

Press Release – For Immediate Release

TURN OFF THE SPOTLIGHT: Sex workers and allies urge an end to Operation Northern Spotlight

October 19, 2017, Canada – As part of the hunt for people who “exploit” or purchase services from sex workers, police forces across Canada held their yearly raids between October 11 -15 on sex work establishments that they call *Operation Northern Spotlight*. These operations include intrusive and intimidating visits to sex workers to their homes and hotels and other places of work, under the auspices of an anti-trafficking initiative. In their press release on October 18th (<http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/news/2017/operation-northern-spotlight-vi>), the RCMP announced that “police interviewed 324 individuals” who they “suspect to be working in the sex trade against their will, or at high risk of being trafficked”. The criteria by which police assume or determine coercion or risk is unknown, but the proportion of police interviews to the “number of people of people removed from exploitative situations” highlights not only misguided police resources, but problematic over surveillance and a violation of sex workers’ rights.

Sex workers across the country have reported to our member groups that Operation Northern Spotlight compromises their safety and dignity. The interactions begin with a male or female police officer posing as a client and booking an appointment with a sex worker. Several police officers then appear at the sex worker’s place of work, ostensibly to ensure that no coercion is taking place, but with the impact of intimidating sex workers, violating their right to privacy and putting their confidentiality and safety at risk. Sex workers across Canada who are victims to this Operation also report feeling confused, frightened, stressed and traumatized after these interactions with police, followed by intense feelings of mistrust in the overall police system.

Operation Northern Spotlight has also undermined sex workers’ health and safety. To avoid the greater scrutiny and law enforcement surveillance, interrogation, harassment, detention, deportation and arrest associated with such campaigns, sex workers are forced to work in greater isolation and secrecy, reducing their capacity to earn money and their ability to negotiate safer working conditions with clients and with third parties.

Campaigns such as Operation Northern Spotlight have intensified an already hostile relationship between sex workers and the police and deterred workers in the sex industry from turning to law enforcement if violence or exploitation occurs. In a survey of Asian sex workers in Toronto and Vancouver, 95 per cent of respondents indicated that they never seek help from law enforcement — even if they experience violence, abuse, harassment or exploitation. In Toronto, not a single respondent indicated that they trusted the police. By alienating sex workers, Operation Northern Spotlight discourages workers in the sex industry from reporting actual cases of human trafficking to law enforcement, frustrating the ultimate objective of such campaigns. It also diverts much-needed resources to anti-trafficking investigations rather than place resources into other forms of services and

supports that sex workers need.

Canada's new criminal sex work laws introduced in December 2014 under the Conservative government's *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act* (PCEPA), that wrongfully equate sex work with sexual exploitation and human trafficking have reinforced antagonistic relationships with the police, interfered with the safety mechanisms that sex workers use to stay safe on the job, and increased stigma and discrimination against sex workers. Operation Northern Spotlight perpetuates the faulty logic of PCEPA and continues to perpetuate great harms on sex workers.

Police repression is one of the primary factors that creates vulnerability to violence. A context of repression makes it equally difficult to report crimes for which sex workers are targeted in an environment of impunity. It contributes to a climate of fear and disdain for sex workers that promotes violence and discrimination. Anti-trafficking campaigns that conflate sex work and human trafficking impact all sex workers, and particularly target Indigenous women and migrant sex workers, who already have entrenched antagonistic relationships with law enforcement, and sex workers who work indoors.

The Alliance urges law enforcement to **put an end to Operation Northern Spotlight**. In addition we ask that police:

- Stop using anti-trafficking programs as a pretext for the intrusion of law enforcement in sex work establishments, including indoor sex work businesses and hotels and on the streets with Indigenous sex workers;
- Review existing anti-trafficking policies and programs that equate sex work with human trafficking, and revise policies to remove assumptions that sex work is a form of human trafficking or sexual exploitation; and
- Provide support for Access without fear/Sanctuary City policies that allow migrants to receive essential services such as health care, without fear of deportation.

If law enforcement is genuine in their efforts to support victims of human trafficking, they must work in collaboration with sex workers to develop best practices to help and support trafficked persons while protecting the safety, dignity and human rights of all individuals in the sex industry.

The Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform formed in 2012 and is composed of sex worker rights and allied groups and individuals in cities across Canada: Calgary, Edmonton, Hamilton, London, Longueuil, Montreal, Kingston, Québec, Sault Ste. Marie, St. John's, Toronto, Vancouver, Victoria, and Winnipeg. Members work together to fight for sex work law reform, sex workers' rights, and community well-being.

Member Groups of the Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform:

Sex Workers, Organizations and Individuals Advocating for Sex Workers' Rights and Community Well-Being
Travailleuses(rs) du Sexe, Organismes, et Individus pour les droits des Travailleuses(rs) du sexe et Bien-être de la Communauté

Angel's Angels (Hamilton)
Action Santé Travesties et Transsexuel(le)s du Québec (ASTTeQ) (Montréal)
BC Coalition of Experiential Communities (Vancouver)
Butterfly Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Network (Toronto)
Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (Toronto)
Downtown Eastside Sex Workers United Against Violence (SWUAV) (Vancouver)
Émissaire (Longueuil)
FIRST (Vancouver)
Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project (Toronto)
Maggie's Indigenous Sex Workers Drum Group (Toronto)
Migrant Sex Workers Project (Toronto)
PEERS (Victoria)
Projet Lune (Québec)
Prostitutes Involved Empowered Cogent Edmonton (PIECE) (Edmonton)
Providing Alternatives, Counselling and Education (PACE) Society (Vancouver)
Rézo, projet travail du sexe (Montréal)
Safe Harbour Outreach Project (S.H.O.P.) (St John's)
Sex Professionals of Canada (SPOC)
Sex Workers Advisory Network of Sudbury (SWANS) (Sudbury)
Stella, l'amie de Maimie (Montreal)
Stop the Arrests! (Sault Ste. Marie) Strut! (Toronto)
Supporting Women's Alternatives Network (SWAN)(Vancouver)
HIV Community Link, Shift Program (Calgary)
West Coast Cooperative of Sex Industry Professionals (WCCSIP) (Vancouver)
Sex Workers of Winnipeg Action Coalition (Winnipeg)