



May 2, 2023.

**Brief Submission to the Standing Committee On The Status of Women for the Study on:
Human Trafficking of Women, Girls and Gender-Diverse Individuals in Canada**

Aura Freedom extends its gratitude to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women for the opportunity to submit a brief on its study on Human Trafficking of Women, Girls, and Gender Diverse People. We are heartened by these efforts and hopeful for meaningful engagement.

ABOUT AURA FREEDOM:

Aura Freedom is a grassroots feminist organization working to eradicate male violence against women and human trafficking (HT) through advocacy, education, research and survivor support. Our Founding Director, Marissa Kokkoros, has worked in numerous countries addressing sex trafficking, including India, Nepal, Kenya, and Italy. With over a decade of human trafficking prevention and survivor support experience, Aura Freedom has consulted at the Regional, Provincial and Federal levels of government for anti-trafficking strategies and plans, advocating for approaches that use an intersectional feminist and human rights lens. We are a member of several coalitions addressing HT around the world and have been recognized internationally for our feminist research on gender-based violence and human trafficking.

In 2021, we received the **Mayor's Community Safety Award** from the City of Toronto for our work preventing youth trafficking. In the same year, we [launched](#) our [Human Trafficking Info Hub](#), a grassroots hub of resources and knowledge which has quickly become a trusted resource for frontline workers, school boards, Police, and other community partners across Canada. In late 2023, Aura Freedom and a pan-Canadian network of stakeholders is set to launch a set of guidelines for better media reporting of human trafficking in Canada.

BACKGROUND:

Preventing Human Trafficking by Addressing Root Causes and Centering Marginalized Communities

Although the statement "*Anyone can be trafficked*" is true, there are communities that have historically been targeted and face higher risks of exploitation. Targeted communities include women/girls, Indigenous women/children, Black women/children, children in foster care, 2SLGBTQ+ youth, migrant women, and others. If we fail to recognize how human trafficking affects certain communities differently in Canada, we will do more harm than good. Intersectionality matters.

"When we work to advance equity, we are working to end human trafficking because human trafficking is a manifestation of inequity. Indeed, exploitation and abuse thrive in conditions of inequity, where there is an imbalance of power, and where there are needs to fill. You can't traffic someone who is enjoying a life of good health, stability, community and care." Marissa Kokkoros, Executive Director, Aura Freedom

Prevention will only happen when we advance equity by addressing the root causes of HT, including:

- Gender inequality and patriarchy, which are deeply connected to sex trafficking as they perpetuate harmful gender norms, the hyper-sexualization of women/girls in media, unhealthy masculinity, victim blaming, rape culture, and more
- Colonialism, systemic racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia and xenophobia
- Poverty, which is linked to inequalities and the marginalization of communities
- Systemic inequities and gaps in social services including foster care/child welfare, housing, education, police/criminal justice, healthcare, and more.

Recognizing Coercive Control

Coercive Control is an insidious form of violence that is constant, repetitive, deceitful, and aims to break a person down from the inside.¹

¹ *Human Trafficking Information Hub*, Aura Freedom International, Nov. 2021, <https://aurafreedom.org/relentless-resilience/human-trafficking-info-hub/>.



Coercive Control is hard to 'see', but is present in all sex trafficking situations. Indeed, it is every trafficker's favourite tool. In many cases of human trafficking, Coercive Control is not understood by frontline workers and those in the criminal justice system, resulting in survivors not getting the support they need and many returning to their traffickers or being re-trafficked by others. We must flip the script from "Why don't they just leave?" to understanding Coercive Control.

The Non-Punishment Principle

Human trafficking is often viewed through the lens of crime, but it must be viewed as a human rights abuse before anything else. The focus on crime is problematic for many reasons. If we focus on crime, we will also focus on the many 'crimes' that survivors are forced and coerced to commit by their traffickers, which include: carrying drugs/arms, committing petty crimes, credit card fraud/identity fraud, recruiting others for their trafficker to sexually exploit, and more. Many of the survivors Aura Freedom has worked with were criminalized during their trafficking experience. Essentially, they were punished for crimes that were completely out of their hands, and these convictions will follow them, and their families, for the rest of their lives.

The 2002 Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights recognized the issue of criminalization of human trafficking survivors and that such victims must be provided with protection over punishment for their unlawful acts in direct consequence of their trafficking.² *The Non-Punishment Principle* was established precisely due to the rising recognition that trafficked persons were being punished for their involvement in unlawful activities committed while they were being trafficked.

Peer to Peer Recruitment

Peer-to-Peer Recruitment is when sex trafficking victims/survivors recruit peers for their traffickers to exploit.³ For example, traffickers know that youth have easier and greater access to other young people and can pose as a friend or romantic partner without raising red flags. Peer-to-Peer Recruitment may take place in schools, group homes, homeless shelters, online, or anywhere targeted communities interact. It is very common in sex trafficking situations and almost always done under coercion, threats and/or force. Survivors have no choice or opportunity to object, and some may not see the situation as exploitative due to trauma.

