

Dangerous and under the radar: New study examines ways to protect sex workers

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Sex work is unprotected, increasingly dangerous and needs to be decriminalized, according to a new report published in the *Canadian Review of Sociology*. Co-authored by Concordia University and University of Windsor researchers, the study calls for sweeping changes to sex work performed on and off the streets.

"We must not only change our laws, we must also revamp our attitudes and implement policies that protect the social, physical and psychological rights of [sex workers](#)," says first author Frances Shaver, chair and professor in Concordia's Department of Sociology and Anthropology. "Regardless of where and how they conduct their business, sex workers are left on their own to ensure their health and safety on the job."

Along with colleagues Jacqueline Lewis and Eleanor Maticka-Tyndale, from the University of Windsor, Shaver compiled data from over 450 interviews conducted with sex workers. The team also gathered intelligence from 40 [law enforcement officials](#) and public health advocates on the perils of the trade. "Even when victimized by others, sex workers are not afforded the rights of protection and redress that any other person in Canada can expect," Shaver observes.

Marginalized and denied protection

In 2007, sex workers launched [legal challenges](#) in the Ontario and British

Columbia Superior Courts against sections of the Canadian Criminal Code. They sued, claiming federal laws put them at higher risk, intensified their marginalization and violated the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. While a ruling in the B.C. case is pending, the Ontario court agreed the provisions in the Canadian Criminal Code deny sex workers protection and resources to ensure their well-being.

"Sex workers are out of sight and out of mind," she deplores, noting assaults include rape, gay bashing, robbery and harassment. "They've been pushed into industrialized or isolated neighborhoods, where lighting, access to public places and even people are sparse."

Shaver says the 2010 Ontario ruling brought to light issues most people never consider. "The public needs to be educated on this industry. Canadians generally don't know much about sex workers and that's created unwarranted fears," she says. "What little is known comes from media reports on crises, such as underage girls forced into sex rings. The reality is only a small number are in crisis."

The vast majority of sex workers are consenting adults who enter the field in order to pay their bills. "Most get into the business because they know someone who knows someone," says Shaver. "It's rare that boyfriends force girlfriends into sex work."

Most sex work conducted off streets

By most estimates, only 10 to 20 per cent of sex workers solicit clients off the street. The majority — 80 to 90 per cent — work from home, brothels and private establishments such as escort agencies, strip clubs or massage parlors.

That's why federal laws need to be amended. "Sharing and referring clients to each other makes the world safer for a sex worker but both

involve procuring," she says, adding home-based practice is illegal, too. "That's considered operating a bawdy house. Indoor sex work is safer yet it involves breaking our current laws if the location is fixed or shared with others."

New Zealand decriminalized its sex industry without negative consequence, although Shaver cautions against adopting that model. "You can't just pick policy from another county and move it in," she says. "It has to be developed as it was in New Zealand: in consultation with all stakeholders including sex workers, the ministry of health, other government organizations, police and citizens."

As for the number of sex workers who operate in Canada, no figures have ever been put forward. "It's hard to know just how many sex workers there are across the country, since many work under the radar," Shaver says. "But one thing's for certain — until new rules are in place, it will continue to be dangerous under the radar."

More information: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10...
18X.2011.01249.x/pdf](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/18X.2011.01249.x/pdf)

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