

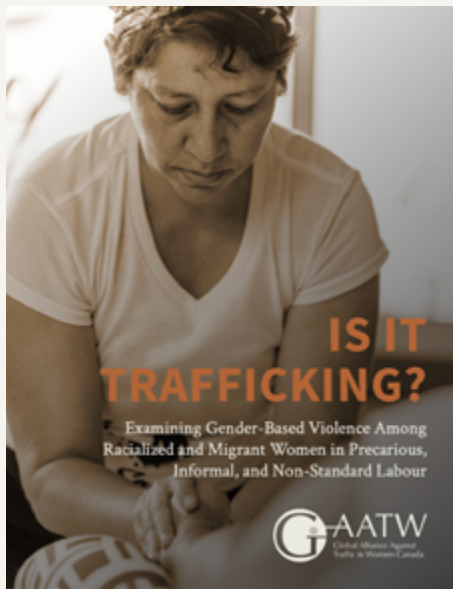
ROOT CAUSES

Trafficking and Neoliberal Capitalism



About the Root Causes Series

In February 2026, [GAATW Canada published findings](#) from its three-year project documenting experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) among racialized and migrant women working across precarious, informal, and/or non-standard labour sectors.



The [report](#) examines how experiences of GBV are understood and responded to by the women themselves, alongside service providers delivering essential support across four provinces and one territory.

Particular attention is given to how these experiences are positioned within broader anti-trafficking discourse and whether they are recognized as “human trafficking” or not.

Drawing on the stories of 16 migrant and racialized women, and 19 representatives from 21 organizations, the findings reveal that labeling migrant women’s experiences as “trafficking” is not straightforward.

Once filtered through anti-trafficking frameworks, experiences of violence and exploitation can become tied to systems of surveillance, criminalization, immigration enforcement, border securitization, and other forms of institutional control, rather than addressing the social, economic, and structural conditions that shape vulnerability and exploitation.

In this way, anti-trafficking discourse reinforces broader settler-colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal systems of control over mobility, labour, and belonging.

In this series, we highlight some of the root causes of human trafficking and gender-based violence as they emerged from our research.

What is the Link Between Human Trafficking and Neoliberal Capitalism?

Most people think of human trafficking as a purely illegal activity that takes place in underground, criminal settings outside the formal economy, and that benefits criminals and organized crime groups.

This is far from the whole story.

GAATW Canada's recent research demonstrated that human trafficking exists in the formal economy and legal workplaces too.

In fact, it is embedded in the capitalist system.

How so?

The form of capitalism that exists in Canada and most other countries today, also called neoliberal capitalism, is designed to increase the profits of companies' CEOs and shareholders while exploiting the workers who create value for these companies.

Neoliberalism creates an artificial scarcity of resources - for example, of money, food, homes, jobs, or support services - to maintain high prices, ensure profitability, and solidify corporate power.

At the same time, it creates a surplus of desperate, impoverished, and exploitable people through the introduction of strict rules governing migrants, as well as the gutting of social and welfare programs and the ability of the government to monitor and enforce human rights and labour standards.

Within this context, temporary foreign labour programs in Canada can be understood as part of a capitalist labour system that relies on a flexible and readily available workforce.

They are described as a way to fill labour shortages, yet migrants' work permits tie them to a single employer, restricting their mobility and increasing dependence on that employer for both income and legal status.



GAATW Canada spoke with 10 migrant workers and 11 representatives from organizations supporting them, who described how speaking up or leaving unsafe or exploitative conditions can mean losing their job, legal status, and ability to remain in Canada.

Think of the people who work in low-paid, informal, or hazardous industries, such as construction, agriculture, food processing, factories, domestic and care work, sex work, or in the gig economy.

WHO ARE THEY?

Migrants on temporary visas tied to an employer who has complete control over their lives; Indigenous people who've been subjected to decades of discrimination and forcefully pushed out of their lands to make way for an oil or gas extraction project; unhoused individuals who've nowhere to live partly because building affordable housing is unprofitable for construction companies; victims of gender-based violence or people who use drugs who can't access adequate recovery services due to gaps in funding.

While impoverished people work for meagre pay and live hand to mouth, the CEOs and shareholders of the corporations employing them reap obscene profits.

They then hire lawyers and accountants to hide these profits and lobbyists to ensure their interests and profits will be protected by public policies.

How is this different from the criminals that people commonly associate with human trafficking?

Not every impoverished person toiling under capitalism is a victim of human trafficking, but some are in all but name.

What Can You Do?

Capitalism is so deeply embedded in our lives that it would be extremely difficult to move on from it. It has been said that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

Still, if you care about preventing human trafficking, you can, for example:

- Read more about the workings of neoliberal capitalism and its disastrous impacts on people and the planet
- Join or support local groups or protests that advocate for labour rights, affordable housing, welfare reform, or increased funding for public services
- Vote for local, provincial, or federal politicians that espouse pro-worker, anti-capitalist values.



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.

