

DECOLONIZE OUR ACTIONS! PROVIDING SERVICES TO INDIGENOUS PERSONS INVOLVED IN THE SEX INDUSTRY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking (NORAHT) conducted a multi-year (2013-2020) community-based research project to learn how service providers are equipped to support persons¹ who experience violence, exploitation, and abuse in the sex trade, including human trafficking. NORAHT hosted community engagement sessions in eight northeastern Ontario communities, which were attended by persons with lived experience and service providers across various sectors. NORAHT also conducted interviews with persons with lived experience and gained feedback via surveys. The research participants identified significant gaps in resources and northern-specific barriers to service in our region. One of our key findings is the need for Indigenous-centered supports and decolonial practices.

This policy brief is written for non-Indigenous or “settler” Canadians who are interested in learning what it means to “decolonize our actions” with regard to providing service to those who experience violence, exploitation or abuse in the sex industry.

Recommendations:

1. *Listen, learn and engage in critical self-reflection* in order to dismantle colonial attitudes, behaviours and knowledges.
2. Take *specific actions* aimed at *concrete change* and the dismantling of colonial systems, laws and institutions.
3. *Honour the self-determination* of Indigenous persons involved in the sex industry by recognizing the *distinction between human trafficking and sex work*.
4. Take a *non-judgmental approach* and use *harm reduction* strategies.
5. Use a *trauma and violence informed approach* that makes space for Indigenous ways of knowing and recognizes the role of colonial violence in personal experiences of trauma.
6. Respectfully and meaningfully seek the *paid guidance and involvement of Elders, Indigenous persons with lived experience* in the sex industry, and *Indigenous communities* in your region in the design and delivery of programming.

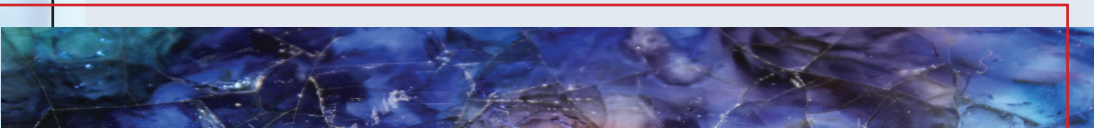
BACKGROUND

Canada is a **settler colonial** society. There is no “post” colonial in Canada. Colonialism continues through laws like the 1876 **Indian Act**, broken treaties, unceded yet occupied land, systemic racism, gender-based sexualized violence, intergenerational legacies of residential schools, and huge quality of life gaps for Indigenous peoples.

Gender-based and sexual violence is a fundamental component of colonialism. The imposition of European hetero-patriarchal structures on egalitarian and often matrilineal Indigenous societies has had lasting consequences, especially for women and Two Spirit people.²

¹ Although Indigenous youth, men and Two-Spirit persons are involved in the sex industry, our research focus is on Indigenous women. However, many of the recommendations in this policy brief are broadly applicable.

² Two Spirit, translated from the Ojibwe niizh manidoowag, is an umbrella term for a range of identities that encompass diverse sexualities and non-binary genders including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex and asexual people.



Colonial authorities excluded women and Two Spirit people from colonial governance structures and enforced binary and sexist gender roles through the residential school system (Dakin 2012). Gender discrimination in the *Indian Act* meant that status Indian women who “married out” lost their treaty entitlements and access to the land. The construction of Indigenous women as inherently sexually available was also key to the gendered dispossession of Indigenous land. In particular, First Nations women were “legislated as prostitute” by virtue of provisions in the *Indian Act* that allowed any First Nations woman found vagrant or intoxicated off-reserve to be criminalized as a prostitute. These provisions demonstrate clear connection between land dispossession and the disempowerment and dehumanization of Indigenous women. The National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls determined that these historic policies and their continuing legacies are **genocide**.

SETTLER DECOLONIZATION

Decolonization in a settler colonial society refers to the **dismantling of colonial knowledges, attitudes, behaviours, laws and institutions, and, ultimately, the return of Indigenous life and land** (Regan 2010; Tuck and Yang 2012).

