



# Violence and Collaborative Safety Planning with Sex Workers

For: Ending Violence Association of BC (EVA BC)  
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## **1. ABOUT THE BRITISH COLUMBIA COALITION OF EXPERIENTIAL COMMUNITIES (BCCEC)**

The British Columbia Coalition of Experiential Communities (BCCEC) formerly known as the BC Coalition of Experiential Women was founded in 2005. We are a consortium of sex worker activists who work to eliminate the oppressive systems and forces that create harm for individuals within the sex industry. Our members possess diverse perspectives and experiences related to sex industry work, community-based research, and service provision. The BCCEC does not support enforcement or victimization models that either promote the continued criminalization of sex workers or foster their dependencies on public services.

Instead, we work to ensure that sex workers are employed and meaningfully involved in projects and programs that affect their lives. We achieve these goals through the creating alliances, implementing of community-based research projects, developing programs, providing consultation and initiating public education projects in collaboration with stakeholders and service providers.

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## 2. FORWARD

The following safety planning tool is an amalgamation of information from three BCCEC projects that were developed with sex workers in British Columbia to address their concerns about violence: the “Trade Secrets- Occupational Health and Safety in the Sex Industry” (BCCEC, 2011), the “411” resource are for sex workers who have been victims of crime (BCCEC, 2009), and “From the Curb: Sex Workers’ Perspectives on Violence and Domestic Trafficking” (Bowen, 2006). This tool is aimed to support those working toward anti-violence issues in co-creating support plans with sex workers that reflect their lived experiences of violence and also respects their unique position as a marginalized and criminalized group of people.

This document is derived from the collective wisdom of sex workers; however, each sex worker will face her/his own challenges and will require some formalized response to violence as well as individualized support to address their needs. Sex workers who experience violence are survivors and many will have safety strategies already in place for themselves.

Addressing violence is a task that requires a coordinated response from government, community members and sex workers. Some of the entities that should be involved include law enforcement, government ministries, Crown Counsel, and First Nations organizations and sex worker groups. Many responses to violence against sex workers have not been guided by sex workers and as such, sex workers have expressed that many public agencies have been judgmental and discriminatory. For example, sex workers state that the Ministry for Child and Family Development assumes that all sex workers are unsuitable parents and that law enforcement treats them as criminals. These negative experiences have served to dissuade sex workers from accessing community and legal services for support or to report violence.

These fears are coupled with other experiences of social stigma and exclusion. As a result, it is essential that the provision of supports to sex workers is co-developed by sex workers and is based in relationships of trust. Violence prevention planning must

mitigate risk as identified and defined by sex workers. In this way, strategies can be carefully developed and can avoid unintended harms to sex workers.

The following provides information about who sex workers identify as the perpetrators of violence; how they define violence and risk; the conditions within which sex workers experience violence; and the questions that can elicit responses that will inform the safety planning processes.

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### **3. FROM THE CURB: SEX WORKERS' PERSPECTIVES ON VIOLENCE AND DOMESTIC TRAFFICKING (2006)**

The 'From the Curb: Sex Workers' Perspectives on Violence and Domestic Trafficking project consultation was designed and implemented by women in and from the sex industry. Seven members of the BCCEC were contracted to interview sex workers from across the region to examine issues of violence and experiences of domestic trafficking within Canada. A total of 112 sex workers participated in interviews during February and March of 2006. The document was shared the same year, at a Satellite session at the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual International Harm Reduction conference held in Vancouver, BC.

The inquiry questions were designed to be administered as one-on-one interviews or through focus groups, depending on the population of sex workers targeted and their level of comfort. Data was collected in Prince George, White Rock, Vancouver, Kamloops, Guildford and Surrey.

Experiences in the sex industry of those interviewed varied. Some were actively involved in the industry, others recently transitioned out of sex work. Their history in sex work ranged from on to off-street. Those who worked off-street had experience in licensed and unlicensed venues. Others worked off-street as independent sex workers or were active or former dancers. All participants had experience in the street-level sex industry in Canada as well as in other countries.

Their years working in the industry also varied, ranging from two to 19 years. For example, a 20-year old sex worker had 8 years experience in the sex industry and a 47-year old had 3 years experience. Participants also ranged in age from 16 to 47 years. This diversity of life experience and sex work experience contributed to the richness of the data collected.

