexual labour, and the criminalization of sex work.** As we discuss later in the report, **none of the sex workers felt comfortable reaching out to law enforcement for help** due to strained relationships with police, marked by historical and ongoing police inaction, misconduct, and violence experienced at the hands of so-called "protectors."

Sexual violence and harassment were reported as very common by both the organizational representatives and the women we interviewed. The research participants from the Migrant Worker Center (MWC) in British Columbia stated that **employers may threaten migrant women with firing, non-payment of wages, or deportation if the women reject their sexual advances.**

This is what happened to Brandy, the hotel cleaner, who continuously refused her manager's sexual advances, which resulted in "threats of having [her] pay docked" and accusations that she "wasn't showing up for work, even when [she] was working overtime." Brandy suggested that he was "indirectly pimping [other cleaners] out to some expats." Brandy had also experienced a sexual assault attempt by a hotel customer, as well as regular sexualized comments by other customers, which she described as eventually "just being background noise." She further reflected with exasperation:

> **"Hotel cleaners, for some unique reason, I don't know if it's the uniform or just the job, we're highly... what's the word... fetishized. Because I have been told by a customer of the hotel, 'Oh, look at you looking like you're looking and you think I don't want you.'"**

MWC also pointed out that, because farm workers live in employer-provided accommodation, women may experience sexual violence and harassment by their co-workers, too. This was affirmed by Raul Gatica from Dignidad Migrante in British Columbia, who highlighted that, in some cases, employers know that male workers sexually abuse or harass female workers, but do not intervene because the male worker is usually in a managerial position and the employer considers him more important for the job. Camilla, the farm worker in British Columbia, also had to deal with sexual advances from her employer, with whom she was living in a complicated employer-friend-housemate situation. While she (hesitantly) agreed to the sexual encounters, she felt pressured by his promises to hire a lawyer and help with her permanent residence, and also by her sympathy for his loneliness and depression.

Women engaging in sex work and the organizations working with them also reported sexual violence, harassment, and assault. It must be noted that the line between sex work and sexual violence, harassment, or assault is determined by the boundaries of the arrangement sex workers have with their clients (e.g., type of service, duration, payment, condom use, etc.). Any breach of these boundaries – including, for example, if a client demands a service that was not

agreed upon or is refused by the sex worker, or if he removes the condom during intercourse, or refuses to pay for provided services – is considered a form of sexual violence, harassment, or assault. Critically, although Canadian law criminalizes acts of physical and sexual violence, the framing of sex workers as poor, abject, desperate, or "immoral" women is so deeply embedded that it leaves them vulnerable to violence and limits their access to justice. For racialized women, this is further compounded by racism, and for migrants, by their insecure status.

RACISM AND HARMFUL SOCIAL ATTITUDES

The organizational representatives generally did not discuss racism and other social attitudes as issues affecting the women they assist. It is possible that the women do not complain about racism when they seek help from organizations, as they seek to address more practical problems or, as we note below, have learned to ignore racist remarks. It is also possible that

organizational representatives simply thought that racism is so pervasive in the immigration system that it does not need to be pointed out explicitly.

However, **many of the migrant women we interviewed felt they were treated differently by their employers, and sometimes by the broader Canadian society, because they were migrants or non-white.** Some felt it as an attitude or they noticed being treated differently from other workers. Other times, they heard verbal abuse. Two women shared detailed accounts of discriminatory attitudes.

For instance, Brandy, a hotel cleaner from Jamaica, was subjected to many racist remarks from her manager, as well as hotel customers, including "go back to where you came from," "immigrant scum," and "you all act like you should still be slaves." She also described how a white man, whose advances she rebuffed, told her he would be "doing [her] race a favour by even wanting to be with [her]." Although such comments were distressing, Brandy shared that, "they're just words. They can't kill me."

Fatima, a Muslim farm worker from Somalia who wears a hijab, said she experienced a lot of discrimination and hostility from her co-workers. She recounted:

> **"The level of Islamophobia on farms is terrifying. It is like I became the punching bag for everything that was wrong. Stuff goes missing – blame the Muslim girl. Everybody's angry that their wage was docked – blame the Muslim girl. […] They call me a terrorist; that they're not afraid to shoot me if I decide to 'blow anybody up.' They said they would strangle me with my hijab. So many different things."**

The stress from these attitudes was exacerbated by the fact that Fatima felt completely alone and isolated on the farm – the Asian and Latin American workers shunned her because she was African, the African men told her that women should not be working outside the house, and the African women shunned her because she was Muslim and they were Christian. She expressed that she could not complain even to her family back home because she had migrated when they tried to marry her off.

Others shared more "everyday" forms of differential treatment. Samira, a Syrian domestic worker in British Columbia, felt that her employer "did not like her colour" and made comments about Canada "allowing [in] too many refugees."

Harley, a Canadian-born sex worker of Asian descent, said she was regularly objectified and fetishized for being Asian, but "tolerated" it. Camilla's employer at the farm humiliated her with racist stereotypes and remarks like, "Oh, you Mexicans! You're very lazy, you just want more money."

Although the Indigenous women we interviewed did not explicitly name systemic racial discrimination, their experiences of violence cannot be separated from Canada's colonial history and state-sponsored violence against Indigenous peoples. The legacy of settler colonialism (e.g., land dispossession, cultural genocide, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop) and the ongoing structural neglect continue to shape the conditions in which many Indigenous women and girls live today.[39]

A significant body of research, conducted by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, has shown that Indigenous peoples face persistent discrimination across nearly every aspect of public life, including healthcare, (un)employment, housing, food insecurity, education, and access to justice. Jamie Eggert from QomQem in British Columbia, an Indigenous woman and former sex worker, shared that many Indigenous women in the sex industry are "multi-generational residential school survivors" or escaped abusive homes when they were young. In fact, research has shown that the intergenerational trauma caused by the displacement and violent removal of Indigenous peoples from their homes, as well as other colonial abuses, has caused a breakdown of communities and access to culturally relevant services.[40] As Joy, an Indigenous sex worker in British Columbia bluntly stated, **"the [police] don't give a shit. The cops don't care unless you're dead."**

39 Heather A. McKenzie et al., "Disrupting the Continuities among Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and Child Welfare: An Analysis of Colonial and Neocolonial Discourses," *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* 7, no. 2 (2016): 1–27.

40 See also Julie Kaye, *Responding to Human Trafficking: Dispossession, Colonial Violence, and Resistance among Indigenous and Racialized Women* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

While racism, stereotypes, and other harmful social attitudes are not usually considered forms of GBV, we see in the examples above that they are clearly gendered.

In the case of Brandy, racism was expressed through a comment that positions a white man as sexually beneficial for a Black woman. In the case of Fatima, Islamophobic comments referred to her hijab and her co-workers berated her for being a Muslim woman who works outside the house.

Taken together, gender, race, ethnicity, and religion create specific conditions of harassment and exclusion that uniquely shape racialized and migrant women's experiences of GBV.

More broadly, the women were acutely aware that employers had hired them precisely because they were migrants and non-white and that this influenced their wages, working conditions, and treatment.

As Brandy reflected, "they had the market of people they had in mind when they hired. There were a lot of Filipinos, a lot of Caribbeans, [...] there were some Africans... just people who are okay with accepting the bare minimum because they're used to living below the bare minimum." Chic, the restaurant worker, similarly stated, "I think one of the reasons why they hired [Chinese people] is because they cannot complain." Thus, in the case of migrants, workplaces abuses were largely created and exacerbated by Canadian immigration rules, to which we turn now.

IMMIGRATION RULES

The most common problems reported by the migrant women and the organizations assisting them were related to various immigration rules. Canada boasts a welcoming attitude to migrants, and the federal government acknowledges that migrants are an integral part of the Canadian economy and fill many labour market shortages. However, immigration policies are designed to serve precisely the economy and employers and not necessarily to protect migrants from abuse and exploitation. As numerous academic and activist reports have noted over the years, Canada's immigration policies put migrants in extremely precarious situations.[41] Temporary visas, closed work permits, the LMIA, employer-provided accommodation, and the promise of permanent residence, to name a few – alone or in combination with other factors – can be abused by employers to subject migrants to violence and exploitation. As Omar Chu from Sanctuary Health and the Immigration and Refugee Legal Clinic in British Columbia summarized, **"this system of temporariness and dependence breeds the conditions for exploitation."**

Several respondents reported how the requirement for employers to possess LMIA before hiring foreign workers creates uncertainty, stress, or debts for migrants. By law, the employer is supposed to pay the LMIA application fee of $1,000, and this amount cannot be paid by or recovered from the worker.[42] However, our research indicates that some employers demand that the workers pay this, and at times, for a much higher fee. Chic, the restaurant worker in Alberta, shared:

41 See for example: Basok et al., "The 'Contract' and its Discontents," 1-14; Bhuyan et al., ""Responding to the Structural Violence of Migrant Domestic Work," 613-627; Strauss and McGrath, "Temporary Migration, Precarious Employment and Unfree Labour Relations," 199-208; Lam and Lepp, "Butterfly: Resisting the Harms of Anti-Trafficking Policies," 91-107; Obokata, "Visit to Canada."

42 Government of Canada, "Program Requirements For Low-Wage Positions," Employment and Social Development Canada, December 31, 2025, https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/foreign-workers/median-wage/low/requirements.html.

> **"I've tried different companies, food and beverage, like restaurants, but they were all asking for an extensive amount of money for LMIA. I know that LMIA only cost them $1,000, but for applicants, they would require us to pay $4,000."**

Cynthia Palmaria from Migrante Alberta also suggested that it is often the workers who pay for the LMIA. She referred to exorbitant amounts that some employers charge the workers for LMIA, of $35-40,000. She even recounted how one domestic worker associated with her organization had overheard her employer saying to another employer, "Hey, it's easy money. Just charge them $35,000 for LMIA." It was not clear if this obscene amount includes any other services, such as a work permit, a visa, or an immigration consultant. In addition to the costs, Michelle Trudeau from ACT Alberta suggested that some employers deceive workers into believing that they need to work for free for several months before obtaining an LMIA to hire them. Thus, it appears that some employers abuse the LMIA requirement to extract free labour or additional fees from migrant workers.

