



Position Statement Title: Sexual Exploitation

Prepared by SERC's Policy and Advocacy Committee

Date: April 8, 2024

Pages: 5

Review Date: April 8, 2027

Overview

Sexuality Education Resource Centre Manitoba Inc. (SERC) is a leader in sexual health education grounded in principles of consent, bodily autonomy, and equitable access to sexual and reproductive health services. As part of our commitment to healthy sexuality, we have identified sexual exploitation as a concern for our local, national, and global communities.

Sexual Exploitation Defined

According to the United Nations, sexual exploitation is “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another” (2017, p. 6). Child exploitation occurs when the exploited person is under the age of 18.

Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking

Sexual exploitation and human trafficking are not always connected. Human trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, and/or holding of persons for the purpose of exploiting their labor or aiding someone else to exploit their labor (Public Safety Canada, 2022). **Sex trafficking is human trafficking that involves the exploitation of sexual labour** (Public Safety Canada, 2023).

Sexual Exploitation is Different from Sex Work

Sexual exploitation is not the same as sex work, although they are often inaccurately grouped together. Sex work may include but is not limited to pornography, stripping, camming, phone work, and transactional sex. Sex work occurs in a wide range of workplaces and settings. Sex work is a transactional exchange of money or other resources for consensual sex between adults (UNAIDS, 2014; NSWP, 2019). Sexual exploitation occurs when the exchange does not involve mutually informed consent or when the individual is under the age of 18. SERC's position against sexual exploitation does not include sex work. SERC supports sex workers' human and labour rights.

It is crucial to distinguish between sex work and sexual exploitation because efforts to prevent sexual exploitation and/or sex trafficking often intentionally or inadvertently harm sex workers. For example, the United Nations considers the criminalization of selling or buying sex as a violation of human rights, which negatively impacts sex workers; criminalizing sex workers or their clients dismisses and negates

their right to individual self-determination and autonomy (UNAIDS, 2014, p. 1). In the Canadian context, laws criminalizing third parties have created barriers to safer work for sex workers by criminalizing drivers, security personnel, and client screening supports (Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform, 2015). SERC values autonomy, choice, and harm reduction. SERC does not endorse the criminalization of sex work or sex workers and emphasizes the importance of understanding sexual exploitation as an issue apart from sex work. Anti-sex work groups often intentionally conflate sex work with sexual exploitation in a (largely successful) attempt to confuse the public and influence government policy and funding.

The Impact of Sexual Exploitation

Anyone may experience sexual exploitation regardless of age, sex, ethnicity, gender, economic status, or any other factor. However, the prevalence of sexual exploitation among women and transgender individuals is especially high. Groups such as Indigenous youth, refugee and immigrant teens, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth are also disproportionately affected (Shuker & Pearce, 2019). Social determinants of health, such as colonization, poverty, and structural violence, contribute to conditions that increase the risk of sexual exploitation.

Because of the extremely hidden nature of this type of crime, it is challenging to find representative studies and exact statistics concerning the prevalence of sex trafficking in children and youth. However, some studies present estimates. The International Labor Organization (2022) estimates that approximately 6.3 million people worldwide are in a situation of sexual exploitation, including more than 1.6 million children.

Contributing Factors to Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation is a complex issue, and there are several contributing social and economic factors that increase the risk of sexual exploitation. Individual, familial, and societal circumstances, including poverty, have a significant influence on who becomes vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Some individuals seeking emotional connection may engage in an online or in-person relationship with an abuser intent on grooming the individual for future exploitation through promises of love and affection. Sexual exploitation often continues due to a dependency created by the abuser, including food, shelter, emotional support, drugs, or threats of violence.

Additionally, being unhoused significantly increases the risk of sexual exploitation. More than one in three unhoused youth experience sexual exploitation (Saewyc et al., 2013). The reasons for youth street involvement are complex. Children may run away from family or foster homes because the streets seem to be a better alternative to traumatic home life. Others experience street involvement after aging out of foster care. An estimated 50% of unhoused Winnipeg youth became street-involved when they aged out of care (Owczar, 2019).

Canadian immigration programs that grant dependent status, including the Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP) and the Fiancée Visa, create situations where individuals are dependent on caregivers and leave women particularly vulnerable to trafficking. Although the specifics of each program differ, both tie women's immigration status in Canada to their commonly male employers or sponsoring fiancée. For instance, the LCP grants temporary status in Canada to work exclusively for the employer listed on the

work visa and requires that caregivers live in the employer's home. The relationship between immigration status and the employer creates a power imbalance that increases risks of exploitation, especially for women, who make up many LCP migrant workers (Oxman-Martinez et al., 2001).

The proximity of industrial camps, such as those for hydro or oil projects, also increases rates of sexual exploitation for neighbouring communities and Indigenous populations (Gibson et al., 2017; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019).

Why SERC Cares About Sexual Exploitation

Understanding the impact of the trauma of sexual exploitation is critical to designing meaningful and effective interventions. The effects of sexual exploitation can be detrimental to the emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical well-being of those experiencing exploitation (Corbett, 2018). Effects may include mental health conditions such as anxiety and stress disorders, depression, eating disorders, learning disorders, PTSD, dissociative disorder, self-harm, sleep disorders, and substance abuse (Perkins & Ruiz, 2017). Individuals impacted by sexual exploitation have increased risks for sexually transmitted infections, physical violence, and unwanted pregnancy (Kenny et al., 2019). Thoughts of suicide and attempts of suicide are not uncommon among victims (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018).

Current State

Sexual exploitation and human trafficking are of serious concern in Manitoba (Ferland et al., 2012). Criminalization of the sale or purchase of sex does not address the root causes of structural and systemic violence that create situations for sexual exploitation, and research has shown that criminalization increases harm and risk of violence (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2014). Population health approaches of harm reduction and addressing social determinants of health, such as those outlined in the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, provide the tools needed to address the underlying factors that result in vulnerability to sexual exploitation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Key Considerations and Recommendations

SERC's Commitments

- Continue to educate Manitobans, service providers, guardians, and community leaders on child sexual exploitation and prevention methods.
- Continue working with relevant partners to educate Manitobans on sexual exploitation and its impacts.
- Continue our partnership with organizations in Manitoba that work towards eliminating human trafficking and sexual exploitation.
- Support the endeavors of the Sex Workers of Winnipeg Action Coalition (SWWAC).
- Educate our staff and board on sexual exploitation, child sexual exploitation, and human trafficking.
- Include child sexual exploitation and human trafficking prevention information within all relevant SERC educational materials and programs.
- Honour the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and calls from the MMIWG2S report and C2C 2019 Findings through meaningful and intentional action.
- Ensure that materials and resources used do not conflate sex work with sexual exploitation.

Calls to Action:

- Advocate for decriminalization of sex work and reduction of stigma against sex workers.
- Engage in educational efforts about sexual exploitation using strength-based, trauma-informed approaches.
- Advocate for social policies that address social determinants of health, including poverty reduction and enhanced access to health and social services.
- Advocate for social policies that support anti-oppression, including anti-racism and reconciliation.
- Support the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, especially 18-42.
- Support the implementation of harm reduction strategies across the province.

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