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### **3.1. HOW DO SEX WORKERS DEFINE VIOLENCE?**

Sex workers defined violence as activities ranging from public humiliation and social exclusion to more extreme incidents of beatings, sodomy, rape, and the abduction and murder of their associates.

Sex workers described the power dynamic that money, and their lack of it, creates when they deal with customers stating that: *“They use money to control the situation”* and *“They pay us and they think they own us.”*

Sex workers described incidents of being robbed, being assaulted with metal pipes and being thrown out of cars. Sex workers described being punched, thrown around, whipped, detained, mistreated by police, and robbed by other sex workers. A participant stated: *“There is every kind of violence out there.”*

Women also spoke to violence from pimps, including being forced to meet quotas, control issues, being isolated, beaten, manipulated, and forced to work when they did not want to or when they were not well. For some sex workers pimps take all of their earnings and women defined this as violence.

Some of the activities of law enforcement officers were seen as violent as well. Participants stated:

*“Police force us to work in isolated areas and then harass us.”*

*“They ignore the bad dates reported by the girls.”*

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### **3.2. WHAT CONDITIONS DO SEX WORKERS THINK CREATE RISK?**

Sex workers identified that the behavior of other sex workers increased violence. They stated that sex workers who “rip off” or rob dates promote retaliatory violence from customers. A participant stated:

*“They come back to stroll looking for the girl that ripped them off.*

*If they don’t find her, anyone of us will do.”*

(Author's note: It should be recognized that sex workers who rob dates are often in exceptionally desperate circumstances and may be experiencing withdrawal from substances, of have financial quotas put in place by pimps that they are forced to meet to avoid physical violence).

Participants also discussed their risk-taking behavior. Sex workers would take dates with customers that they would normally avoid and engage in sexual activities that they are not comfortable with in order to earn money. Participants stated: *"The more desperate you are, the more likely you are to take risks."* and *"The colder it gets, you will do anything."* There appears to be a direct link between desperation and high risk behavior.

Some sex workers made reference to their drug use as creating conditions for violence. Sex workers who use drugs felt that their level of intoxication dulled their intuition—a skill necessary for date selection. One woman stated: *"You're vulnerable because you are too high."* Sex worker who used drugs shared that being intoxicated is risky, but that they needed the drugs in order to function. One participant stated: *"You have to be high to cope with all your pain and do this job."*

Women identified that it is not only their own drug use that puts them at risk. The drug use of others that are part of the environment also pose risks. Participants stated that drug dealers and addicts prowl the streets at night. They roam through alleys and move in and out of crack houses. Sex workers shared that they are targets for both robbery and violence because street-level drug addicts monitor their activities and are aware when they have finished with a customer and have money.

Women also talked about the marketing behavior of other sex workers and how this contributes to increasing risk. When prices are set for a particular stroll, some workers may reduce their prices out of desperation. If a customer knows that minimum service costs \$100 on a particular stroll, but a sex worker provides the service for \$60, other dates would expect that same service for \$60, so charging \$100 will be very difficult for other sex workers on that stroll. As with any business, if prices are reduced workers will have to turn more dates, work harder for longer hours



to make the same amount of money. Workers felt that this increases violence because the longer you are “out there” the more risky sex work becomes. One participant stated:

*“We risk our lives every time we get into cars: more cars, more risk.”*

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### **3.3. WHO COMMITS VIOLENCE AGAINST SEX WORKERS**

Some women were very specific about who commits violence against them. Others had comments like *“Fuck, who doesn’t”*, indicating that they are at risk of violence from everyone.

In addition to physical environments, where the weather conditions affect street-level sex work, sex workers expressed concern about the social environment. They discussed the way they are treated by the general public and identify this group as one of the most prevalent sources of violence they experience. A participant stated:

*“The people don’t care - they don’t respond to the women that have been killed here in town ... that creates more violence...dates aren’t stupid you know.”*

Women felt that the general public did not care about them and treated them like second-class citizens. They also overwhelmingly believe that customers will continue to violate sex workers because they see that the public provides no protection.

Sex workers also stated that their intimate partners committed violence against them; especially in situations where their partners were drug users.

There are a wide range of perpetrators of violence against sex workers. There is a common sentiment that misogynous men and people who hate sex workers commit acts of violence. Sex workers also note that some of these individuals may be mentally ill.

