

IS IT TRAFFICKING?



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

From 2023 to 2026, GAATW Canada carried out a research project examining the experiences of racialized and migrant women in domestic work, agriculture, hospitality, and sex work across Canada.

The research found that these women experience very similar forms of violence and exploitation, yet the responses from governments and service organizations can be vastly different. This led GAATW Canada to ask:

What makes one experience 'human trafficking' and another not?

Who decides?

How do these decisions shape funding, services, and public understanding of the issue?

Is it trafficking?



Many of the women GAATW Canada interviewed experienced forms of abuse, coercion, and exploitation in their workplaces.

Only two self-identified as trafficking victims, and only one had her experience recognized by the criminal justice system.

In practice, this means that cases fitting the common understanding of human trafficking are more likely to attract police attention, while many similar experiences of harm go unnoticed.

What does this mean for direct services?

The community organizations interviewed for this research discussed how the types of support they can offer, and to whom, are influenced by wide-ranging program criteria and organizational mandates.

Some organizations linked their use of the 'trafficking' label directly to funder requirements, illustrating strategic value in whether or not to assign the label 'victim of trafficking' to the women they assist.

This highlights the inherently political nature of funding and how competition for financial resources, along with a lack of clear definitional criteria, can influence how human trafficking is understood within the nonprofit and community services sector.



What does this mean for public understanding and ‘fighting trafficking’?

Much of what the women described in this research does not involve criminals who are easily identifiable or arrestable.

Instead, their experiences stem from the structural inequities that drive exploitation and trafficking.

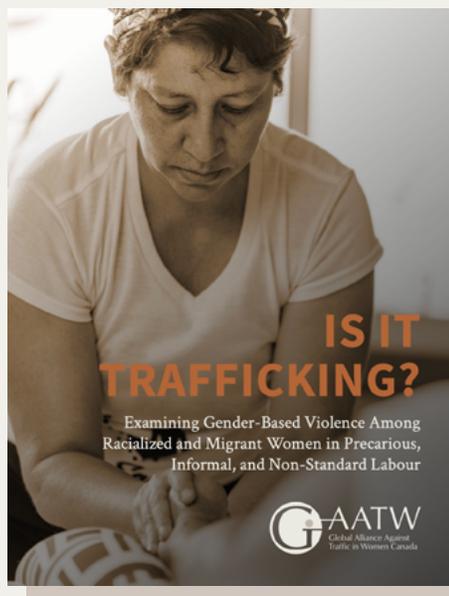
This study confirms what GAATW Canada has known for a long time:

trafficking is a symptom, a logical outcome of the many interconnected systemic injustices that exist in Canada.

Everyday abuses embedded in the system enable coercion, exploitation, and extreme cases of human trafficking to occur in underprotected labour sectors. However, most anti-trafficking approaches and law enforcement efforts focus on specific cases that focus on a narrow definition of human trafficking.



This report aims 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.



GAATW Canada is 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 precarious, informal, and non-standard work, and what these differences mean in real life for victims and survivors, especially when it comes to meeting their needs.

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