Work permits were also reported to cost thousands of dollars. Chic had found an employer who did not require her to pay for the LMIA, but she paid $3,500 for her work permit when an immigration consultant drove her to the US border for a "flagpole turnaround."[43] While other women did not specify how much they had paid for their work permits, Michelle Trudeau from ACT Alberta said some of their clients have paid up to $70,000 for work permits. This may or may not include the fees that migrants pay to various formal and informal recruitment agencies and middlemen in their home countries.

However, the end result is that an entire migration industry in both Canada and the origin countries leeches off working-class people who are doing backbreaking work to support their families – and the economies of their origin and host countries. The need to repay these huge amounts of debt means that, at the end of the month, migrants may be left with little money to cover their living costs or remit to their families. As Julie Diesta from the Vancouver Committee for Domestic Workers' and Caregivers' Rights in British Columbia explained:

> **"Let's say, for example, a construction worker paid $30,000, and in their contract, it says the [pay] per hour is $28. [But] as well as taking out money from their wage because of the $30,000 that they have to pay to an immigration consultant, as well as to the recruiter. So, at the end of the month they don't have anything. They don't have money at all because they are already deducting the recruiter, immigration consultant, as well as their housing and all this. So, that's why the system is really bad."**

Beyond the costs, the organizational respondents emphasized that closed, or tied, work permits (which allow migrants to work for only one specific employer) create dependence on the employer who can use it to subject the worker to violence and exploitation. Under a closed work permit, migrants must either accept the pay, working conditions, and treatment that employers offer them, or leave the employer, which would make them undocumented and deportable. As Raul Gatica from Dignidad Migrante in British Columbia noted,

"Sometimes [workers] believe that they […] should accept everything that their employer does."

The research participants from the Migrant Worker Center highlighted that most of the workers who seek help from their organization are on tied work permits, "which are precarious just by nature." The women were also aware that the closed work permit creates power disparities between them and their employer and increases their vulnerability to abuse by employers. Cecilia, the farm worker in British Columbia, for example, shared that "[her employers] thought because they helped [her] with a work permit, that [she] was a slave for them."

43 "Flagpole turnaround" refers to the practice in which migrants with temporary status in Canada access immigration services, such as study or work permits, at a port of entry (at the US border) rather than through Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. The Canadian government ended the practice in December 2024. Government of Canada, "Ending Flagpoling for Work and Study Permits at the Border," Canada Border Services Agency news release, December 23, 2024, https://www.canada.ca/en/border-services-agency/news/2024/12/ending-flagpoling-for-work-and-study-permits-at-the-border.html

By contrast, the pilot Open Work Permit Program that Canada introduced in 2019, which permitted caregivers to change employers within this occupation, served as a lifeline for some women. Janet, the domestic worker in Alberta, had problems with her employers, and after connecting with other caregivers and Migrante Alberta, she managed to leave her employers and find new ones. She was well aware of the freedom that comes with the open work permit and highly appreciative of the policy change at the time:

> **"... The Government of Canada makes it easier for us. It is a restricted open work permit. We can work [for] any employer as long as [it's] a nanny job. […] Unlike before [when] you had to stay [with] your employer for two years or three years. You have to finish your contract even [if] there's a problem. And that's why I'm so thankful that I'm with this program. And that's a good idea that the Government of Canada, maybe they know [that] there are some cases of abuse, so they make it open work permit for the caregivers."**

Several research participants spoke about the Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers (OWP-V). Many organizational representatives shared that they had supported clients to obtain it, and several of the women had received it. It was described as extremely beneficial, as it allowed the women to leave an abusive employer and find a new job. However, both the women and the organizational representatives emphasized that its efficacy is undermined by the fact that this type of work permit is valid for only one year and is non-renewable.

Thus, while the OWP-V may provide crucial assistance to migrant women experiencing exploitation, it offers only temporary relief. Indeed, after one year, holders must either leave Canada or find a new employer willing to obtain an LMIA for them, leaving them vulnerable to further abuse. Furthermore, some respondents stated that the OWP-V application process is complex, with the women expected to describe their vulnerability in specific ways that they may not be aware of.

Two migrant women we interviewed disclosed that they hold study permits. Both were working in the sex industry, which is prohibited for temporary migrants (a work prohibition they were aware of).[44] Indeed, Alice, a migrant sex worker in British Columbia told us, "If you have a […] study permit, right at the bottom, it says explicitly that you are not allowed to do any kind of sex trades." Mandy, a former migrant sex worker in British Columbia, was especially critical of the fact that her study permit only allowed her to work for a maximum of 20 hours a week. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Science and was trying to find a job in her field, but "nobody wanted to do the paperwork for [her] because [she] wasn't worth it for them to go over the hassle." Since she was in Canada with her child and had to pay for education, rent, food, and other costs for both of them, she felt she had no other choice but to work in massage parlours. Mandy explained, "with a regular job, I could never make ends meet." She also said that the manager of the massage parlour was aware of the restrictions of Mandy's visa and took advantage of her precarity to force her to work sometimes 14 hours a day. Alice, too, had tried to find other work, but without success. As a trans woman suffering severe psychological stress due to traumatic childhood experiences and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, she felt that sex work was her best option to generate income. However, when she experienced abuse and rape from clients, she did not report to the police because she had violated the terms of her study permit by engaging in sex work. Again, we see how the limitations on migrants' visas and work permits including, in this case, **the restriction of a maximum of 20 hours of work per week for students, and the prohibition on migrants working in the sex industry, create situations of vulnerability and prevent them from seeking help if they experience abuse.**

Lastly, many migrants come to Canada as temporary workers with the intention of applying for permanent residence (PR), once eligible. Some employers take advantage of this fact to make unreasonable demands on the migrants or subject them to violence or exploitation, knowing that the workers are unlikely to complain. For many, the prospect of receiving PR after two or three years of work is worth enduring any hardship. Camilla, the farm worker in British Columbia, stated: "I just pretended like everything was

44 The Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations (IRPR) state that migrants are not allowed to work for an employer who offers striptease, erotic dance, escort services or erotic massages (Art. 183.1.(b.1), Art. 196.1(a); 200 (3)(g1); 203(2)(a) https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/regulations/SOR-2002-227/page-1.html.

fine. I thought, 'If I can hang [on] two years and then I will apply for my permanent residence and that's it, goodbye.'" Michelle Trudeau from ACT Alberta similarly reported: "I've had individuals say to me, 'Maybe I'll just stay in this abusive and exploitative situation so that I can at least just get my hours so that I can apply for permanent residency once this is done.'" Julie Diesta from CDWCR in British Columbia affirmed that

"even [if] they are trafficked, [...] 90% of workers don't complain or don't even talk about it [...] because they have to wait until they become permanent residents."

To conclude, across the studied work sectors in the four provinces and one territory, the racialized women we interviewed were subjected to different forms of violence and exploitation by their employers. These include physical, psychological, and sexual violence and harassment, verbal abuse, underpayment of wages, long working hours with no overtime pay, and unsafe and unhealthy working environments. These workplace abuses are enabled and sustained by structural causes, such as visa restrictions on the location and types of jobs women are allowed to do, racism and other discrimination against migrants and Indigenous peoples that position them as inferior to white Canadians, patriarchal social norms that devalue women's worth and labour, and employers' ability to flaunt labour laws and contract conditions due to lack of meaningful oversight of low-wage and stigmatized labour sectors. These factors not only allow employers to abuse women, but may also force women to endure exploitation and prevent them from seeking help.

Help and Services

Having outlined the problems racialized and migrant women have faced at work, we now turn to their experiences seeking help and receiving services as reported by the women themselves and the organizations supporting them.

Our aim is to better understand the barriers that prevent women from accessing services – and the challenges organizations may face in providing them – and to assess whether the available services meet the women's needs.

REASONS FOR NOT SEEKING HELP

The reasons why racialized women delayed or did not seek help when they experienced exploitation and violence at work varied. However, the most common reasons, according to both the organizational representatives and the women themselves, were the need to work to support their families in their country of origin, mistrust of government institutions, fear of repercussions, such as arrest, deportation, loss of work, or retaliation, and lack of knowledge of the English language, their rights, or where to seek help.

As noted, for migrants, the main reason for enduring exploitation and not seeking help is their visa and immigration status. They fear that if they spoke out about violence, bad working conditions, or low pay, their employer would fire them and, because of their closed work permit, they would lose their status in Canada and be forced to return home. As Julie Diesta from CDWCR in British Columbia stated, **"They cannot just leave and then go to another farm [...] because they're bound to that contract that they have to stay."** Since many migrants support dependents in their home countries (e.g., parents, children, siblings), losing their work and income would have disastrous consequences. This is especially true for women – particularly single mothers – who bear the primary responsibility for caring for their parents and children. As Raul Gatica from Dignidad Migrante in British Columbia explained, "if they are the

single income to the family and they have three, four children and a mom and a dad to support, those women are able to accept everything in order to keep the job that could feed their family." Furthermore, as Brandy, the hotel cleaner in British Columbia, illustrated:

> **"It's not just one life on the line. If it was just me, I would've probably told [my manager] to kick rocks a long time ago. But what happens when my brother needs money or my family needs money? Will I tell them, 'Oh, I stood for my principles and my morals, so you are going to be hungry.' If I stand up to [my manager], does that put food on the table? Does that pay your bills? Does that keep a roof over our head?"**

While migrants expressed a sense of duty to support their families, the families may also exert pressure on them to continue working and sending remittances. Brandy continued, "what everybody tells you when you migrate is, 'keep your head down, don't make any waves and you'll make it.' And trying to fight against some [employment] policies is equivalent to making a wave. Waves don't pay the bills."

