

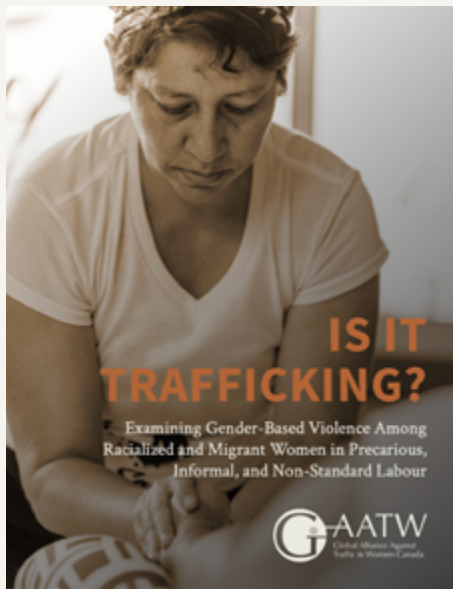
ROOT CAUSES

Trafficking and the Legacy of Settler Colonialism: *Indigenous Peoples*



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 the Legacy of Settler Colonialism and Treatment of Indigenous Peoples?

Colonial Harms & Gender Based Violence

For Indigenous peoples in Canada, experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) are inseparable from the legacy of settler colonialism (e.g., land dispossession, cultural genocide, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop) and the ongoing structural neglect that continues to shape the conditions in which many Indigenous women and girls live today.

Indigenous peoples face persistent discrimination across nearly every aspect of public life, including healthcare, (un)employment, housing, food (in)security, education, and access to justice.

In GAATW Canada's research, Jamie Eggert, an Indigenous woman and former sex worker, from the QomQem outreach program in British Columbia, shared that many Indigenous women in the sex trade are multi-generational residential school survivors or escaped abusive homes when they were young.

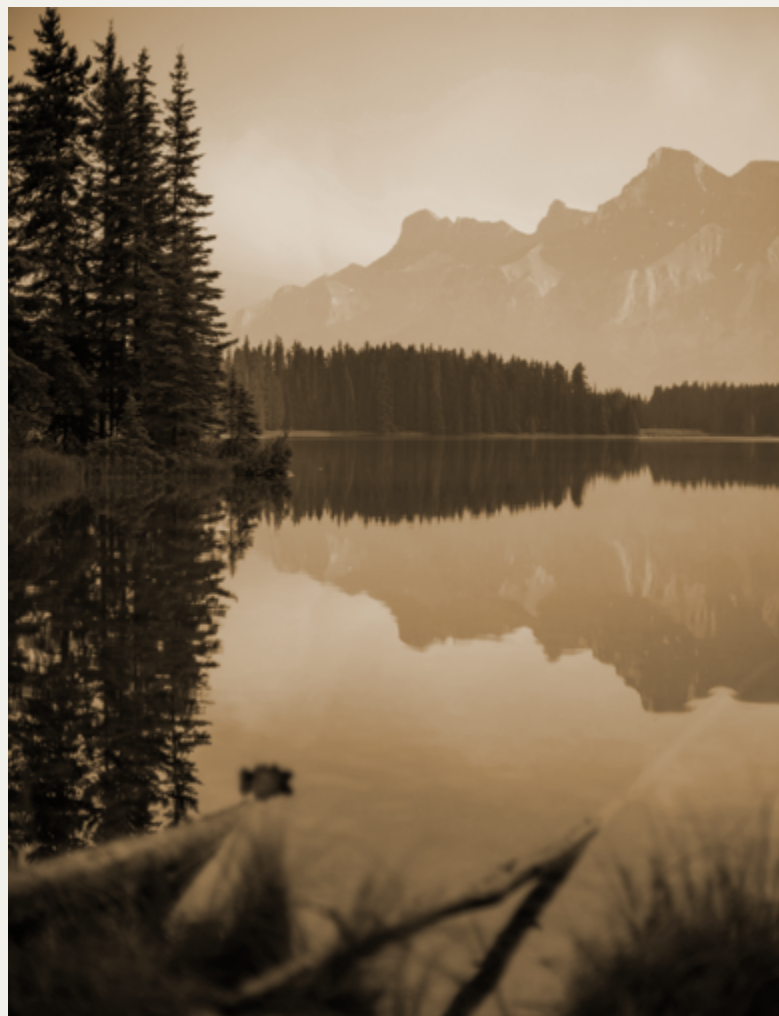
The intergenerational trauma caused by the displacement and violent removal of Indigenous peoples from their homes, as well as other colonial abuses, has caused a breakdown of communities and access to culturally relevant services.

Such state-sponsored violence is designed to dispossess Indigenous communities while reinforcing settler control over land, mobility, and belonging.

This research showed that Indigenous peoples continue to experience colonial harms.

These include, but are not limited to:

- Housing insecurity
- Poverty
- Criminalization
- Food insecurity
- Barriers to healthcare
- Unequal access to justice



In addition, GAATW Canada’s study revealed that Indigenous peoples are both over-policed and under-protected:

As Jessica, an Indigenous sex worker in British Columbia shared, “I would never call [the police]. They are no help anyways. They’re more damage to you than anything.”

On rare occasions when Indigenous women did call them to report violence, they shared stories of police arriving late, when the abuser “had already done the damage and was gone.”

Joy, an Indigenous sex worker in British Columbia, stated: “The cops don’t care unless you’re dead.”

Some organizations characterize all forms of GBV against Indigenous women and girls, especially those working in the sex trade, as human trafficking.

While human trafficking is one form of violence Indigenous peoples may experience, conflating trafficking with GBV collapses diverse experiences of harm into a single framework that ultimately obscures the colonial conditions responsible for such violence.

Furthermore, [Canada’s anti-trafficking framework is part of a white colonialist project and is therefore ill-suited to prevent and respond to GBV against Indigenous women and girls.](#)

As Audre Lorde writes, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”

What Can You Do?

- Educate yourself about Canada’s settler colonialism and treatment of Indigenous peoples.
- Join, support, and work alongside Indigenous organizations that distinguish between involvement in the sex trade and human trafficking, and that resist Canada’s anti-trafficking framework. To engage more on this topic, you can [check out this webinar hosted by GAATW Canada in May 2026.](#)
- Listen and learn from Indigenous organizations that raise attention to how exploitation is rooted in broader colonial structures and social inequalities, and reject carceral approaches that only heighten the surveillance, policing, and state violence against Indigenous peoples.
- Invest in and support Indigenous-led programs and services that provide culturally safe prevention, protection, and healing for Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQI+ people, while advocating for systemic reforms to address the root causes of violence, including colonization, racism, and socioeconomic marginalization.

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.