Peer-to-Peer Recruitment is strategically employed by traffickers to maintain control over their victims. As one survivor's trafficker would say: "See, now you're a pimp, too. The police will never help you." Oftentimes, recruiting others increases a survivor's own safety, as it puts them in 'good favour' with their trafficker. It may also mean that they can take fewer sex clients themselves. Peer-to-peer recruiters are also victims of human trafficking, which is why it is crucial to employ the Non-Punishment Principle mentioned previously.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Prioritize Prevention by Addressing Root Causes and Centering Marginalized Groups**

Aura Freedom urges the Committee to focus on upstream, preventative measures to address human trafficking in Canada. This means sustainable and ample funding for prevention work that advances equity, empowers marginalized communities, addresses gender and racial discrimination, decolonizes systems, and more. While it is crucial to ensure that survivors are supported and frontline services funded, it is even more important to prevent HT from happening in the first place. If we fail to prioritize prevention, we will continue to see two victims leave a safe house, and another two arrive.

"There is no 'quick fix' to human trafficking. Those of us doing intersectional HT prevention work know that we will never witness the end of human trafficking in our lifetime, but we also know that our work has contributed to the generational

² *Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking*, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Nov. 2002.

³ *For Parents*, Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, 2020, <https://www.canadiancentretoendhumantrafficking.ca/for-parents/>.



change needed to eradicate human trafficking and gender-based violence for good.” Marissa Kokkoros, Executive Director, Aura Freedom

- **Investigate Familial Trafficking:** An under-studied and under-reported form of human trafficking, we urge the Committee to mobilize research into the human trafficking of family members and inter-generational sex trafficking to better understand its nuances, prevent victimization, and support survivors.
- **Employ the Non-Punishment Principle:** Ensure survivors and victims of trafficking are not punished for crimes they were forced and/or coerced to commit while being exploited in the sex trade or that they committed along with their traffickers. A failure to employ the Non-Punishment Principle significantly impacts victims as it may discourage them to come forward, cooperate with investigations, and negatively affect the justice system at large. In this same light, expunge all convictions of crimes committed by human trafficking survivors in the context of their status as trafficking victims.
- **Utilize Existing International Law and Legislation:** Canada ratified the Palermo Protocol (which highlights coercion) in 2002.⁴ There is also other human rights legislation (CEDAW, UNDRIP, The Convention on the Rights of The Child, and more) that explicitly address the violence, abuse, oppression and exploitation faced by trafficking victims. We urge the Committee to consider this legislation where Canadian legislation is lacking.
- **Officially Recognize Coercive Control:** It is important to explicitly identify and criminalize Coercive Control in Canada’s Criminal Code, and recognize its key role in human trafficking cases. Coercive Control is a cornerstone of human trafficking and is what keeps victims in the cycle of abuse and trauma-bonded to their traffickers. We recommend seeking out community GBV/HT experts who know the many nuances of Coercive Control and can inform policies, legislation and action plans with accurate and intersectional knowledge.
- **Recognize and Address the Foster Care to Sex Trafficking Pipeline for Indigenous Children in Care:** Many Indigenous girls enter the criminal justice system due to minor incidents in child welfare facilities. For instance, they might get into a physical altercation with a peer and are then sent to detention centres. Here, they meet recruiters working for sex traffickers, many of them being exploited themselves. Given the rates of Indigenous children in care, it is safe to say that their overrepresentation in foster care directly leads to their overrepresentation in sex trafficking stats. In other words, Canada’s colonial systems put Indigenous children at a higher risk of exploitation **from the moment they are born.**⁵
- **Seek Out and Sustain Grassroots Human Trafficking Organizations:** We urge the Committee to seek out and enlist ‘unlikely’ grassroots HT advocates and groups; those working quietly under the radar with little to no funding, but still doing the heavy lifting. These community advocates have a lot of expertise, but it is often the larger organizations, with sustainable funding, who are brought to the table when designing action plans and legislation. If you do work with grassroots organizations, it is important to respect, credit, and compensate their work in the same manner as stakeholders in criminal justice, health care, and academia. There is something to be said about honouring the emotional and intellectual labour that goes into grassroots work to change the trajectory of grassroots organizations who are under-compensated and under-appreciated, but still showing up to do brilliant and difficult work.

We thank the Committee for considering this brief on Human Trafficking of Women, Girls and Gender-Diverse Individuals in Canada and look forward to working closer with you in the future.

For further information, contact Marissa Kokkoros at marissa@aurafreedom.org.

⁴ *Actions to Combat Human Trafficking*, Public Safety Canada, 25 Aug. 2022.

⁵ Aura Freedom’s Gender-Based Violence Resource Centre - *Violence Against Indigenous Women, Girls, 2SLBGTQQIA+ Peoples*. Aura Freedom and Native Women’s Resource Centre, 2020, <https://aurafreedom.org/relentless-resilience/violence-against-indigenous-women/>.