Below sex workers list who commits violence against them:

- Pimps that own you.
- Drug users and dealers.

- The public/Neighbors
- Other sex workers.
- Partners/spouses
- Teachers
- Lawyers
- Judges
- The mentally ill
- Men who hate women.
- Men who hate sex workers
- Counselors
- Foster parents
- Doctors
- Criminals
- Police- the ones that pretend to want to help you.

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#### **3.4. WHY DO SEX WORKERS BELIEVE PEOPLE ARE VIOLENT TOWARDS THEM**

Women gave a wide range of reasons why they are the victims of constant violence. Most highlight that violence against sex workers is perceived as something that can be done with impunity. This topic sparked enormous anger among many of the sex workers interviewed and they shared their belief that men who are violent use them as their targets rather than taking the risk of being violent to their wives and girlfriends.

Sex workers felt that they were modern day “whipping boys.” They strongly believed they bear the brunt of male violence against women. Sex workers stated that their sheer accessibility makes them targets of violence and that if the larger community does not take action, the violence they experience will continue.

Overall, sex workers perceive violence against them as pervasive because the community at large condones it, permits it by ignoring it, or by not acting to stop it. Sexual predators and violent men get the message that sex workers are not socially protected individuals and can be abused with little risk. The nihilistic feelings of sex workers are expressed in the following statement from a participant:

*“People believe we are not worth protecting and shouldn’t be alive.”*

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### **3.5. WHERE DO SEX WORKERS GO FOR HELP AND WHAT KIND OF HELP DO THEY GET**

Sex workers listed a number of public services they have accessed for support. Their comments are listed below under each type of service.

#### *Health Services:*

Sex workers stated they accessed hospitals, outreach nurses and HIV/AIDS services.

- Some hospitals, particular hospitals in the Greater Vancouver Regional District were identified as ones that should be entirely avoided;
- Outreach nurses provided supplies, first aid, supportive contact, the use of phones and general advocacy;
- Various AIDS services were used for bathrooms, phones, supplies and advocacy.

#### *Sex Worker Organizations:*

Sex workers stated that beyond the expected supplies and resources, they received love from these organizations. Some individuals working within these organizations were also named. Their names were excluded from this report.

- PEERS Vancouver
- PACE Society
- WISH Drop in Center
- SHOP
- The Front Room
- MAP Van (An overnight mobile outreach program in Vancouver)

#### *Faith Based Services:*

- The Mission
- Servants Anonymous Society
- Some churches

#### *Other Services and Supports:*

- Police (named officers that they trusted)
- Native Friendship Centers
- Various recovery houses
- Street nurses

Some women, including those who lived in areas where there were no organizations sex worker led organizations and no specific services for sex workers stated that there was nowhere to go for help in their communities. One participant stated:

*“I have nowhere, can’t call the cops.”*

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### **3.6. KINDS OF SUPPORT NEEDED**

Sex workers listed the kinds of supports that would like to receive, ranging from food clothing and supplies to bathrooms, phones and make-up.

- Emotional support
- Information
- Shelter
- Stress relief
- Showers Food
- Clothing Trust
- Sharing Medical
- Transportation Needles
- Condoms Beds
- Referrals Help- filling out forms
- Educational Guidance/support
- Love
- Substance abuse support
- Safe/healing environment
- Outreach
- Bus tickets
- Understanding
- Information

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### **3.7. HOW SUPPORTIVE HAVE LAW ENFORCEMENT, THE COURTS AND HEALTH SERVICES BEEN IN ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST SEX WORKERS**

In general, some sex workers shared that they did not know how supportive any of these services and agencies have been because they have never received support and only had experiences of enforcement. Other participants shared that they had accessed these entities for help but had no luck receiving support. Many stated that the treatment they receive is based on the individuals they encounter; some are supported and caring and others are not.

#### *Law Enforcement*

Although responses varied in this category, it is clear that the treatment sex workers receive from law enforcements depend on two important factors: demographics: race, age, addiction issues, previous relationships with law enforcement, length of time in the sex industry; and which officer you encounter. . Sex workers identified three

types of officers: those who have compassion for the plight of sex workers; those who uphold the law first and view sex workers as criminals; and those who have no respect for sex workers and have goals toward the exploitation and humiliation of sex workers. Younger respondents (under the age of 21) appeared to have better relationships with law enforcement

Additionally, respondents shared information about specific locations in British Columbia where harassment or ill treatment by police is more prevalent. These locations are not disclosed here, but will be used to direct relationship building and education initiatives in the future.