It should be noted that many migrants come to Canada from countries with high levels of perceived corruption and may be mistrustful of authorities, such as the police or the justice system, due to negative experiences in their home countries. As a result, they may hesitate to contact authorities in Canada, too. As the interviewees from the Migrant Worker Center in British Columbia pointed out, "for example, in Mexico, they already don't trust the police, so […] there is already historically and culturally this mistrust." Similarly, as Fatima, the farm worker from Somalia, reflected, "I'm from a country where the government never helped. It was oppressive, it was not helpful." However, this is far from the whole story. The women were acutely aware that they cannot trust Canadian government institutions either. As Fatima continued, "And we come here thinking it's going to be better, yet it's almost just the same nightmare. […] How can I run to [someone that] I don't believe will actually help me?"

Many of the women we interviewed were especially afraid, or at least highly suspicious, of the police. As Brandy said, **"A lot of workers are immigrants, and I do not think they like the police much or want to do anything that draws attention to themselves."**

This was particularly pronounced for both migrant and Indigenous women working in the sex industry. As noted above, two migrant women in the sex industry were on a student visa. They were afraid that if they complained about abuse from clients or managers, they would be arrested and deported. As Alice pointed out, **"if any authority found you were doing this kind of trade and you were making money, there [are] no protections for the sex worker.** So you are a criminal because of doing that […] You have no protection, you have no support." Similarly, Fatima said she tried doing sex work to earn more money, but stopped after a week because she had several violent clients. When asked if she complained to the police about them, she said she did not, because she would need to explain how she knew these men and this would have been "a bad look" and "not helpful."

For Indigenous women, mistrust of police is rooted in the longstanding abuses that the Canadian settler colonialist system has perpetuated against Indigenous peoples through the oppressive structures of the state.[45] Jamie Eggert from QomQem in British Columbia explained that the police routinely insult, assault, and rob Indigenous peoples, especially drug users, sex workers, or welfare recipients. She concluded that, **"We, as sex trade workers, do not rely on the police for anything and I would never call the police on another Indigenous sister."**

This sentiment was echoed by other sex workers and sex work activist participants, including Katy Prost from the Sex Workers of Winnipeg Action Coalition (SWWAC) in Manitoba and Kelly Go from SWAN Vancouver. We also heard it from Jessica, an Indigenous sex worker in British Columbia, who said, "I would never call [the police]. They are no help anyways. They're more damage to you than anything." This strong stance to avoid police involvement was not only based on direct experience, but also informed by the lived realities of other Indigenous and racialized sex workers who have endured (and continue to endure) colonial harm.

45 Renée Bourgeois, "Colonial Exploitation: The Canadian State and the Trafficking of Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada," *UCLA Law Review* 62 (2015): 1426–1463.

Women who had attempted to seek police assistance were met with delayed responses (for example, Jessica said the police would come 30 minutes after she called them to report abuse) or complete inaction, including the lack of any consequences for the abuser. In addition, both sex workers and the organizations working with them described many instances where police harass and insult sex workers while they are working. These experiences contribute to a broader pattern in which police are perceived as a source of harm rather than protection.[46] Street-based workers and the organizations supporting them stated that police harassment remains a routine aspect of their working environment, with officers driving their cars by the women throughout the night, chasing away any potential clients, and thus reducing their income.

Another reason why migrant women delay or do not seek help when they experience violence and exploitation at work is that some of them do not speak English well enough or at all. This was mentioned by only one of the women we interviewed – Samira, a domestic worker from Syria in British Columbia. Although only women who spoke English were interviewed for this study, language barriers were routinely cited as a reason women may delay seeking help. As Teresa Acheson from the Yukon Federation of Labour explained:

> **"Most services are offered in English. So, if you're coming to the Yukon with something else as your first language or even French as your first language, […] there's going to be a barrier to how much you're accessing or getting information."**

Several organizational representatives also pointed out that some migrant women endure exploitation and violence and do not seek help because they are not aware of their rights and Canadian regulations regarding working hours, rest time, and overtime pay, occupational safety and health rules, or legal salary deductions. As Robin McGeough from the Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria said, "many people arrive and don't know they have rights. They don't know that there are places they can go to get that support." It is a common refrain in anti-trafficking and migrant rights activism that if migrants (or even citizens) were only aware of their rights, they would not fall into exploitative situations or would easily leave them. While having knowledge and awareness of one's rights is always an advantage, acting on this knowledge is a completely different matter. Given the constraints described above (e.g., financial obligations to family abroad, mistrust of authorities, and fear of deportation), it is doubtful that simply knowing one's rights will prevent women from entering into exploitative situations or remaining in them.

ACCESSING HELP

As noted in the Methodology section, most of the women were recruited through support organizations. They had accessed formal channels of support for their experiences of violence and exploitation or were at least in contact with organizations that could provide support if they requested it. Only two of the women, Brandy, the hotel cleaner in British Columbia, and Fatima, the farm worker in Manitoba, were not in contact with any formal sources of support (e.g., from government or non-government organizations), and had not sought help. Brandy's manager, who had subjected her to regular sexual harassment, was arrested for unrelated offences, and she later left her hotel job. At the time of the interview, she was married and trying to open her own business. Fatima had left her exploitative farm job and found a managerial position at another farm where she was feeling valued and appreciated.

INFORMAL SUPPORT

In many cases, the women first sought informal support from friends and co-workers. For example, when Brandy was asked if she sought help for the sexual harassment, she responded: "I did vent to a friend and we ate ice cream and we cried and slept, if that counts." Janet, the domestic worker in Alberta, had first shared her situation in a "group chat for caregivers" and it was there that she learned about Migrante Alberta and sought their help to escape her abusive employer. Women in the sex industry also shared that, because of the stigma they feel from society, they mainly complain about their problems to other sex workers.

46 On this topic, see: Elene Lam, "Targeting Asian Massage Parlours in the Name of Anti-Trafficking: Experiences of Asian Women in Toronto," in *Trafficking Harms: Critical Politics, Perspectives, and Experiences*, eds. Katrin Roots, Ann de Shalit, and Emily van der Meulen (Toronto: Fernwood Publishing, 2024), 119-138; Alison Clancey and Julie Ham, "Anti-Trafficking Policing in Vancouver: The Denial of Crimes Against Asian Sex Workers," in *Trafficking Harms: Critical Politics, Perspectives, and Experiences*, eds. Katrin Roots, Ann de Shalit, and Emily van der Meulen (Toronto: Fernwood Publishing, 2024), 177-191.

As Mimi, an Indigenous sex worker in British Columbia, put it, "being a sex worker, I [feel] discriminated [against], not being listened to, looked down on. […] I'm afraid whether [support organizations] will understand me or listen to me the way I want to without judging me." The value in sharing problems with other women was also highlighted by Susan. She was receiving formal support as a victim of trafficking in Saskatchewan, but still found talking "freely and openly about what happened" with other victims "really helpful." This suggests that, even when the women did not know where to find formal assistance (e.g., legal or psychological aid) or were afraid of doing so for the reasons outlined above, there may be some comfort in sharing their experiences with colleagues and other community members.

FORMAL SUPPORT

The women described diverse types of help they received from community organizations. Some received information about their rights as migrants and workers – organizations explained that their working conditions were unacceptable and encouraged them to leave their abusive employers. Several received support with their application for an OWP-V, specifically where to apply and how to prepare their application. Other women received support with housing, such as safe accommodation, financial support to pay one or two months of rent, or help with finding an apartment to live in or share with other community members. Some were referred to lawyers or psychologists. One woman was accompanied to a hospital and one said she received clothes, shampoo, towels, and other personal necessities. Although some of the women spoke about services that they needed but did not receive (most commonly, psychological assistance/therapy, accommodation, or financial support), they were extremely grateful to the community organizations they were in contact with and did not share any negative experiences.[47]

When it comes to services received from government agencies and institutions, the responses were more mixed. Alice, the migrant trans sex worker in British Columbia, felt she was treated with respect and sensitivity by staff at the hospital she visited when a client raped her.[48] Chic, the Filipino restaurant worker in Alberta, was grateful for the advice she received from an Alberta labour agency on where and how to apply for her OWP-V, although she partly attributed this to being assigned a Filipino representative. At the same time, she was disappointed that the Philippines consulate did not offer any assistance but simply referred her to a non-government organization. Chic reflected: "For my government, I'm just a statistic. They just told me, 'Okay, just update us again, whatever happens, so we can put it on record'."

Similarly, Camilla, a farm worker in British Columbia, shared that Mexican workers sometimes call their embassy for help and no one answers. She herself had called Service Canada to report her situation, but they just took her number, name, and stated that someone would call her to follow up. Yet, Camilla informed us that nobody did. Moreover, one Indigenous woman working in the sex industry shared that she had called the police a number of times to complain about physical abuse from her clients, but the police failed to respond to these calls or did nothing to protect her.

47 As we noted in the Methodology section, this is to be expected since the women were recruited through community organizations they were still in contact with, and may not have wished to appear "ungrateful" to the organizations.

48 To be clear, Alice did not disclose to health care staff that she was sexually assaulted by a client out of fear that she would be "caught" working in violation of her visa.

The organizations described providing a wide range of services – outreach to work sites, providing information to women about their rights, advice and referrals to other services, legal aid, support with immigration, work permit, visa issues, accommodation, financial assistance, peer support groups, accompaniment to hospitals, police, or courts, legal representation, and more. One service commonly mentioned by both the organizations and migrant women was advice for preparing the application for OWP-V, which they contend had to be formulated in specific ways that workers may not always understand. As Chic told us, "[Migrante Alberta] gave me good advice [on how to] write my narrative for the vulnerable open work permit application."

While this sounds like a comprehensive list that covers all the women's needs, we cannot say with any certainty that these services are provided in all four provinces and one territory or that they address all the women's needs. As described in the Methodology section, we interviewed a relatively small number of organizations across the four provinces and one territory, and the majority were based in British Columbia. This creates a sense that there are more services in some provinces than in others, and although we cannot draw conclusions, this may well be true. Consider, for example, Susan's experience: She was identified as a victim of trafficking in Ontario and referred to services there, which she felt were comprehensive and met her needs. However, in Saskatchewan, she was seeing a counsellor who was not trained in working with survivors of human trafficking and there were things she felt she could not share with them as a result.

