

SAFER PLACES: HARM REDUCTION STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS HUMAN TRAFFICKING

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking (NORAHT) conducted a multi-year (2016-2020) 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 trafficking². 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 service providers to utilize a harm reduction approach and to prioritize safer places³ for women who experience(d) violence in the sex industry.

Recommendations

1. Take a **non-judgemental approach**. Be **aware of the presence and impact of the stigma** associated with sex work, human trafficking, substance use, and gender-based violence. Acknowledge and address potential stigma in your own practice.
2. Employ **peer led** initiatives. Take the lead from those with lived experience in the development and delivery of services. **Pay those experts** for their knowledge, skills, and time.
3. Prioritize **client's own goals**. Take a client centred approach that focuses on **empowerment** and **resiliency**.
4. Use a **trauma and violence-informed** approach that recognizes the pervasiveness of trauma and violence in the lives of women. Approach healing through **each person's unique experience**, aiming to do no harm.
5. Create **inclusive spaces** for women who have experienced violence in the sex industry. Utilize trauma informed design that respects **dignity**, addresses **safety** concerns, focuses on **wellbeing and culture**, and takes a **strength-based** approach
6. **Decolonize** personal and organizational practices. Ground policy, practices and programs in local Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and teachings. Acknowledge the pervasiveness and harms of colonization and **honour the self-determination** of Indigenous peoples.
7. Adopt **housing first** initiatives. Engage with community stakeholders to enact policies that increase **affordable housing** stock and increases housing support for women who have experienced violence.

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

² Note on language: through our research, we have moved away from the term trafficking in order to not define women's experiences or limit their participation based on our assumptions of their experiences. Thus, although we do refer to "trafficking" or "human trafficking," we see this as a subset of many forms of violence that may occur in the sex industry (i.e., rape, theft, assault, unsafe working conditions). We also want to recognize the lateral violence that has occurred due to the polarization of terms sex work and human trafficking.

³ We use the language of "safer" because no one place is safe for an individual at all times, and no one space will be safe for everyone. Space is a subjective and dynamic.



BACKGROUND

NORAHT takes a **critical anti-trafficking approach** that respects and promotes human dignity and self-determination of persons involved in the sex industry, whether by choice, circumstance or coercion. We clearly distinguish between sex work and human trafficking. Critical anti-trafficking approaches reject “rescue narratives” because such strategies can undermine trafficked persons’ human dignity and right to self-determination. It is NORAHT’s position that clients are experts in their own experience; therefore, service providers ought not to assume authority regarding the needs of persons with lived experience. Further, critical anti-trafficking strategies emphasize resiliency, resistance, and strength-based approaches.

HARM REDUCTION

Harm reduction emerged in the early 1980s in response to HIV infection among substance users (Riley, 2012). The use of harm reduction principles can reduce risk for those involved in the sex industry in similar ways that substance users have benefited from drug-use harm reduction (Rekart, 2006). Sex workers have developed strategies for modifying their risk and for coping with dangerous situations. Harm reduction strategies for trafficked persons should build upon these strategies and increase self-determination and autonomy (Rekart, 2006).

Harm Reduction Services

The importance of using a harm reduction approach was repeatedly brought up by women with lived experience of violence in the sex industry. Harm reduction has already been adopted by public health, sex work advocacy groups, and sex workers who have themselves developed strategies to modify risk and cope with their situations (Rekart, 2006). Whether a client is using substances or not, harm reduction services are appropriate to mitigate negative consequences and improve health and wellbeing while creating community and fostering inclusion. Harm reduction is focused on client-centred, trauma and violence-informed approaches that empower clients and promote strength and resilience. A non-judgemental practice that addresses the risk, and not the behaviour, does not identify inherently “good” or “bad” activities. Instead, harm reduction approaches value relationship-building, dignity and a client’s own ability to identify whether a given situation or action is positive or negative for them. Harm reduction services strive to be peer-led and to create safer spaces inclusive of lived experience.

Principles of Harm Reduction

There are key principles to harm reduction practice:

1. **Pragmatism:** Acknowledge the good, complex and multifaceted phenomenon that encompass the sex trade for both individuals and community.
2. **Human Rights:** Respect the human rights of clients, including rights to dignity, security and self-determination. Respect client’s choices for their own lives including when or how they receive services. Respect and promote clients’ dignity and remove judgement.
3. **Focus on Harms:** Rather than focussing on the activity or behaviour itself, focus on reducing the harms associated. Emphasize strategies to mitigate risks at all levels (structural and experiential).
4. **Maximize Options:** Recognize that no one solution works for all. Provide individuals with choices and work with them to access all the resources and supports they need to meet their identified goals.
5. **Priority of Immediate Goals:** Focus on the immediate goals that are client centred. Meet clients where they are at and celebrate fulfilled goals even if it is an incremental gain over time. Avoid penalization if goals are not met or there is a misstep.
6. **Lived Experience Involvement:** Involve lived experience at all levels of programming including design, provision, and evaluation. Recognize the value of lived experience through paid opportunities at all levels of the organization.

