

ROOT CAUSES

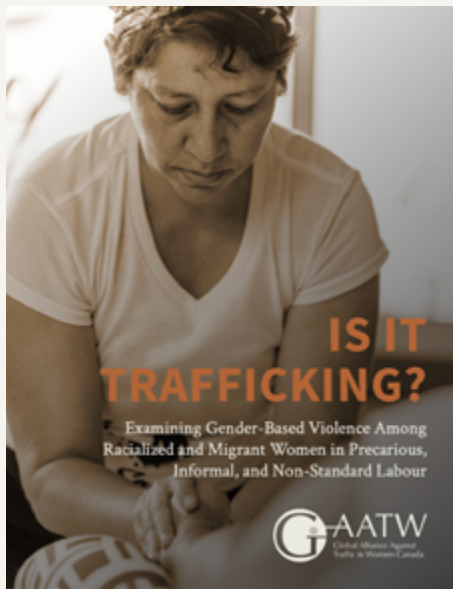
# Human Trafficking and Patriarchy



## About the Root Causes Series

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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 Patriarchy?

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GAATW Canada's recent research identified patriarchy and gender inequality as one of the root causes of human trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV) against racialized women and gender-diverse people.

*Patriarchy is the system that assigns higher value to men - men's decisions, work, and behaviour - than to women.*

Patriarchy is deeply embedded in social norms and attitudes in societies throughout the world, including in seemingly modern and progressive countries like Canada.

Broadly speaking, these attitudes consider men as aggressive, outspoken, ambitious, and rational, and women as quiet, timid, passive, caring, kind, and emotional.

In practice, this means that in the home, family, or relationship, men are expected to make decisions and women are expected to obey them. This not only silences and disempowers women, but also means that if they do not obey, they will be punished.

Due to patriarchy, in the public sphere, women are hired in industries and professions associated with care and human interaction, which are seen as an extension of women's caring responsibilities in the home, and paid lower salaries.

These include nurses, teachers, social workers, cleaners, servers, bank clerks, receptionists, shop floor workers, and so on.

At the same time, men tend to work in industries and positions associated with decision-making, negotiation, management, and physical strength, which typically involve greater authority and higher pay.

Some employers prefer hiring women, because they are seen as more docile and less likely to protest bad working conditions.



## *How Does Patriarchy Manifest in Human Trafficking and GBV?*

### **THROUGH DEMANDS FOR SEXUAL ACCESS TO WOMEN.**

In our research, one woman - Brandy, a hotel cleaner in B.C. - described how she was subjected to constant sexual harassment by her manager.

Her rejection of his advances led to threats of having



her pay docked and unfair accusations that she wasn't doing her job.

She was also sexually harassed by customers of the hotel. She reflected:

“Hotel cleaners are highly 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.’”

Sexual harassment is a form of gender-based violence that causes immense physical or psychological harm to women and prevents them from leading fulfilling personal and professional lives.

#### THROUGH CONTROL.

In our research, Susan, an Indigenous woman trafficked into the sex trade in Ontario, described how her trafficker controlled all aspects of her life, including the clothes and makeup she wore, her work, and her finances.

She barely had any moment to herself:

“He was always close by and he was always watching me.”

Physical and psychological control are among the main characteristics of gender-based violence and human trafficking - the perpetrator always exerts control over their victim.

#### THROUGH PHYSICAL VIOLENCE.

Several women in our research shared that they were subjected to severe physical and psychological abuse by their partners, managers, or clients.

Some 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.”

Since patriarchal social norms position men - with their desires, attitudes, and behaviour - as superior to women, men feel social permission to physically abuse women for any perceived infractions or disagreement.

#### *What Can You Do?*

- Inform yourself about the history of the women’s rights movement and women’s struggle for gender equality in Canada and around the world
- Join, support, or follow feminist organizations that combat gender-based violence and promote women’s rights and equality
- Practice gender equality in your life and reject the stereotypical expectations of men and women and their role in society.

## About GAATW Canada

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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.