When we asked the organizations what services they are unable to provide to meet the women's needs, a few mentioned legal aid – namely, because they do not have lawyers on staff – and others pointed to therapy services and the urgent need for accommodation. Three of our interviewees – Souls Harbour Rescue Mission in Regina, Hope Restored in Saskatchewan, and the Salvation Army in British Columbia and Manitoba – provide shelter for women, including those in the sex trade and victims of trafficking. The remaining organizations reported referring women to emergency shelters, shelters for unhoused people, or shelters for victims of domestic violence. However, they emphasized recurring challenges securing placements due to bed availability. Other organizations described using emergency funds to pay for one or two months of rent and connecting women to other workers or community members who may be able to share their accommodations. Regarding psychological support, some organizations said they provide emotional support, but none had psychotherapists or counsellors on staff. In most cases, they referred the women to other organizations or to private therapists. Still, it was not clear from the interviews who these organizations or individual therapists are and whether or how the women could afford them.

We also asked organizations whether there are systemic barriers that prevent women from accessing services (e.g., whether their services, or those they refer to, are restricted to certain women due to various program or funding requirements). All our interviewees described their own services as low-threshold and available to anyone who needs them, regardless of visa type, immigration status, or other factors. However, some pointed out that **there are organizations whose services are available only to migrants with permanent residency or refugee status and are thus not accessible to temporary foreign workers or undocumented migrants.** While we did not understand how prevalent such restrictions are, they are clearly harmful for migrant women in informal and precarious work, who are usually on temporary visas or undocumented. This could be especially challenging in remote areas or provinces and territories with fewer migrants, where there are also fewer services in general.

Another restriction mentioned, particularly regarding services for women in the sex industry, including victims of trafficking, was a requirement that women be sober to access them. Katy Prost from SWWAC in Manitoba, Michelle Trudeau from ACT Alberta, and Thayane Sa from the Salvation Army in British Columbia all described this requirement as extremely harmful. It effectively excludes women who use alcohol and other substances from accessing services, especially accommodation, thus preventing them from leaving abusive situations.

Michelle Trudeau also pointed out that **some services require women to leave sex work entirely before accessing them.** She explained, under this restriction, "[there is] no option to say, 'I want out of this situation, but all I really know is sex work, so I'm going to continue working in sex work until I can get on my feet.' That's not allowed there." Again, such a blanket requirement is not survivor-centred and completely ignores the

women's realities and may prevent them from leaving abusive situations, including trafficking. Furthermore, Hanako Rodgers from SHIFT Calgary emphasized that requirements to exit the sex trade can be especially problematic because some sex workers wish to report experiences of exploitation and leave that situation, but still engage in sex work. This is another example of how anti-trafficking organizations set sex work apart from other labour sectors. For women exploited in agriculture or domestic work, organizations are committed to supporting their needs and helping them find an alternative employer. As Hanako Rodgers from SHIFT Calgary suggests, these women would never be told that they must first "exit" the agriculture or domestic work sectors to receive and access services. Sex workers, by contrast, are viewed through a judgmental, moral lens and treated as "hapless" victims who must be guided by middle-class saviours.

Finally, Kelly Go from SWAN Vancouver noted that for women in sex work to access police-based Victim Services, they need to file a police report first. As we discussed above, there are many reasons why sex workers, especially racialized, migrant, and Indigenous workers, may refuse to have contact with the police, even to file a crime report to access help.[49]

Making assistance conditional on police reporting is putting unnecessary limitations on women and goes against Canada's stated commitment to survivor-centred approaches to care and protecting victims of trafficking.

Indeed, even if sex workers do file a police report, the result is far from certain. As Kelly Go added, "I don't think [the police] are very well trained in supporting sex workers or migrant sex workers at all."

More broadly, **there are concerns that many organizations, including some among our interviewees, do not provide direct services but primarily information and referral.** As we discussed above, information and referral are very important for women, but it was sometimes unclear in the interviews who ultimately provides the services they need. While we acknowledge that we interviewed a small number of organizations, our findings suggest that there are gaps in NGO services for racialized women who have experienced violence and abuse in informal and precarious employment.

One of our interviewees, whose organization is run by volunteers and migrant workers, sounded frustrated with the limited support available in British Columbia, stating: "Most of those organizations will provide only information, but they won't help the workers to solve the issue, to represent them, to defend them, to protect them, or to rescue them from the abuse situation."

They went on to describe other limitations of established, well-funded, and professionalized NGOs:

> **"There [are] a lot of organizations who supposedly have funding to provide support to [women], but none of them [do]. First of all, because the majority of those offices are open 9:00AM to 4:00PM or 5:00PM – at a time when women cannot access the services. […] They are open usually Monday to Friday. So, nobody provides service to the migrant worker in the time that they can access the services – in the evening or weekends. [...] The other problem is that [these] organizations […] usually are in the office, but they don't go out to the fields, they don't go to the cleaning places or workplaces. They don't go to the construction sites. So, it is difficult for them to see […] all the abuses to the people."**

To conclude, our research found that there are services racialized women can access when they experience violence and exploitation in informal and precarious work. These services can meet the women's needs – to escape from an abusive employer, organize their legal status in Canada, find accommodation and a good job, and take care of their physical and psychological health. At the same time, the research also suggests that services may not be sufficiently available and accessible across all four provinces and one territory, and may not meet all the women's needs. Furthermore, many structural barriers prevent women from accessing help.

These range from fear of losing their job or legal status

49 Anna-Louise Crago et al., "Sex Workers' Access to Police Assistance in Safety Emergencies and Means of Escape from Situations of Violence and Confinement under an "End Demand" Criminalization Model: A Five City Study in Canada," *Social Sciences* 10 no. 13 (2020): 1-5, doi:10.3390/socsci10010013.

in Canada and being unable to send remittances to support their families, to mistrust of authorities, lack of knowledge of their rights and where to seek help, and institutional restrictions on who can access services. These barriers must be removed to prevent and reduce GBV against racialized women in informal and precarious work.

Is It Trafficking?

The women we interviewed shared accounts of severe exploitation, including breaches of contract, being coerced to work without pay, denial of rest days, and subjection to physical and sexual abuse.

They described how employers exploited their precarious immigration status, using threats, manipulation, and false promises to coerce them into enduring unsafe working and living conditions. **In some legal contexts, these experiences match the definition of human trafficking.**

Consider, for example, the Domotor case, in which 19 men were trafficked to Canada and forced to perform manual labour for up to 13 or 14 hours a day with little to no pay.[50] They were also housed in overcrowded, unsanitary spaces.

While the case involved additional elements such as welfare fraud and theft that made it stand out as one of Canada's most significant trafficking cases, the core conditions of exploitation (i.e., long hours, no pay, inhumane living conditions) are sadly not unique and far from exceptional.

This raises an important question:

What makes some cases recognizable as human trafficking, while others remain unseen or dismissed?

While it goes beyond the scope of this research to unpack the full extent of the legal, political, and economic forces shaping these distinctions, **our findings suggest that who is considered a "victim of trafficking" is not always clear-cut.**

Indeed, it often depends on who is asking and who holds the power to decide.

To begin this discussion, we first turn to the women we interviewed, and where relevant, put their experiences of GBV into conversation with broader political narratives and understandings of human trafficking.

WOMEN IN PRECARIOUS, NON-STANDARD, OR INFORMAL LABOUR: VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING?

With the exception of Mandy, who described her working conditions in the sex industry as labour trafficking,[51] none of the migrant women we interviewed self-identified as victims of trafficking. They also did not indicate whether service providers or government authorities viewed them as such, nor if it had been suggested to them that their experiences aligned with definitions of trafficking.

Instead, frontline organizations affirmed that what the women were experiencing constituted workplace abuse and gross violations of their labour rights. For many women, a vague but persistent sense that "something was wrong" in their employment situation was validated in their first interaction with service organizations. Providers informed them of their legal rights and entitlements in Canada, and some women even chose

50 Bethany Hastie and Alison Yule, "Milestone or Missed Opportunity? A Critical Analysis of the Impact of Domotor on the Future of Human Trafficking Cases in Canada," *Appeal* 19 (2014): 83–93.

51 During the interview, Mandy did not claim to be a victim of trafficking. Rather, she indicated that she was aware of the socio-political discourse around human trafficking and the common conflation of sex work and trafficking. She seemed to be saying here that she is not a victim of sex trafficking – as the dominant trafficking discourse would suggest – because she was not forced by anyone to do sex work; but if she was a victim of trafficking, it was labour trafficking, because she was forced by her manager to work long hours.

to pursue civil litigation against their former employers to seek justice for the abuse they had endured.

Although they did not self-identify as victims of trafficking, the services they received were essential in leaving their exploitative employment, asserting their rights, navigating complex and repressive immigration rules, and importantly, helping other migrant workers in similar situations. The women who work in the sex trade had also turned to community organizations for support in navigating the structural inequalities they face.

In addition to Mandy, Susan, an Indigenous woman from Saskatchewan, self-identified as a trafficking victim and had her victimhood recognized by the criminal justice system. Her story corresponds with dominant institutional understandings of human trafficking and the exploitative activities involved. When she was young, she was forced to "sleep with men for alcohol and drugs and money." Years later, she met a man online who "flew [her] to Toronto where he introduced [her] to online escorting." He controlled all aspects of her life, driving her to and from locations, forcing her to provide sexual services to clients, collecting all the money she had earned, and subjecting her to physical abuse when she did not want to work.

One day, she "researched a human trafficking hotline" and called them for help. The hotline put her in contact with local police, and after three days of exchanging texts with an officer, Susan's trafficker was arrested. She was then referred to services for victims of trafficking.