Indigenous Harm Reduction

Mainstream harm reduction has been criticized for focusing too strongly on individual choices and not enough on systemic change, especially on the need to disrupt colonization. (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network & Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development, 2019). Indigenous harm reduction involves reducing the harms of colonization. This means that harm reduction is not tied to substance use. Rather, it is a way of life embedded within traditional knowledge systems (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network & Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development, 2019). A key feature to decolonizing harm reduction is self-determination that centres power and control in places where it has been removed from indigenous people (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network & Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development, 2019). Decolonizing policy and programs to support the restoration of knowledge systems that see the spiritual world, the natural world and humanity as inter-related is critical to restoring the wellness of indigenous communities. (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network & Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development, 2019).

SAFER PLACES

A key tenet of harm reduction is creating safer places for folks who are marginalized. Our research identified a large housing gap, including lack of shelters, in Northeastern Ontario. Specifically, there is no human trafficking-specific shelter, and there is limited access to harm reduction housing services in the region. Further, there is a regional scarcity of affordable housing. These housing gaps can lead women to return to unsafe situations and increase the risk for violence in order to secure a roof over their head. Housing solutions need to include diversified stock so that there are places for women experiencing violence who require a shelter setting, or transitional supportive housing model or independent living.

Auditing Organizational Spaces for Harm Reduction

Although the priority is to create housing options in our communities, existing organizations can offer harm reduction services in response to the type of services requested by those who have been trafficked. Auditing organizational programs and services to determine if or how harm reduction can be incorporated into their delivery and service mapping with other organization in your community will begin to address the gap.

For your audit, ask whether your programs/services:

- Offer **harm reduction** services that are non-judgmental, relational, holistic and offer a low threshold for engagement?
- Meet the **needs of each individual**, recognize the complexity of experiences, offer a period of rest and acclimatization, and build relationships?
- Promote **dignity** through accessibility for all abilities, provide private spaces and showcase client's creativity and talents?
- Address **safety concerns** through offering private facilities, locked storage, clear sightlines and being pet-friendly?
- **Support health** and **wellbeing** with access to cultural spaces, incorporating nature and addressing financial literacy?
- Promote **empowerment** through a menu of choices, and peer led initiatives that celebrate strengths and focus on self-determination?

Trauma and Violence-Informed Design

It is also important to assess the organizational space to determine if it is aligned with trauma and violence-informed design. Trauma and violence-informed design includes:

- Spaces that are inviting and clear of clutter;
- Variety of seating options;
- Clear sightlines and visible entrances and exits;
- Outdoor spaces and use of natural elements;
- Cultural spaces and spiritual services;
- Use of calming colours and varied lighting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This brief was written by the Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking (NORAHT). NORAHT is a partnership between Nipissing University, the Anishinabek Nation, Victim Services of Nipissing District and Centered Fire Counselling and Consulting. We thank past partners Amelia Rising Sexual Assault Centre of Nipissing and the AIDS Committee of North Bay and Area. The research is generously supported by a Partnership Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). We acknowledge the Anishinabek peoples on whose territory we live under the Robinson-Huron Treaty.

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Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network & Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development. (2019, March). *Indigenous Harm Reduction = Reducing the Harms of Colonialism*.

Rekart, M. L. (2006). Sex-work harm reduction. *The Lancet*, 2123-2134.

Riley, D. P. (2012). A brief history of harm reduction. In R. D. Pates R, *Harm Reduction in substance use and high-risk behaviour: International policy and practice*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Kathleen Jodouin and Sydnee Wiggins "Safer places: Harm Reduction Strategies to Address Human Trafficking," Policy Brief No. 4, Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking. 2020

FURTHER NORAHT RESOURCES

Website:

Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking (NORAHT) website: <https://noraht.nipissingu.ca/noraht-research/webinars/>.

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.

Reports:

Rosemary Nagy, Gina Snooks, Rebecca Timms, Donna Debassige, Kathleen Jodouin, Brenda Quenneville and Lanyan Chen, "Transitions and Fluidity: Exploring Women's Agency in the Sex Industry," North Bay: Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking, 2020.

Policy Briefs:

“Violence, Exploitation and Abuse in the Sex Industry: 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.

“Decolonize Our Actions! Providing Services to Indigenous Persons involved in the Sex Industry,” Policy Brief No. 3, Northeastern Ontario Research Alliance on Human Trafficking. 2020.

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 is 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.”