### *The Court System*

Sex worker experiences with the court system were similar to law enforcement and depended greatly on demographics of the sex worker and the individuals they encountered. It must be noted here that a small number of sex workers who participated in our study had experiences with the court system. Those who did engaged the legal system as victims pursuing charges and felt that their credibility was often questioned due to their involvement in the sex industry. There were a number of concerns about perpetrators going free and short sentences handed out to men who were convicted of violence against sex workers in our study. Some respondents who had no experience with the court system see them solely as an enforcement body instead of one that offers protection and justice. As a result, sex workers involvement in the court system remains unpredictable and causes anxiety among sex workers.

### *The Health Care System*

Health care professionals play a large role in the care of those who are the victims of violence. Sex workers shared that nurses and other hospital staff can be judgmental. Some found that street nurses and First Nations' health services were extremely supportive. According to sex workers, cities within the region where street nurses are

available or where medical services are located within sex worker organizations and/or First Nation services appeared to provide the highest quality of service.

Mainstream hospitals are venues where sex workers stated that they commonly encountered the harshest treatment. Sex workers felt they were treated like they were threats to humanity or 'vectors of disease'. Many stated, like law enforcement and the court system, treatment was unpredictable and dependant on who they encountered and also if their involvement in the sex industry was detected or disclosed.

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### **3.8. WHY SEX WORKERS THINK THESE SERVICES HAVE NOT BEEN SUPPORTIVE**

*"They think we deserve to be treated like this cause we chose to grow up to be a hooker."*

Sex workers shared experiences of alienation and described a lack of sensitivity and compassion from many of the individuals who provide services. Sex workers feel that they are mistreated due both to their involvement in the sex industry and the lack of experience or exposure that service providers have to people in the sex industry. Sex workers expressed the reasons for their maltreatment in four major categories:

1. Social exclusion and the devaluing of the lives of sex workers;
2. The lack of knowledge and lack of experience on the part of service providers about the sex industry;
3. Blatant discrimination; and
4. Fear and hopelessness on the part of providers.

Overall, sex workers felt that they are not valued or seen as worth helping by the public sector. The majority of sex workers in our sample experienced feelings of social isolation and abandonment as a result of their experiences with public services. Some sex workers have gone as far as to say that even people who work in the public sector who are paid to care do not.

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### 3.9. WHAT DO SEX WORKERS THINK NEEDS TO BE DONE TO REDUCE THEIR RISK TO VIOLENCE?

Respondents suggested a wide range of service and ways sex workers could collaboratively reduce harm. They described various strategies to reduce their risks to violence. Some of their ideas are below:

- **Media/mainstream:** report crimes and perpetrators of violence against sex workers in the media like Crime Stoppers is done for regular women;
- **Safe locations:** There is a need for more safe spaces for sex workers to access without judgment and that do not require sex workers to disclose personal information or pray before meals. Other needed services include: supportive living environments; drop in centers attached to female-run outreach services and a safe injection site for women;
- **Hours of Operation:** Sex workers indicated that the hours of operation of sex worker serving and sex worker friendly organizations need to be expanded: *“We need late night programs.”*
- **Suggestions on how sex workers can better protect each other :** implementing a buddy systems, taking license plates, only performing doubles (two workers per customer);
- **Street level:** Better lighting and alley patrols by women;
- **Sex worker led education programs** for the community at large and various service providers were recommended.
- **More severe sentences** to perpetrators of violence against sex workers and the testimony of sex workers should not be dismissed as not credible witnesses by the courts because of her occupation.
- **Safe intercourse sites (SIS),** similar to the safe injection site (SIS) in Vancouver. Sex workers also wanted to create cooperatively run sex worker brothels where sex work can take place in monitored and safe environments. Sex workers stated that dates should undergo training on how to be serviced by sex workers.
- **Sex workers commented on the Criminal Code** pertaining to prostitution (Sections 210, 211, 213). Their comments ranged from support for decriminalization to calling for the legalization of prostitution. Sex workers state that the criminalization of sex work done by police officers is not the only oppression they face and that pimps and members of organized crime also use the code to silence and control sex workers. Members of organized crime use the Criminal Code to threaten women, saying things like:

*“If you go for help or tell anyone anything, you will be the one that goes to jail.”*

Based on the level and range of violence experienced by sex workers, it is entirely reasonable to suggest that street-level sex work is the world's deadliest profession. Sex workers were open about the need for the world to see them as human beings who deserve the same protection from violence as any other person. They reject the notion held by some that violence is an inherent part of sex work and they urge us all to participate in making change:

*"Words cannot express the violence I have experienced over the past ten years. I'm 27 and have been tortured for hours. My head was shaved once. I've been stabbed numerous times especially on my face because they wanted to make me ugly so I can't work. Raped so many times I can't count, I mostly try to block that out. I've had guns pointed at my head 4 times and have been purposely burned with lit cigarettes. I feel I've almost lost my life 10 times to tricks who I believe genuinely wanted to kill me. I've had johns ask me numerous times to help them find a 10 or 11 yr. old girls. All this is unbelievable to me and has to change!"*

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## **4. QUESTIONS TO GUIDE A COLLABORATIVE SAFETY PLANNING PROCESS**

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### **4.1. CONTEXT**

Most safety planning instruments for women do not include information related to the specific needs of sex-working women who experience a wide range of violence from many sources. Some information for sex workers to reduce harm when working exists within sex worker organizations, but none were found that are specific to mainstream service providers.

Over the past six years BCCEC has worked with sex workers to document our experiences with violence, police response, barriers to accessing supports and best practices for supporting sex-working women in a way that blends lived experiences with support practices.



The following section is aimed to guide support planning for sex workers and is based on our experiences identifying and reducing risk among female sex workers. We include some emerging best practices and useful questions for support staff to ask to enhance safety planning among sex workers.

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#### **4.2. IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE SAFETY PLANS**

Sex workers in crisis may be facing intimate partner violence from their spouse or significant other, or violence at the hands of a pimp or organized crime family. They may also experience violence from community members, customers and other sex workers. Additionally, they may experience violence from individuals in positions of power over them like police officers or nurses.

Safety plans should be developed quickly and in consultation with the sex worker. She should always be asked if she has a safety plan in place and the details of it. Support staff will want to have a dialogue with the sex worker to identify known risk factors and what her needs are in her particular situation.

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#### **4.3. PERPETRATOR HISTORY**

Obtain as much information as possible about the person or people who have caused harm or threaten harm against the sex worker. For the purposes of this planning kit we focus only on Intimate partner, Pimp and Customer violence.

##### ***Information about the Perpetrator***

Who is the perpetrator?

**Part One:** In the event that the perpetrator is an Intimate Partner or Pimp (organized crime family) or trafficker ask the following:

- Is the party aware of her sex working activities?
- Has the party threatened her life/attempted to kill her?
- Does she have government ID/ passport? Did her partner or pimp seize it?
- Has she diarized these threats/assaults?
- Has she reported the threats/assaults to police?

- If she has not reported to police discuss the risks and benefits of reporting and support her in her decision.
- If she has reported this violence to police, does she have these reports? If so, get details and copies
- What kinds of supports does she have here or in other communities?
- Has she considered leaving the community? (Remember that leaving is the most dangerous time and she will need a plan and supports in place).
- If she has not separated from the party and is considering doing so, discuss with her the risks she perceives in doing so. Discern which are realistic and which are not likely.
- In high risk cases when sex workers have been under threat of lethal violence some have chosen to change their identities and relocate. Where appropriate, inform the woman about the services offered by the BC MPSSG Protective Measures Unit. <http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victimservices/victim-safety/index.htm#notification>

***Part Two Pimp/ Trafficker***

If the perpetrator is a pimp or trafficker the questions above apply in addition to the following:

- How has the pimp/trafficker controlled her in the past?
- Has she attempted to leave her pimp/trafficker before?
- Does the pimp/trafficker know where she lives?
- Does the pimp/trafficker know who her family is? Are they at risk also?
- Is she monitored by the pimp/trafficker and unable to escape easily?
- Is there a time she could safely escape without being noticed right away?
- When she is working, she is unguarded?
- Discuss plans for a ride to be waiting for quick exit, for example a car waiting behind a hotel where she is working.