Returning Indigenous land doesn’t mean all settlers have to leave Canada. Rather, as Kanien’kehá:ka scholar Taiaike Alfred (2009, 182) explains, it means “demonstrating respect for what we share – the land and its resources—and making things right by offering us the dignity and freedom we are due and returning enough of our power and land for us to be self-sufficient.”

Who is a Settler? There is some debate over whether people of colour are settlers, particularly Black peoples and their descendants who were forcibly brought to Turtle Island (North America) as slaves. Canada had legal Black slavery until 1834. For different reflections on this issue, see [Who Is a Settler, According to Indigenous and Black Scholars](#).

We find it useful to take an intersectional approach, noting that white supremacy and settler colonialism interact with class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc. This creates an uneven distribution of privilege and marginalization amongst Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (Jafri 2012). While white settlers experience different degrees of advantage and marginalization also, it is imperative to recognize that “whiteness” – and its attendant privileges – is produced through the interaction of Anti-Blackness, Indigenous genocide and Orientalism (Morgensen 2014).

The concept of “[structural complicity](#)” is helpful for thinking about “strategies and relations that reproduce social and institutional hierarchies” and the ways that we, from within our differential positions, “give ourselves... responsibility and become accountable” for enacting systemic change (Jafri 2012).

For Indigenous peoples, decolonization is about resistance to colonialism and the resurgence of Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Settler Canadians can be allies (or accomplices) in this work but not without also engaging in their own decolonizing practices, starting with **listening, learning** and **critical self-reflection**:

- Don’t ask Indigenous people to teach you about their experiences of colonization – that is not their job;
- Teach yourself (and other settlers) about colonialism as an ongoing structure in our society;
- When Indigenous people do offer insights and experiences, accept the hard truths they are telling us. Be humble. Listen more and speak less. The sharing space is not about you;
- Engage in critically reflexive autobiographical work that accounts honestly for settler legacies and connections to settlers’ own cultural and ancestral heritage;
- Decolonization is not easy. It is an uncomfortable and “unsettling” experience. It is not about “feeling bad” for Indigenous peoples or wanting to help them. It is not about wanting to “close a dark chapter” in our history. It is about changing ourselves and our society here and now.

- Sit with difficult feelings (anger, denial, shame, guilt, frustration, sadness) and ask yourself, or in conversation with other settlers, why you feel this way:
 - » What presumptions and understandings do you need to challenge?
 - » What images of yourself, of Canada, of the past (etc.) do you need to re-imagine or “re-story” in order to move toward relations of mutual respect, reciprocity and responsibility? (see Regan 2010)
- Act out of responsibility, not guilt.

While changing attitudes and behaviours are crucial to settler decolonization, we must also strive for **material change** and **substantive transformation** in the dismantling of colonial structures. Here are some specific actions you might take (see Korteweg and Root 2016; Land 2015):

- Learning your treaty obligations because we are all treaty people;
- Land-based experiences and acknowledgement of Indigenous Land;
- Responsibility for and actions to disrupt ongoing systemic settler colonialism in Canadian institutions such as education, law, policing, healthcare, child welfare;
- Supporting and making use of our privilege for the people we seek to work with;
- Directly helping an Indigenous person;
- Teaching other settlers about colonialism;
- Calling out racist stereotypes and jokes;
- Joining protests and campaigns.

To learn more about how to be a **settler-ally**, see:

- Lyn Gehl's [Ally Bill of Responsibility](#);
- Indigenous Action's [Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex](#);
- Unsettling America's [Allyship and Solidarity Guidelines](#); and
- PeerNetBC's [“what is allyship? why can't I be an ally?”](#)

DECOLONIZING SERVICES FOR INDIGENOUS PERSONS IN THE SEX INDUSTRY

It is important to acknowledge **that sex work and human trafficking are not the same**. Lumping all instances of exploitation, violence and abuse that Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit persons might experience in the sex industry under the umbrella of human trafficking “does nothing for their individual sovereignty over their bodies and freedom of movement, nor does it open up more options to them” (Hunt 2015/2016). Rather, the conflation of sex work and human trafficking reinforces the (historic) colonial presumption that all Indigenous women are inherently sexually available and therefore fated to be sexually exploited. This fails to recognize the self-determination of Indigenous sex workers or people engaging in survival sex.