While Susan's story fits the dominant narrative of trafficking and was formally recognized by the legal system, other women we spoke to faced similarly coercive and exploitative conditions without being identified, or identifying themselves, as victims of trafficking.

This raises a critical question: What makes Susan a victim of trafficking, but not the other women in our research?

If we turn to the language of the *Criminal Code,* in which *Trafficking in Persons* includes harbouring and controlling the movements of another person "for the purpose of exploiting them" (s. 279.01(1)), and if we rely on Article 3 of the *UN Trafficking Protocol* to understand exploitation to include practices in which an employer abuses their position of power or authority to coerce someone into accepting exploitative working conditions, such as breaching employment contracts, withholding wages, restricting mobility, or threatening deportation,[52] then many of the migrant women we interviewed would arguably meet this legal threshold. Consider Janet, the domestic worker in Alberta, who worked for more than 12 hours a day, because, according to her employers, "it's normal for a live-in caregiver to work flexible hours until needed," but was only paid for eight hours; or Fatima, the farm worker in Manitoba, who often received only half of the salary stated in her contract, with deductions justified by vague and misleading explanations; and Francisca, who was never paid overtime either, and whose employer attempted to control who she socialized with during and outside of work hours. Each of these women encountered conditions that involved deception, manipulation, wage theft, and employer control, yet none were officially recognized as victims of trafficking.

To be clear, we are not arguing for who should or should not be labelled a trafficking victim. Instead, we wish to draw attention to the blurred boundaries and inconsistencies that exist across experiences of informal, precarious, and non-standard work.

We want to highlight the absence of clear criteria used by hotline operators, service providers, or law enforcement to determine why some individuals are categorized as trafficking victims and others, who face comparable forms of coercion, are not.

It is acknowledged in human trafficking literature that labour conditions exist along a continuum, ranging from decent work, through minor and major labour rights violations, to forced labour and human trafficking.[53] Some scholars have gone further, conceptualizing trafficking and forced labour as exceptional or extreme

52 For full text, refer to Article 3 of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/ProtocolonTrafficking.pdf

53 Klara Skrivankova, *Between Decent Work and Forced Labour: Examining the Continuum of Exploitation* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010); see also *Spectrum of Exploitation*, https://www.spectrumofexploitation.ca/

forms of exploitation, with the vast middle between the two ends of the continuum as "everyday abuses,"[54] such as excessive work hours, unpaid overtime, poor living conditions, restricted movement, wage theft, and verbal or sexual harassment. These "everyday abuses," which are normalized within broader economic and regulatory systems, disproportionately affect migrant and racialized workers, and once again, are more likely to be treated as administrative or labour code violations than as trafficking.

It is also widely recognized that, in Canada, anti-trafficking interventions disproportionately focus on the sex industry, ignoring other sectors with severe migrant labour exploitation.[55]

In this context, young Canadian women working in the sex trade tend to align more closely with stereotypical notions of victimhood. The "typical" narrative of a sex trafficking victim is of a woman who does not receive all or any of her earnings, is forced into providing sexual services and fears retaliation if she refuses to work, and is isolated from support.[56]

However, if we remove the context of sex work, then her experience becomes nearly indistinguishable from those of Fatima, Janet, Francisca, or, indeed, countless migrant workers under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. Hence, we return to our question: Why aren't they all considered victims of trafficking?

One possible explanation is that these forms of labour exploitation are embedded in the normal functioning of the Canadian economy under capitalism and

the "everyday abuses" migrant workers experience are thus baked into the system.

If they were all classified as victims of trafficking, removed from their workplaces, and their employers sentenced as traffickers, the Canadian economy

would likely grind to a halt. If they were all paid proper wages, corporate profits may tumble and inflation skyrocket. In addition, the government would have to acknowledge their complicity in producing migrant victims of trafficking.

Alternatively, the sex industry functions largely outside the formal capitalist economy and much of it does not show up in Gross Domestic Product, employment, and economic activity statistics. This makes it politically and economically easier to label it as a site of crime, framing sex workers as victims to be rescued and third-party actors such as managers, drivers, and security personnel as criminals to be punished.

It is much easier for the public and policymakers to feel outraged at the plight of a young woman (especially white, but Indigenous, too) coerced into working in the sex trade and sympathize with her as a victim of trafficking. Fewer people feel the same outrage and sympathy for a Mexican man on a farm, or a Filipino caregiver in a Canadian home.

Moreover, "victim of trafficking" is a category; a label that is assigned to people by those with institutional power (e.g., law enforcement personnel, employees of government agencies and service organizations, etc.).

54 Joel Quirk, Caroline Robinson, and Cameron Thibos, "From Exceptional Cases to Everyday Abuses: Labour Exploitation in the Global Economy," *Anti-Trafficking Review* 15 (2020): 1–19, doi:10.14197/atr.201220151.

55 See for example: Ricard-Guay, "Labour Trafficking in Canada," 1-18; Baglay et al., "Understanding Gaps in Supports for Trafficked Migrants in Canada," 1325-1349; Hope Restored Canada, *Human Trafficking in the Prairie Provinces*; Obokata, "Visit to Canada."

56 Elya M. Durisin and Emily van der Meulen, "The Perfect Victim: 'Young girls', Domestic Trafficking, and Anti-Prostitution Politics in Canada," Anti-Trafficking Review 16 (2021): 145–149, doi:10.14197/atr.201221169.

Building on this, we now turn to organizational representatives to understand the various considerations and motivations that shaped their decisions on when and to whom they assign the human trafficking label.

SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS: WHO IS A VICTIM OF TRAFFICKING?

When we asked organizational representatives whether they consider the women they support to be victims of trafficking, their responses revealed a range of perspectives. These were shaped by their experiences on the ground, knowledge of trafficking laws in Canada, and engagement with broader human trafficking debates.

Some of the community-based or migrant-led organizations pointed out that a large number of migrants on temporary foreign worker visas can be considered victims of trafficking. As Raul Gatica from Dignidad Migrante in British Columbia explained:

> **"All those people who have not been paid accordingly with the contract, or those people who have been working more [hours] than their contracts say, or the people who have been paid less than what they deserve, or people who have been taking out personal documents, or the people who have no freedom of movement. All those kinds of things really, really qualify in the case of the temporary foreign worker. So, all of the temporary foreign workers, I can say, they suffer labour trafficking."**

Omar Chu from Sanctuary Health and the Immigration and Refugee Legal Clinic in British Columbia similarly stated that, "If you look at trafficking as abuse based on having power over someone's movement and where they're allowed to go and like control their papers, then yeah, I think everyone we support is a victim of trafficking."

Cynthia Palmaria from Migrante Alberta further identified human trafficking situations where recruitment agencies in countries of origin, such as the Philippines, deceive potential migrants with promises of false jobs or persuade them to come as international students.

Julie Diesta from CDWCR in British Columbia also identified deception as a core element of trafficking in the context of caregiving. This includes situations where employers fail to process the proper immigration paperwork, leaving workers undocumented and therefore working illegally in Canada. Such deceptive practices align with some legal frameworks, which recognize deceptive entry or employment based on fraud or misrepresentation as indicators of human trafficking (i.e., section 118 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA)).

However, despite acknowledgement that the migrant workers they assist can, legally, be victims of trafficking, some organizational representatives were critical of the label and language of trafficking. Omar Chu, for example, **stated that his organization does not use trafficking language due to troubling ideas of what human trafficking is and what it looks like. "In the public imagination," he shared, "[human trafficking] brings up a lot of imagery that isn't accurate for the people we work with. There's this idea of like shadowy figures who are kidnapping people and taking them across borders… But that's not really the way that these things play out."**

Omar's perspective aligns with our broader research findings that

much of what the women described does not involve criminals who are easily identifiable or arrestable. Instead, their experiences stem from the structural inequities that drive exploitation and trafficking.[57]

At the same time, migrant rights organizations have also seen that the topic of human trafficking attracts the attention of funders and other institutional actors, and is a non-partisan issue for both conservative and liberal

57 Marika McAdam, "Labour Rights Won't Make Criminal Gangs Go Away," OpenDemocracy, May 27, 2025, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/labour-rights-wont-make-criminal-gangs-go-away/

politicians.[58] As Quirk has noted, the intense political focus to combat human trafficking "can open up avenues that are not readily available when it comes to worker and migrant rights."[59] As such, he suggests that some migrant rights advocates may strategically adopt the language of human trafficking to promote the rights of migrants in spaces that would otherwise be hostile to them.

The sex worker-led organizations we interviewed approached the label of "victim of trafficking" with a great deal of caution when describing the experiences of the women they assist. Katy Prost of SWWAC in Manitoba gave a particularly insightful response. She stated, "I think the T word [trafficking] is so big and people really want to shy away from it. It carries this big stigma with it, but I have no reason to say that [certain experiences of women in the sex industry are] not a form of trafficking."

It is necessary to understand how such caution with labelling sex workers' experiences of violence as trafficking is shaped by broader sex work movement efforts to challenge the deeply harmful conflation. This includes problematic assumptions that all sex workers, particularly Indigenous and migrant sex workers, are victims in need of rescue.

This framing has long influenced the dominant anti-trafficking discourse. Indeed, much of the mainstream anti-trafficking movement draws from second-wave feminist ideology, which frames all sexual labour as a manifestation of patriarchal oppression and a form of violence that no woman could meaningfully consent to.

However, this position stands in direct contradiction to the lived experiences of many sex workers, as well as decades of academic and community-based research demonstrating that, for many women, sex work is a rational occupational choice to support themselves and their families. As such, interviewees whose organizations promote a sex workers' rights perspective emphasized that sex workers' experiences of violence must be distinguished from dominant narratives of human trafficking.

Furthermore, while some sex work prohibitionists make the baseless claim that sex worker organizations defend the interests of "the pimp lobby" and wish to keep women in the industry, research has demonstrated that they can and do assist women who have been trafficked in the sex trade.[60]

This was poignantly expressed by the representative of SWWAC, who firmly stated that their organization can simultaneously support sex workers and provide services to help improve their working conditions, at the same time as they denounce human trafficking.