***Part Three: Client/ Bad Date***

If the perpetrator is a Bad Date the questions in Part One apply in addition to the following:

- Does she know this client? Has she serviced or seen him before? Can she identify him/ recognize him if he approaches her again?
- Did the client threaten her life/assault her? More than once?
- Is there a way she can work and screen/avoid contact with this client?
- Does the client know where she lives?
- Does the client know who her family is? Are they at risk also?

#### **Part Four: Children**

Many sex workers are parents and may engage in sex work in order to support their children. Children can be used by pimps/traffickers, partners and clients to threaten or coerce sex workers. Sex workers may not disclose to you if they think their children are at risk of violence, but in the event that a sex worker discloses concern for her dependents, ask the following:

Does she have children in her care?

First explain to her your reporting obligations and whether her disclosure to you is confidential. The sex worker must be made aware of any risks she takes in talking to you about issues related to her children. If she agrees to speak with you, then ask her if she needs any assistance from you.

You may ask if her children have been exposed to violence, witnessed violence, or experienced any threats or assaults.

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#### **4.4. OBSESSION, JEALOUSY, CONTROL OR COERCION**

Sex workers may have relationships with men who are possessive and controlling. Sex workers have disclosed that former clients often follow them or haunt them with email, phone messages and can show up at their places of employment. For street-level workers, they are more vulnerable because people who stalk them have more access to them and can park and observe their activities. In the event that a sex worker is being stalked by Intimate Partners, Pimps/traffickers, or Customers, the following questions can be asked to obtain more details.

- Is her Intimate Partner, Pimp/ Trafficker or Client/ Bad Date stalking her?
- Is she keeping track of the times and places she has seen her stalker?
- Has she reported to police?
- If she has not reported to police, discuss the risks and benefits of reporting. Support her in her decision.
- Does her stalker leave messages?
- Has she kept any written notes, emails, voicemails or texts that have come from her partner?
- Can she change accounts, addresses in order to eliminate contact?
- Does her stalker bother her at work or in public in front of others?
- Has she spoken to other sex workers about this?
- Has the stalker been reported on the Red Light Alert<sup>1</sup>?
- If employed other than as a sex worker, (part time sex worker) are they aware of her sex worker status?
- If her stalker is not her partner, has her partner threatened her stalker?

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<sup>1</sup> The Red Light Alert is a violence perpetrator information sheet distributed to sex workers by WISH Drop in Center Society: <http://www.wish-vancouver.net/>

- Does she have regular routines that would make her vulnerable? Discuss how these could be changed.
- Discuss security measures for working such as with another person or hiring periodic security or checking in with a friend.
- Ask her if she is familiar with “Trade Secrets- Occupational Health and Safety in the Sex Industry” and if not refer her to the security planning portions of the guide: [www.tradesecretsguide.blogspot.com](http://www.tradesecretsguide.blogspot.com)

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## **5. VICTIM VULNERABILITY FACTORS: PERCEPTION OF FUTURE VIOLENCE**

Sex workers may be susceptible to future violence because she may not define her experiences as violent, and as a result, may not be prepared to protect herself. The following are ideas and approaches to support sex workers in identifying violence and abuse from Intimate Partners, Pimps/Traffickers, Clients/Bad Dates:

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### **5.1. FUTURE VIOLENCE: INTIMATE PARTNERS , PIMPS/ TRAFFICKERS, CLIENTS/ BAD DATES**

Determining a sex worker's current level of fear from partners, pimps and clients, may help her prevent future violence.

Ask the following:

- Does she describe her partner/pimp/client's behavior as abuse/ violence?
- Are there ways you can support her in defining her experiences? For example:
  - Show her the Power & Control Wheel?
  - Share with her other women's experiences?
  - If safe to do so, share materials, books, videos?
- Does she believe she is at risk for future violence?
- If she predicts future violence, what does she think her partner is capable of?
- Does her partner/pimp/client use her children to coerce her into compliance?
- Does her partner/pimp/client use her sex worker status to coerce her into compliance?
- Does she think her partner/pimp/client will respect court orders or police intervention?
- If she understands her risk, collaborate with her in developing a safety plan for each aspect of her individual circumstances.

