

AWCEP – Panel Speech National Trafficking Conference

November 9th, 2012

My name is Sarah Mah, and I am here as a member of the Asian Women Coalition Ending Prostitution.

We are a Canadian Asian women feminist group based in Vancouver, and our membership includes Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and Filipina women. It is entirely possible to end the practice of prostitution, and we challenge the promotion and normalization of prostitution. Our group advocates for the abolition of prostitution as a form of violence against women, and we work to build awareness about the harms of prostitution to Asian women. We also aim to expose the connection between prostitution and human trafficking. Our focus is mostly local, and so my talk today will center around Vancouver, but we also have connections with women and organizations around the world that are also working to eradicate the global trade in women.

As Asian women, we have a major investment in what happens in prostitution. Making up about half a billion of the world's population, prostitution and human trafficking in Asian women and girls has become a global phenomenon. We know that of the people who are trafficked, a majority of women are trafficked specifically for prostitution, and they are overwhelmingly women of colour, poor women and from third world countries. Prostitution entrenches racism and amplifies the effect of sexism on everyone.

A legacy of American troops in countries like Vietnam and South Korea has created red light districts. Drugs, alcohol, and brothels continue to be used to placate and control soldiers stationed in those parts of the world. Many Asian countries, such as Thailand, have been sex tourism centres for the Western visitors. We also think of these-called “comfort women” recruited from Korea,

China, Japan, and the Philippines, trafficked and sexually exploited by the Japanese military.

The situation in Vancouver is an important place in this discussion. As with most places, the poorest women of colour are recruited to prostitution – and specifically, recruited to the most dangerous forms of prostitution. We see Native women in street-level prostitution. We see Asian women in massage parlours. Some are trafficked, illegally/legally, internationally/domestically. Some get here on student visas, or as mail-order brides. Many women from the Philippines are persuaded to come to Canada through the live-in caregiver program, and later experience unfair employment conditions, abuse, and sometimes sexual abuse. It's also important to note that about a third of Vancouver's population is Asian, and that it is a port city, which serves as a major access point for organized crime and drug trafficking. These are often connected to the sex trade and support it.

The link between human trafficking and prostitution is undeniable. Both target the poorest, most vulnerable women, and the men use elements of force, coercion, deception and exploitation in both cases. Prostitution fuels the majority of human trafficking, taking advantage of globalization, as well as the social and economic disparities between and within countries. We know from other countries such as Australia and New Zealand that legalizing prostitution directly increases the size of the sex industry, as well as the demand for more women and girls in the sex trade. In places where prostitution is legal, the buying, selling, control, and violence of pimps and johns towards women is tolerated and normalized. These are the societal conditions that facilitate the trafficking and exploitation of women. We cannot talk about how we prevent and target human trafficking without addressing how we will prevent and target prostitution.

A couple of years ago we looked more closely at two particular avenues through which Asian women are widely and blatantly advertised – local newspapers The

Straight and The Westender in particular, as well as the online classifieds listings, Craigslist.

(The Straight and Westender are entertainment-focused weekly papers. The Westender does not seem to carry these ads anymore.)

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We discovered that Asian women were disproportionately featured in these ads. In a sample we took in June 2010, 53% of the adult service classified ads in the Westender, and 44% in the Georgia Straight, featured Asian women. These papers alone profit on adult service listings by as much as \$75,000 per week.

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We also analyzed the erotic ads on Craigslist when it existed. We got together as a group of six women, and looked at the content of a full day's worth of Craigslist erotic ads. We looked at who the women were, read their descriptions, kept track of what time the advertisement was posted, and how men could get access to her.

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We looked at all of these elements in the 1472 ads coming out over 24 hours, which should give you an idea of the scale we're talking about, and it was a huge undertaking. Doing the math, you could say that in some sense, a woman goes on sale every minute.

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We noticed that race was mentioned a lot – especially for Asian women. One of our major findings was that 67%, over half of the advertisements marketed Asian women, and in most cases (almost 90% of ads), an Asian race was used as a

selling factor. When we looked at the ads marketing non-Asian women, only 23% marketed their racial background. This illustrated to us, in a very concrete way, how prostitution is both a racist and sexist practice.

We then took all of the major newspaper and internet advertisements that provided a physical address, and marked them on a map.

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What struck us the most was the sheer density of brothels, and how they are embedded in our neighborhoods. You could encourage people to take a closer look around their neighborhood shopping area as the massage parlours are very ordinary in the landscape of most cities now. Keep in mind – many of these establishments are licensed as businesses. Local municipalities could impose checks and restrictions if they chose to¹. And now, with so-called ‘neighborhood-based projects, law enforcement and community officials have openly said they may not respond to the concerns of residents when they see prostitution happening in their neighborhoods, which could take the form of a pimp or a john prowling the street. The impact of those decisions effectively means that women and children will be particularly vulnerable to prostitution in these areas, and the people that live and work there will also be powerless to demand safety for themselves and others.