Honouring self-determination also means that service providers should not impose strategies or solutions, such as ‘exit’ from the sex industry. Rather, it is imperative to support Indigenous women in their determination of what they need. This necessitates taking a **non-judgmental approach** and using **harm reduction** strategies.

Service providers should also employ a **decolonial trauma and violence informed approach** that:

- Recognizes the ongoing impact of systemic colonial violence, such as residential schools or the child welfare system
 - » Makes space for Indigenous ways of knowing (e.g., holistic worldview, ceremony, traditional healing);
- Unsettles Eurocentric paradigms (cultural awareness);
- Fosters relationality (between client and service provider, between client and community, etc.).

In the development and implementation of decolonial policies and approaches, service provider organizations should consider the following:

- Non-indigenous service providers should not be speaking for Indigenous peoples;
- Organizations should seek Elder guidance and the expertise of experiential Indigenous persons in all aspects of programming;
- Offer tobacco in the request for guidance and ensure that Elders and experiential persons are monetarily compensated for their time and expertise;
- Reach out to local Indigenous communities (Friendship Centers, local First Nations, etc.) to build relationships and to develop your services to fit local concerns and needs .

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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RECOMMENDED CITATION

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FURTHER NORAHT RESOURCES

Webinars:

Quenneville, Brenda and Gina Snooks. "[Intersectional Trauma-Informed Approaches to Human Trafficking in Northeastern Ontario.](#)" Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children, Learning Network. Webinar, 2019.

Nagy Rosemary and Kathleen Jodouin. "[Strategies for Service Provider Collaboration.](#)" Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking. Webinar. 2020.

Jodouin, Kathleen. "[Safer Places: Harm Reduction Strategies to Address Human Trafficking.](#)" Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking. Webinar. 2020.

Toolkits:

[“Trauma and Violence Informed Approaches to Human Trafficking: A Critical Reflection Workbook for Service Providers.”](#) North Bay: Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking, 2020.

[“Service Mapping Toolkit”](#). North Bay: Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking, 2020.

Policy Briefs:

“Violence, Exploitation and Abuse in the Sex Trade: Strategies for Service Provider Collaboration,” Policy Brief No. 1, Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking. 2020.

“Trauma and Violence Informed Approaches to Service Provision,” Policy Brief No. 2, Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking. 2020.

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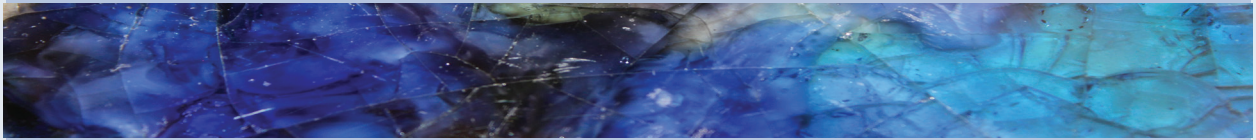
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Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. “Decolonization is not a Metaphor.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (1): 1-40.

GLASS IMAGE

Images by Brenda Quenneville

The image of one of Brenda's potted bowls is fused glass encased in pottery. It was chosen to represent not only the complexities associated with human trafficking, but highlights the possibility of transformation and resilience. In this pottery technique, coloured pieces of broken glass are layered on the bottom of a thick walled clay form. When the glass goes through the kiln within the pottery, the glass melts, fusing together in beautiful swirls of colour and texture resembling crystals. There is no absolute control in this process, it is up to the materials to transform and choose to revitalize. The resulting glass is stronger than it was before, as this new shape embedded in pottery asserts its identity. Through resiliency it is able to maintain its core purpose and integrity even in the face of dramatically changed pressures and circumstances.



WAVES IMAGE

The image of the waves is another piece of Brenda's pottery, this time a plate. The imprint of the waves are rolled onto a flattened piece of clay. The clay is then stretched to size and placed on a mould to shape it as it dries. The imprint is very delicate, and can be flattened easily. However, once it goes through the firing process, and glaze is added, the subtleties of the transformation emerge. When Brenda works with this motif, she often thinks how "Happiness comes in waves."