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## **5.2. EXTREME FEAR OF PERPETRATOR**

In some cases, sex workers endure extreme emotional and physical abuse over extended periods of time. In these cases she may feel fear in taking any action. Asking questions about past attempts to access support and report abuse can give a clearer picture of any emotional barriers a sex worker may be facing. Future safety plans should include past experiences and strategies that the sex worker feels are realistic and possible for her to implement.

### *History of abuse from: Intimate Partners, Pimp/ Trafficker, Clients/ Bad Dates*

- How long has she endured abuse from her partner/pimp/client?
- Has her partner/pimp/client attempted to murder her before?
- Is she dealing with trauma caused by previous and/or long term abuse?
- Has she attempted to leave her partner/pimp/client in the past unsuccessfully? Has this resulting in violence, punishment or confinement? What was the outcome?
- Discuss the ways in which a sound and detailed safety plan can help her survive. Assure her that having the plan in place does not mean she has to leave immediately, but provides her the tools to do so when she is ready.

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## **6. SOCIAL STATUS/ POWERLESSNESS: SUPPORT OR RESOURCES**

The following are important questions to ask the sex worker about the resources and support available to her in her networks.

- Does she have friends or family she can turn to?
- Is she a foreign national with no family or friends in Canada?
- Can she afford to return to her country/ community of origin?
- Does she want to return to her country/ community of origin?
- If she returns to her country/ community of origin will she face repercussions, for instance imprisonment, family shame/ honor killing, execution?
- Does she qualify for refugee status in Canada?
- Does she speak English well enough to communicate her needs/choices? A translator could help in this circumstance

- Does she have the necessities of life such as food, shelter, clothing, etc.

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### **6.1. HEALTH PROBLEMS**

Health problems may limit one's ability to leave violent situations. The following are some questions that can be asked as part of planning.

- Does she have any medical conditions that need to be incorporated into her safety plan?
- Does she require special medication to treat these conditions?
- Does she require scheduled treatments in a hospital? le- cancer, kidney disease
- Could her abuser track her through these treatments or medications?
- Could she stock pile some medication in a safe place?
- She may alert her abuser if she tries to leave with her medication. A local clinic may be able to arrange to have her prescriptions waiting for her.

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### **6.2. DESCRIBING PAST VIOLENCE**

Those with a history of violent acts are more likely to commit future violent acts. Sex workers need support in tracking past violence and gauging risk.

#### ***Past Violence from: Intimate Partners, Pimps/ Traffickers, Clients/ Bad Dates***

- If there has been violence has it been escalating in severity?
  - The sex worker may want to use calendar to look back and track incidences of violence. This will help her to know if it is getting more severe.
  - Does she recognize when he is escalating towards violence? Eg: Drinking more, finding things to complain about, sitting morosely in front of the tv, complaining about the kids.
- Diarizing can help recognize these patterns and help her build confidence in knowing when a violent episode is going to occur.
- When she recognizes these signs what can she do to avoid further violence?
  - Go to transition house, friends or family member's house
  - Send kids to friends or family's house to take them away from the situation? If she has done this, you can help her plan for their continuing protection.
  - If he has ever threatened or assaulted friends, family members or co-workers her risk increases.

Ensure your safety plan includes all the other people who might be at risk.

### ***Violation of Court Orders***

- Has she filed a restraining order or peace bond? If not is there a way you could support her in doing that?
- If there is a Court Order in place that restricts his contact does she have a copy and carry it with her at all times?
- If she does not have a copy can you obtain one for her from Court Registry, Police Victim Services, or the Provincial Protection Order Registry?
- If there is more than one order (i.e. PTA with no contact conditions and a Family Court access order) help her to understand which order is most binding.
- Has her abuser violated court orders in the past?
- Does she keep a record of her abusers violation of the orders?
- Does she have a photograph she can share with her family, friends and co-workers so they may know the abuser if they are approached?
- Violation of court orders is a high risk indicator and should be taken seriously.

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## **7. ALCOHOL/DRUGS/EMPLOYMENT INSTABILITY/MENTAL ILLNESS**

The people in the lives of sex workers may pose a greater risk to her safety due to drugs and alcohol use, unemployment or mental illness.