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Both the prevalence of the advertising, and this failure of the municipalities to effectively challenge the operation of prostitution businesses in Vancouver and other cities all over the world has consequences for all women – in and out of

¹Suzanne: The massage parlour in Kerrisdale is suing the city for refusing to give them a licence because so many people have complained to city hall about suspected prostitution. The parlour as of last week was still in operation. The city is being attacked for doing their job. They are acting on reports/complaints as they should.”

prostitution. In the same way that pornography shapes men's expectations of women, and men's expectations of certain women – poor women, women of colour, Aboriginal women, Asian women – so too do these advertisements. The ads, the images, the existence of brothels, convince men that domination and entitlement is an ideal relationship to women, which all women have to deal with one way or another. We know that this model gets reproduced to varying degrees - in sexual and non-sexual relationships, in marriage, in workplaces, in rape and sexual assault, in prostitution.

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About a year and a half ago, the heat was put on Craigslist in the US about the fact that the free classifieds listings aided the activities of human traffickers and child prostitution. We and other local and national women's groups have seen Craigslist as cooperating with the entire sex industry (not only those who relocate the women). The problem has to do with the subordination of women, and is closely connected to the powerlessness of children. A few months after Craigslist closed its Erotic Services section in the US, they did the same for their Canadian websites. What happened after showed us it was, in fact, a small, and short-lived victory.

Other classified ads websites such as backpages.com picked up the slack and experienced a huge cashboom with the elimination of Craigslist Erotic services section.

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The ads for prostituted women also came back on Craigslist itself – only they were re-categorized.

There is a particular promotion and imposition of the prostitution on Asian women. Here, Asian women are often isolated by culture and language, and harsh

immigration laws are a deterrent for women to speak out. Help and assistance to women escaping prostitution is scarce, with minimal funding to transition houses and rape crisis centres.

Canada's treatment of immigrant women and refugee women has recently taken a turn for the worse. In June, several harsh immigration and refugee reforms took effect in the form of Bill C-31. In particular, significant cuts to the Interim Federal Health Program, designed to provide essential and preventative health care to refugees and those applying for refugee status. Another objective of the bill is the creation of conditional permanent residence, which means that permanent residence can be revoked at the discretion of the Minister of Immigration, Jason Kenney, and allows for a person to be deported. Particularly dangerous is proposed conditional permanent residence for sponsored spouses, which means is a sponsored woman who does not stay with her sponsor (which is often her husband) for at least two years, she could lose her status and face deportation. This legislation increases the power of the battering husbands over women, especially women solicited by men as mail-order brides, and increases the already incredible leverage that pimps and brothel owners have over the women they recruit into massage parlours and brothels.

The laws against human trafficking are adequate, and yet most traffickers remain immune to arrest. This is due in part to the lack of understanding of human trafficking, and the socioeconomic pressures and lack of viable options women face. Trafficked women are hesitant to seek help from the police for fear of being criminalized and deported. Services available for trafficking victims are inconsistent throughout the country, and it is often poorly funded women's groups that take the responsibility of providing those services. This lack of funding is an indication that Canada does not prioritize women's equality. Although Canada does issue Temporary Resident Permits (TRPs) that are meant to aid victims by

providing food, healthcare, and shelter, one in four trafficking victims were denied the permits between 2006 and 2008.

So far, the only legislative strategy we know of that is compatible with women's social, political, and economical security is the full abolition of prostitution. It consists of decriminalizing the women, criminalizing the johns and the pimps, and providing prostitution exit services and prevention strategies for women – things like a guaranteed livable income, universal childcare, education and employment opportunities. This would be the gendered strategy to prostitution, and the approach that is most in line with human rights law that says that “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.” “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” and “Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.”

I invite you to learn about the Nordic model and help us put this progressive approach in front of more people and legislators as a means to prevent the normalization of prostitution, as it is inseparable from human trafficking.

Other steps to take are to support the criminalization of those who profit and exploit women and children in all cases of human trafficking and prostitution. Support the recognition that women and children are coerced by circumstance and vulnerability to human traffickers – so they should never be arrested or criminalized for prostitution.

Prioritizing the prevention of trafficking is connected to abolishing prostitution, and we need to provide the leadership in terms of what we can expect the state, the courts, law enforcement, and the general public to do. The courts need to successfully enforce the laws already in place to arrest and charge traffickers, pimps, and johns. The requirement for law enforcement to establish coercion

when they are trying to lay trafficking charges should be eliminated, because coercion is almost always inherent in trafficking. In the area of immigration, automatically grant landed status to women upon arrival to Canada to undermine the power of the employer, the husband, family, church, state, or any entity that could use deportation or lack of supports to non-landed, non-citizens to threaten a woman into compliance with violence and/or exploitation.

Support and enable the autonomous women's groups that are currently doing the work of providing services to trafficked women, including prevention and escape. Support our work to prevent women from being vulnerable to pimps and recruiters and traffickers in the first place. Promote adequate funding to the women's groups that would enable them to fully carry out the advocacy necessary to make a significant difference in the lives of those who have been trafficked and prostituted.