58 Over the past decade, migration has become an extremely polarizing topic in wealthy democracies, with left-leaning and liberal parties generally in favour of more relaxed immigration rules and more concerned with the human rights of migrants, and right-leaning and conservative parties in favour of stricter migration controls. Human trafficking, on the other hand, has bi-partisan appeal (with left-leaning parties seeing it as a human rights and women's rights issue and right-leaning parties as a crime control issue). Thus, for some advocates, human trafficking presents an opportunity to advocate for migrants' rights with right-leaning politicians.

59 Joel Quirk, "Are We Better Off on the Inside? Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking as Platforms for Political Mobilisation," OpenDemocracy, November 15, 2020, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/are-we-better-inside-modern-slavery-and-human-trafficking-platforms-political-mobilisation/

60 See for example: Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, *Sex Workers Organising for Change: Self-Representation, Community Mobilisation, and Working Conditions* (Bangkok: GAATW, 2018); Emily Kenway, "'You Feel That You Could Have Done So Much More': The Practices and Potentials of Sex Worker-Founded/-Led Groups in Tackling Sex Sector Exploitation," in *Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation Around the World: Law, Ideology, and the Experiences of Sex Workers and Clients*, eds. Marijke Malsch and Janine Jansse (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2025), 131-152, doi:10.1515/9789048560745-009.

SHIFT Calgary further argued that **"any access to basic needs and human rights is trafficking prevention."**

However, it is important to note that not all organizations assisting women who work in the sex industry adopted such a stance.

Some stated that they do view the women they support as victims of trafficking, regardless of whether such identification came from law enforcement, the criminal justice system, or was based on the presence of indicators suggesting they might be victims.

Notably, the organizations that responded affirmatively to this question are those whose mandates, core missions, or specific programs explicitly focus on assisting victims of trafficking. They described trafficking as involving financial gain derived from the (sexual) labour of another person, frequently by a controlling boyfriend or "pimp."

Trafficking was also described as involving situations when a woman is denied access to most or all of her earnings, or is coerced or manipulated into sex work. Although some representatives attempted to distinguish between "exploitation" and "trafficking," distinctions remained unclear.

In practice, many organizations collapsed experiences of gender–based violence and exploitation into a single trafficking framework.

For example, the Salvation Army in British Columbia explained:

> **"We essentially will accept people who have experienced domestic violence because, to us, it is a form of exploitation and a form of abuse. It all kind of falls under abuse. So, if they are a human who has experienced domestic violence, but maybe not the trafficking side of it where somebody has benefited monetarily, then we can still help support those people."**

Other organizations stated that they employ the language the women use to describe their own experiences.

For example, if a woman does not identify as a victim of trafficking, they would not deploy that language when providing support.

As one anti-trafficking organization explained:

> **"We're just supporting them as individuals. We don't need to say, 'You're a sex trafficking survivor or victim,' beyond meeting our initial screening. They have to meet the criteria to come into our program, and then we just deal with the trauma of being sex trafficked or exploited."**

There are two essential points to unpack here.

First, although this organization claims to avoid labelling the women they serve as trafficked victims, **they nonetheless require women to be categorized as such during their intake process to establish program eligibility.** In other words, to access some services, women must fit the trafficking criteria, even if the language is not used later in their care.

Second, the organization later shared that they view the women they serve as victims of trafficking, "or [at] least [victims] of exploitation." It was further stated that they use these terms "interchangeably," reinforcing dominant narratives which tend to frame exploitation and (sex) trafficking as one and the same.

While this is unsurprising given that this organization specifically provides supportive services to victims of trafficking, other organizations that receive anti-trafficking funding shared similar perspectives.

It is possible that the use of such language is shaped and reinforced, at least partly, by the definitions and terminology required by funders and other institutional actors.

As such, **this proclaimed commitment to honour self-identification begins to unravel in the context of anti-trafficking funding**.

Although we discuss funding in more detail later in the report, it is worth noting here that

some organizations linked their use of the trafficking label directly to funding requirements.

This was affirmed by one organization:

> **"There are a lot of nuances with funding. When you're applying for things that specifically state the funding is for victims of sex or human trafficking, we do have to use that language. It helps us access the funding."**

In fact, **the requirement to adopt trafficking rhetoric and deploy labels of victimhood is a key reason why some organizations deliberately choose not to apply for anti-trafficking funding.** However, some respondents reported benefits to applying the trafficking label, particularly from a service access perspective.

A VICTIM OF TRAFFICKING: TO LABEL OR NOT TO LABEL?

Several organizational representatives reported that the "victim of trafficking" label opens doors to increased support. Indeed, they suggested that women who are identified as victims of trafficking often receive prioritized access to housing, legal aid, counselling, and other critical services. Thayane Sa from the Salvation Army in British Columbia explained that **using other labels, such as "domestic violence survivor" or "migrant woman," often fails to elicit the same sense of urgency as "trafficking victim." She specifically stated that "these other labels don't hold a lot of power." Therefore, deploying the "victim of trafficking" label can trigger an immediate response.** She continued, "The [authorities] will make exceptions when you use that specific vocabulary," highlighting how shelters or social services scramble to find space and support when trafficking is mentioned.

Similarly, Cynthia Palmaria from Migrante Alberta added that using the term "trafficking" "sounds more immediate, so maybe there'll be more immediate attention to address the needs of the workers." In this way, **the trafficking label serves almost like an institutional password to open the doors to services.**

However, immediate access to services and support does not appear to always be the case. Amanda Aziz from the MWC in British Columbia recounted cases of migrants she had worked with whose experiences showed clear indications of trafficking, but who were deported or denied a VTIP-TRP. She stated rather bluntly: "I don't know if there's a benefit [to using the trafficking label]" and that **"it doesn't feel like actually the government rhetoric around wanting to help victims of trafficking is put into practice."**

This observation corresponds with the experience of Susan, the victim of trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation from Saskatchewan, who was disappointed that she was rejected for the witness protection program and lived in constant fear of her trafficker. In general, she felt that once she had returned from Ontario, she "got dropped and left to fend for [herself]." Her most urgent need at the time of our interview was access to safe, second-stage housing. Although her victimhood was formally recognized by the criminal justice system, she continued to experience long-term precarity as she still lacked access to secure and stable housing.

Likewise, Omar Chu shared that, despite the perceived urgency of the trafficking label, the response to victims' needs is not always a smooth and timely process:

> **"One particular client really just fit what the [external] organization was looking for […] in terms of the way that they came to Canada and when they came here, forced under duress, under false identity. […] But even so, it actually took a long time. The referral process was not easy. We really took months of trying to contact that organization and get them in contact with our clients."**

He suggested that, **while anti-trafficking organizations often have the funding and capacity to provide quality and comprehensive services that other**

organizations may not be able to offer (e.g., housing and psychological counselling), they can be difficult to access because the women "have to fit into sort of a narrow box."

This is consistent with what GAATW has heard from other organizations, particularly in Europe and Asia. Colleagues from NGOs there, too, have shared that people officially identified as a "victim of trafficking" are entitled to a wide range of benefits, such as (temporary) residence and work permit, social assistance, accommodation and healthcare, psychological counselling, and financial compensation as a victim of crime. However, the process of obtaining a formal identification as a victim of trafficking and receiving these entitlements can be long and arduous.

By comparison, a different label such as "exploited migrant worker" may be easier to access, but comes with significantly fewer benefits or with downright dangers, such as loss of employment and deportation. The situation is somewhat similar in Canada. For example, the VTIP-TRP is granted for a period of at least 12 months and is renewable, applicable to dependents, opens access to healthcare, and all application fees are waived by the government. The OWP-V, by contrast, is non-renewable, only grants holders the right to work, and applicants need to pay processing and biometrics fees.

Furthermore, some of the interviewees also pointed out potential negative consequences of deploying the trafficking label. For example, it can constrain how racialized women are perceived and treated. As Michelle Trudeau from ACT Alberta pointed out, being labelled a trafficking victim can invoke a "victim mentality." Thayane Sa from the Salvation Army similarly noted that it can reduce a person's perceived autonomy, as "all of a sudden, they're no longer an adult or a human. [...] They have to be coddled. Everything has to be done for them." Furthermore, representatives from MWC in British Columbia and Migrante Alberta both pointed out that **the label of trafficking victim carries a stigma for its persistent association with the sex industry, as well as the shame of "failed migration."** This may prevent some women from seeking help. Cynthia Palmaria from Migrante Alberta explained:

> **"There's a disadvantage [to using the trafficking label] because of the stigma to the worker. They're coming here because they [want] to support their families back home. […] But to admit that they became victims of trafficking, there is a stigma to it. There's a shame that's tied to it. And so, at times, instead of saying, 'Yes, I need help', they would just put up with the situation."**

She further added that the shame and stigma of the trafficking label may discourage some women from accessing the more comprehensive services that victims of trafficking can receive (such as VTIP-TRP) in favour of services that are less beneficial, but are not associated with trafficking (such as OWP-V).

Thus, while most organizational representatives affirmed a general awareness of trafficking discourse and its relevance to their work, their responses revealed important tensions regarding the practical and ethical implications of using the term trafficking to describe experiences of GBV in precarious, non-standard, and informal labour.

Our research further reveals that organizations make strategic choices whether or not to apply the label "victim of trafficking" to the women they assist.

These choices are informed by their organizational

mission and mandate, funding (which we discuss in the following section), impact of anti-trafficking interventions on members of their communities, access and quality of services, and how the women describe their own experiences.

Funding

We asked the organizational representatives whether their organizations received anti-trafficking funding and the extent to which it could address experiences of GBV within informal, non-standard, or precarious labour sectors. Specifically, we critically explore how funding might influence the kinds of services organizations offer, determine who can access those services, and affect the overall resources available to organizations that choose (or choose not) to apply for and receive anti-trafficking funding. However, not all research participants were able to provide detailed information about their organization's funding sources and streams, as frontline staff are often not privy to this information.