### ***Intimate Partners, Pimps/ Traffickers, Clients/ Bad Dates***

- Does her partner/pimp/client use alcohol or drugs?
- How does she feel this affects her safety?
- What does she do when her pimp/ trafficker confronts her and is intoxicated?
- How does she stay safe when her partner/pimp/client is using?
- Work with her to build on those strategies
- Has her partner/pimp/client threatened or attempted suicide before?
- Does her partner/pimp/client have mental health issues?
- Would it be useful to connect her with a Mental Health Worker to discuss risk?
- Has she diarized the threats?
- Can you offer her suggestions of how to do that and where to keep her notes safely hidden?
- Has she included these threats in the information she's given to police?
- If not, and she agrees, can you help her report?

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## 8. WEAPONS/FIREARMS

Sex workers may be at risk from partners/pimps/clients who own or have access to deadly weapons.

### *Weapons/Firearms (Used or Threatened): Intimate Partners, Pimps/ Traffickers, Clients/ Bad Dates*

- Has the partner/pimp/client ever professed to own a fire arm?
- Does her partner/pimp/client own a fire arm?
- Has her partner/pimp/client threatened themselves, her or her children with the firearm in the past?
- What does the sex worker do already to keep herself and her children safe?
- Does she have a safety plan for her home?
  - For the children?
  - At work?
  - In her car?
- Did she report the threat and fire arm to police?
- Does she fear repercussions if she speaks to police?
- Is her partner/pimp/client a member of organized crime?
- Could her partner/pimp/client borrow a fire arm?
- Does she feel her partner/pimp/client would use the fire arm against themselves, her or her children?
- If the police were alerted, did they confiscate any fire arms?
- Has she notified neighbors, family, friends?

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### 8.1. CULTURE

Criminalization and social stigma has isolated the sex working community from the mainstream. As a result, sex workers have evolved into a distinct subculture which has its own lexicon, norms and rules. Behaviors, language and gestures have different meanings within and outside of the sex industry. Those who are unaware of



the norms for sex workers may unintentionally say or do something that is offensive or misinterpreted, and vice versa.

Misunderstandings make it difficult for sex industry workers to communicate their needs or function within mainstream culture, and the reverse is also true as some service providers find it difficult to engage with sex workers in a meaningful way. Understanding sex work culture could greatly improve relations between sex workers and those who are charged to protect them.

The following are examples of phrases that some sex workers may deem offensive and should be avoided when developing relationships:

- **Honey/ baby/ darling-** Although acceptable in mainstream culture, these terms are considered patronizing or insulting to sex workers. A sex industry worker of 32 years is a veteran, a survivor and is not anybody's baby.
- **Prostitute-** We are sex industry workers. Prostitute is a term used by legislators and is also politically charged and oppressive as it ignores the fact that sex work is labor. This word demeans us, degrades us and contributes to the perception of sex workers as miscreants.
- **Real Women-** When comparing sex workers to non sex working people, BCCEC has found that many use the term 'real women' and create a binary framework of sex workers vs. "real women". These kinds of phrases reinforce an othering of sex workers and contribute to frameworks that view sex workers as unworthy or subhuman.

**BCCEC members have identified practices that can create barriers when working with sex workers:**

- **Wearing a gun, badge or uniform-** can spark fear in sex workers who have experienced oppression from social workers, law enforcement, nurses and others. Where possible, when engaging with sex workers, wear plain clothes and come unarmed.
- **Don't ask us to "rat"**- In the underground culture, criminalization has created a wall of silence. The number one rule on the street is never under any circumstances speak to the authorities. That could mean social services, family services, police or any other group/ person with power over our safety. At times, when sex workers do approach authorities they do so at great risk. Provide the supports that are possible and do not make your help contingent on the provision of information by sex workers about their associates or networks.

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## 9. CLOSING REMARKS

This sex industry subculture will vary from place to place. In order to avoid miscommunications and to get information on how to best support sex workers one can access frontline sex worker organizations for advice. These groups understand local sex work culture and can serve as 'translators' for mainstream support services.

Remember, every situation and sex worker is unique. In your role as support staff you have an opportunity to be part of guiding sex workers in protecting themselves and reducing violence.

The high levels of violence experienced by sex workers is all of our responsibility and we hope the information herein contributes to strengthening relationships between sex workers and support staff.

On behalf of the BCCEC, we thank you for your interest in reducing violence among sex workers and we are grateful for the work you do!

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