Many of the sex worker organizations we interviewed explained that they do not apply for anti-trafficking funding because of the constraints it imposes. These restrictions often relate to eligibility criteria, reporting requirements, and the design of services in ways that exclude certain populations, such as undocumented migrants or those with precarious immigration status, as well as sex workers who do not wish to exit the industry. For example, a key reason service organizations that primarily support sex workers avoid applying for anti-trafficking funding is rooted in their refusal to reinforce dominant and harmful narratives around trafficking.

Hanako Rodgers from SHIFT Calgary, in particular, pointed to the "interchangeable use of sex work and trafficking," expressing concern that "if [they] accept anti-trafficking funds, it kind of strengthens that connection between trafficking and sex work." Indeed, many advocacy organizations were cautious about such funding, as it would require them to adopt perspectives that do not align with their core values or the lived realities of the communities they serve.

Katy Prost of SWWAC in Manitoba similarly shared that they "get a little squiggly" about anti-trafficking funding because they "want the money to be for sex workers, not against trafficking."

Notably, SWAN Vancouver reported receiving anti-trafficking funding but using it "ethically" to uphold their commitment to defending and championing the rights of sex workers, particularly through an anti-colonial and migrant rights lens. Their perspective on anti-trafficking funding raises attention to how sex worker groups can navigate funding structures while simultaneously challenging and subverting anti-trafficking rhetoric from within.

The Yukon Status of Women Council (YSWC) provided insights that link and expand upon the perspectives of SWAN Vancouver and SHIFT Calgary. They, too, receive anti-trafficking funding, yet negotiated with one funder to better reflect their organizational values (as SWAN Vancouver does, too). After consultations with the women they support, the organization successfully amended problematic language in its funding agreement with a federal funder, which had previously reinforced the conflation of sex work and human trafficking.

This shows that organizations are not passive recipients of funding and do not have to comply unquestioningly with all funder requirements.

Depending on the funder, these relationships can be reciprocal, with funders open to learning more about the issues and, in some cases, adjusting funding conditions and reporting requirements to reflect realities on the ground.

Beyond anti-trafficking funding, across the 20 organizations interviewed, funding sources varied widely. Many rely on a mix of government funding (federal, provincial, and municipal), philanthropic foundations, private donations, and in a few cases, client fees.

Among the most commonly cited funders were Public Safety Canada, Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE), and the Law Foundation. While this diversity of funding sources is expected within the nonprofit sector focused on GBV, nearly all organizations noted their funding is often short-term and project (or program) specific, rather than allocated for core operational costs.

This creates challenges in maintaining organizational stability and independence, long-term service provision, and flexibility in the support offered. SWWAC, for example, lost funding after two years of operations. While specific details were not shared, the outcome is evident: essential services for sex workers were no longer available, thus contributing to the loss of meaningful services necessary for trafficking prevention.

Organizations further reflected on broader systemic and political issues affecting their ability to secure funding. For example, both the Migrant Worker Centre and Dignidad Migrante in British Columbia noted that some federal funding would prohibit them from supporting undocumented workers – a condition that Raul Gatica from the latter described as "discriminatory" and "against human rights." For this and other related reasons, some of the organizations we interviewed operate on a volunteer basis and with minimal institutional funding. This allows them to, as Gatica said, "operate in the interests of the worker" without having to bend to the requirements imposed by funders and the government.

Furthermore, several organizational representatives noted important community partnerships in service delivery, including, for example, with the Elizabeth Fry Society. They stressed that funding is not only needed internally, but is crucial for the external organizations they refer clients to, especially in areas such as housing, mental health, and addiction services, which are chronically under-resourced. This ties into broader systemic issues that many organizations highlighted, such as the ongoing housing crisis and the lack of accessible, trauma-informed support for migrants and marginalized communities.

These reflections point to the inherently political nature of funding, not only in terms of eligibility criteria, but also in how funding shapes the framing of social issues, the language organizations are expected to use, and ultimately, who is made visible or invisible within service delivery models (e.g., undocumented workers, sex workers).

As such, funding was described as a fundamental determinant of which services are available, who can access them and under what conditions, and **who is labelled as a victim of trafficking.**

Recommendations

Recommendations

The research findings demonstrate that the harms racialized and migrant women experience in various forms of precarious, informal, and non-standard work are rooted in structural inequities rather than isolated "criminal acts of human trafficking."

Many participants emphasized that dominant anti-trafficking approaches often fail to address, and can sometimes exacerbate, the conditions that make racialized and migrant women vulnerable to exploitation in the first place.

Instead of relying on punitive or carceral interventions, participants called for rights-based and systemic reforms that address the root causes of exploitation to promote women's agency and access to safety and well-being.

The following recommendations are thus grounded in participants' input and the research team's analysis. While each recommendation can be understood as an independent call for action, they are presented thematically to emphasize that meaningful and lasting change requires coordinated progress across all areas to prevent human trafficking.

Rethinking Anti-Trafficking Approaches: Tackling Root Causes

The first recommendation is to **promote a nuanced, systems-based understanding of human trafficking.** Our study affirms that human trafficking is enabled by a complex interplay of factors such as gender inequality, criminal justice policies, im/migration rules and restrictions, systemic racism and discrimination, economic inequality, and colonial logics. The Canadian government, media, funders, and anti-trafficking organizations must move away from the reductive narrative of trafficking as a problem of evil traffickers exploiting vulnerable women and, instead, highlight the structural root causes of exploitation. This shift in understanding is foundational because it shapes how policies, funding priorities, and services are designed and delivered. Without such a framework, even well-intentioned efforts risk reinforcing the very systems that create vulnerability.

Building on this, **combatting racism and discrimination is fundamental to any meaningful anti-trafficking or anti-exploitation strategy.** Many participants emphasized that GBV against racialized and migrant women is enabled by longstanding racist and colonial logics that frame sex workers, im/migrants, and Indigenous peoples as less deserving of safety, rights, and protection. In practice, many women are navigating systems intentionally designed to exclude, discipline, and control those who do not fall within colonial and patriarchal norms of belonging. These dynamics manifest in concrete ways, shaping access to services such as housing, addiction supports, health care, domestic violence shelters, and others. To address this, the Canadian government must actively counter discriminatory narratives through public education that affirms human rights and universal dignity, accurate representation of migrants' and Indigenous peoples' contributions to Canadian society, and genuine engagement with reconciliation efforts that confront the legacy of colonial policy. It must also prevent and sanction the spread of misinformation that blames migrants for policy failures such as housing shortages or strained public services.

Racialized and migrant women frequently face overlapping barriers, including low income, limited labour protections, and insecure housing, which, as organizations routinely noted, often prevent them from leaving exploitative workplaces or abusive relationships. To meaningfully address these conditions, **the government must tackle root causes, such as investing in building more affordable housing.**

When Funding Harms: Addressing Availability, Exclusion, and Misrepresentation in Direct Services

There is also an urgent need for accessible essential services. These services must be available to all women regardless of immigration status, type of work, or sobriety. This is critical given that many existing programs remain highly exclusionary. Indeed, participants described how services are limited to documented migrants or refugees, but not available




to undocumented migrants. Other programs require women to prove sobriety, exit the sex trade, or identify as a victim of trafficking in order to receive support. These exclusions are maintained by repressive policies and arguably run counter to Canada's expressed commitment to human rights-based and survivor-centred approaches to assistance. **The government must fund community and grassroots organizations that provide long-term, low-threshold, and secular services, with minimal requirements.**

A major factor sustaining these exclusions is the way funding is structured. For instance, when access to services depends on identifying as a trafficking victim, funding effectively determines who qualifies for support. In this respect, funding is not neutral. It is inherently political, shaping who receives help (and who does not), and reinforces inequalities by making support contingent on fitting narrowly defined categories. GAATW Canada, therefore, recommends that service organizations **exercise caution in applying the label "victim of trafficking" to women who experience GBV in informal and precarious work.** While participants described how this label functions as an institutional password that can unlock access to resources, service providers risk reinforcing reductive and stigmatizing narratives about racialized and migrant women. In doing so, organizations may unintentionally uphold narrow definitions of "deserving" versus "undeserving" victims and as our research indicates, misrepresent women's experiences to satisfy funder requirements. It is crucial to raise awareness surrounding these harms and encourage organizations to resist such pressure from funders.

Furthermore, organizations are not passive recipients of funding; they have knowledge of the systemic barriers and everyday challenges their communities face and have the expertise to advocate for more equitable funding practices. **While carefully navigating the power imbalance and risk, organizations can and should scrutinize harmful or exclusionary funding conditions and communicate these concerns directly to funders.** This may include explaining the impacts of narrow eligibility criteria or restrictive requirements. Without such understanding and action, funders will continue to pressure organizations to work within frameworks that narrowly define women's experiences of GBV. Meaningful change requires systemic reforms that address both how funding is structured and how services are delivered (and to whom), ensuring equitable access and supporting the autonomy and dignity of all women who work in precarious, informal, and/or non-standard labour regardless of how they are labelled.

Furthermore, our research suggests that federal and provincial funding is often awarded to large organizations that are far removed from the everyday lives and realities of migrant workers. By contrast, grassroots organizations work closely with their communities and have firsthand knowledge of the challenges marginalized women face. **The government must fund and allocate more resources to grassroots organizations assisting racialized women experiencing GBV.** This can be accomplished, for example, by requiring applicants to demonstrate their ties to the communities they serve or that a substantial share of their staff belong to the target groups. As much as possible, funding should also be allocated explicitly for the creation of peer support groups and collective spaces where women can share experiences and solutions.

Promoting the Rights and Safety of Migrant Workers

Exploitation often begins before workers arrive in Canada. As we heard from participants, many migrant workers, whether coerced or acting under economic pressure, pay exorbitant recruitment fees to agencies in their home countries or in Canada, including

immigration consultants. These fees, and the need to repay debts incurred for them, force migrants to accept and endure exploitative labour conditions. The government must therefore **enforce stricter regulations on the operations of immigration consultants and recruitment agencies.**

Once in Canada, migrant workers' safety depends on the strength and enforcement of the policies that govern their employment. The Canadian government **must improve labour inspection practices** to ensure genuine oversight and accountability. Current inspection practices prioritize employers rather than the rights and wellbeing of workers. Employers are often notified of inspections in advance, affording them the opportunity to conceal abuses or coach workers on what to say if approached by a labour inspection officer. Labour inspections must be unannounced and focus on the working conditions, health and safety, and labour rights of workers, and, as much as possible, conducted in collaboration with migrant and worker community organizations. Collaboration is especially important in inspections of sex work venues, to ensure they improve sex workers' rights and working environments rather than cause harm. Additionally, the government must establish and enforce a strict firewall between labour inspections and immigration enforcement for all migrant workers.[61] This ensures that workers can assert their labour rights and access protections without fear that reporting violations will lead to their deportation or trigger other immigration-related consequences.

To ensure ongoing oversight and meaningful access to justice, **the government must also create and strengthen complaint mechanisms** that allow workers to report abuses safely and confidentially. These mechanisms must be multilingual, accessible, and guaranteed to protect workers from employer retaliation or immigration consequences. Complaints must be responded to promptly, with clear processes for follow-up and enforcement. To operate effectively, these systems must also be resourced and coordinated with community organizations that provide direct support, accompaniment, and advocacy for workers navigating the complaint process.

Alongside this, **the government must provide all newcomers with clear, accessible information about their labour rights and entitlements.** Many migrants arrive without knowing what legal standards apply to them or where to seek help if they face abuse. Rights information, which can be distributed at points of entry, through visa programs, and in workplaces, should be multilingual and sector-specific. However, information alone cannot prevent exploitation. Awareness of rights must be supported by strong complaint mechanisms and access to well-funded, community-based services that provide the necessary support for workers to act on their rights.

Protecting All Workers Through Reforms to Legal, Immigration, and Criminal Justice Policies

Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of addressing the legal and immigration status of migrant workers, as well as reforms to criminal justice policy to formally legitimize sex work. The recommendations detailed below are deemed essential to remove structural vulnerabilities and ensure that all workers have the protections and autonomy to exercise their rights.

Give all migrant workers permanent resident status upon arrival in Canada and end all closed work permits. Temporary and restrictive visas and closed work permits render migrant workers dependent on their employers and highly vulnerable to exploitation. Migrant workers must receive permanent resident (PR) status upon arrival, and all work permits for migrant workers must be open, allowing them to change employers and work sectors. Such reforms shift power away from employers, prioritize migrant workers' rights and well-being, and promote their ability to exercise agency throughout the course of their employment in Canada.

Permanent residency and immigration reforms must also include migrant women engaged in sex work. Prohibitions barring migrants from engaging in sex work reinforce stigma, restrict access to justice, and exclude migrants from recognition as contributors to Canadian society. Crucially, including migrant sex workers affirms their agency, safeguards their autonomy to choose sex work, and strengthens their capacity to navigate life safely in Canada. Therefore, the government must

61 François Crépeau and Bethany Hastie, "The Case for 'Firewall' Protections for Irregular Migrants: Safeguarding Fundamental Rights," *European Journal of Migration and Law* no. 2-3 (2015): 157-183, doi:10.1163/15718166-12342076.

repeal Art. 183.1.(b.1), Art. 196.1(a), Art. 200 (3)(g1), and Art. 203(2)(a) of IRPA. This must be accompanied by the **institutional recognition of sex work as a legitimate income-generating activity.** Such recognition is foundational because, without it, migrant sex workers remain excluded from immigration-related reforms, including pathways to permanent residency, labour protections, occupational health and safety standards, and barrier-free access to services.

In line with this, the government **must repeal the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act* (PCEPA) and decriminalize sex work**. PCEPA is built upon problematic assumptions about the sex industry and individuals involved (e.g., sex workers, clients, third parties). In effect and enforcement, prostitution laws in Canada significantly increase sex workers' vulnerability to violence. To promote sex workers' occupational safety and access to justice, sex work must be institutionally recognized as a legitimate form of labour. Decriminalization is a critical step for achieving such recognition, as well as reducing stigma and ensuring that sex workers are treated with respect by law enforcement and other institutional actors. Full decriminalization will help enable sex workers to report violence, access services, and organize collectively without fear of arrest, deportation, harassment, stigma, or other punitive consequences. By addressing the structural and legal conditions that increase vulnerability to GBV and human trafficking, these reforms directly target the harms that anti-trafficking approaches claim to prevent, creating safer, more equitable working environments for all sex workers.

Meaningful Participation of Impacted Communities

Finally, to ensure these reforms are meaningful and responsive, **policies to combat trafficking, gender-based violence, and exploitation must be designed, implemented, and monitored with the active participation of affected communities.** This includes migrant workers, racialized or Indigenous sex workers, and survivors of trafficking and GBV. Inclusion ensures that reforms reflect lived experiences, strengthen community-led supports, and avoid reproducing harm through narrow definitions of "deserving" workers or "legitimate" employment. When affected communities are fully included in consultations, policies are more practical, effective, and equitable.

We began this section by emphasizing that vulnerability to trafficking and labour exploitation is a symptom of structural inequities, reproduced and sustained by colonial logics, repressive policies, and patriarchal norms that restrict rights, economic autonomy, and access to meaningful support. Participants' insights reveal that focusing narrowly on traffickers or individual perpetrators obscures the broader roles of the government, labour markets, im/migration systems, and criminal justice policy in shaping environments where exploitation thrives. Therefore, effective anti-trafficking strategies must address these underlying conditions, rather than relying solely on carceral or rescue-based interventions.

The recommendations presented in this report, while not exhaustive, build on our analysis to form an interconnected framework aimed at tackling the root causes of vulnerability. Guided by participants' lived experiences of GBV, **GAATW Canada emphasizes the importance of integrating prevention with intervention, demonstrating that addressing structural determinants of risk is essential to creating equitable communities where exploitation has no foothold.** This approach not only prevents trafficking but also promotes justice, healing, and autonomy, underscoring the imperative for governments and funders to critically examine how resources are allocated to ensure interventions do not inadvertently reproduce the inequalities they seek to eliminate.

Conclusion

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to understand whether racialized women's experiences of gender-based violence in informal and precarious work are understood as "human trafficking" by service providers, government agencies, and the women themselves. While the title "Is It Trafficking?" posed a direct question,

the aim was to encourage reflection and to prompt those who hold institutional power to critically reflect on when they assign the label "victim of trafficking," to whom, and why.

Such critical reflection is necessary because the trafficking label is so politically and socially loaded. As the findings revealed, it can create a sense of urgency and spur action among authorities, while at the same time, alienate women who wish to avoid the stigma and shame associated with it. It can open the doors to services, but also make the women dependent on service providers. It can provide temporary relief – such as a residence permit, housing, mental health support, or back wages – but only if their experiences meet the right criteria.

There is clearly no "correct" course of action, but a number of considerations that organizations must and do take into account when searching for the best ways to help the women they support. It is our hope that this report provides critical food-for-thought to them and other organizations working in the fields of migration, GBV, and human trafficking.

This research affirms what GAATW Canada has known for a long time: trafficking is a symptom, a logical outcome of the many interrelated systemic injustices that exist in Canada and the world.

These include patriarchal social norms which normalize GBV, devalue women's labour, and enforce outdated and restrictive ideas of appropriate sexual behaviour for women. Trafficking is further driven by the criminalization and stigmatization of sex work, as well as the neoliberal economic model that prioritizes corporate profits and employers' interests over worker protections. It is the product of a receding welfare state and chronic underinvestment in public services, especially healthcare, housing, mental health, and addiction support – factors that push large numbers of people into precarity and at heightened risk of experiencing exploitation. It is further enabled by the legacies of settler colonialism, the decimation of Indigenous cultures and lifeways, and the dispossession and impoverishment of Indigenous peoples. In addition, restrictive immigration policies that serve employers' insatiable demand for cheap and controllable labour in Canada, coupled with a lack of resources and decent work opportunities in countries of origin due to centuries of colonialism further exacerbate vulnerability to trafficking. Finally, trafficking is a symptom of an unjust law enforcement and prison system that criminalizes poverty and perpetuates structural oppression.

If these systemic injustices did not exist, would there be trafficking? Probably not. When we put our energy into "combatting trafficking," do we resolve these systemic injustices? Certainly not. While providing support to victims of trafficking, GBV, and exploitation is important, it is equally important to work towards the dismantling of the systems of oppression and injustice that make them possible.

To make meaningful progress, anti-trafficking organizations cannot remain in their comfortable silo; they need to learn from, and join the struggles of, organizations and social justice movements fighting for the rights of migrants, Indigenous peoples, workers, including in the sex trade, 2SLGBTQI+ people, as well as for racial justice, police and prison abolition, and more.

Because until all people live in freedom, dignity, and equality, anti-trafficking organizations will keep treating the symptom and not the disease.

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About GAATW Canada

GAATW Canada is a federal non-profit organization and charity based in British Columbia.

GAATW Canada bridges community and scholarly expertise to address human trafficking through research, policy change, advocacy, education, and collaborative partnerships.

Since 1996, GAATW Canada's work has been grounded in several guiding principles. Our goal for a fairer Canadian society is to prevent, reduce, and address human trafficking while prioritizing the rights of those at risk or trafficked, as well as those harmed by anti-trafficking efforts.

We aim to build a fairer, more compassionate society where exploitation has no place.

We listen to diverse voices—including Indigenous peoples, migrant workers, sex workers, and other affected groups—to honour the varied experiences of exploitation at individual, community, and regional levels.

We move beyond rescue and criminal-legal approaches, fostering lasting change and creating a society where everyone can flourish, free from exploitation.


GAATW
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