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### Sex Trafficking, Survival Sex, and the Role of Consent in the Lives of Aboriginal Canadian Women and Girls

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## Sex Trafficking, Survival Sex, and the Role of Consent in the Lives of Aboriginal Canadian Women and Girls

Aboriginal women and girls are labeled as particularly vulnerable to domestic human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation within Canada. Human trafficking involves the recruitment, transporting, transferring, holding, concealing or harbouring a person, or exercising control, direction or influence over the movements of a person, for the purpose of exploiting that person or facilitating their exploitation. Trafficking typically involves sexual exploitation or forced labour. Domestic trafficking takes place when victims are trafficked within the borders of a country. The RCMP, government agencies, news sources and social service providers recognize that Aboriginal women and girls make up a large number of trafficking victims within Canada. The existing literature provides limited understanding of the lives of Aboriginal women and girls entrenched in these situations. This study seeks to discover what the available literature reveals about the experiences of Aboriginal females domestically trafficked in the Canadian sex trade.

The purpose of this study is to explore various factors that make Aboriginal women and girls vulnerable to sex trafficking by evaluating peer-reviewed literature. This study will also discuss the role of consent within the lives of Aboriginal women and girls involved in the survival sex trade, and examine the potential for blurred distinctions between survival sex and trafficking within the lives of many Aboriginal Canadian females. To clarify, survival sex is when a person exchanges sex acts for basic necessities, such as food, shelter, clothing, or protection. The reviewed literature reveals high numbers of women wishing to exit prostitution and being unable to do so, as well as numerous other exploitative factors that point to a lack of choice in the lives of many Aboriginal women and girls. This research involves using the Canadian Criminal Code to describe how, in some cases, survival sex work for Aboriginal women and girls may lead into, or stem from, sex trafficking.

Despite the wide recognition that Aboriginal women and girls are particularly vulnerable to domestic trafficking in Canada, very little research has been done that describes the experiences from the perspectives of victim/survivors. Benjamin Perrin (2010) lists potential risk factors in Aboriginal communities that may make Aboriginal females particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation in Canada in his book *Invisible Chains*. These factors include poverty, domestic violence, inadequate laws and services, crime, the legacy of colonization, and lack of awareness, education, and acknowledgement of the problem.

A few articles have been published that describe sex trafficking of Aboriginal females within Canada. Anupriya Sethi (2007) wrote an article entitled *Domestic Sex Trafficking of Aboriginal Girls in Canada: Issues and Implications*. Sethi (2007) identifies why Aboriginal girls are so vulnerable to trafficking, recruitment methods that traffickers use to target them, and includes policy recommendations that acknowledge sex trafficking and the need for indigenous healing. Mark Totten (2009) completed research on Aboriginal girls who are

trafficked in Canadian gangs, and had similar results explaining why Aboriginal girls are vulnerable, and the need for culturally appropriate interventions and healing. Most research done within this area has been conducted by contacting social service organizations and government agencies, but not with actual victims or survivors of domestic sex trafficking that are of Aboriginal descent.

A literature review similar to this study was completed by Nina Koebel at the University of Ottawa in 2014, detailing the experiences of Aboriginal women and girls domestically trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation, and suggests reducing vulnerability and recognizing and addressing the domestic trafficking problem. This research is a review of this body of knowledge that encompasses similar information about vulnerability and exploitation of Aboriginal women and girls, but also explores the topic of consent and the role this plays in the lives of trafficking victim/survivors.

The search for articles was conducted using five online databases including *Scholars Portal*, *JSTOR*, *Taylor and Francis Journals*, *Project Muse*, and *Google Scholar*. The following keywords were employed to guide the search: Indigenous, Aboriginal, Metis, First Nations, Native, sex trafficking, survival sex, sexual trafficking, Canada, and North America. The specified date range was between 1990 and 2014. A total of fifty-four articles were analyzed. In order to be included, a study needed to either focus on Aboriginal females or have Aboriginal participants, and focus on survival sex work, sex trafficking, or violent experiences in the sex trade. The final 15 articles chosen for review contained one or more elements of the following: prostitution of Aboriginal youth, Aboriginal heritage as a risk factor for becoming involved in the sex trade, studies with large proportions of Aboriginal participants, or studies that included culturally appropriate preventative measures and healing techniques. Articles were independently reviewed and categorized into common themes by this author.

The term “trafficking” was applied scarcely throughout the reviewed literature when describing exploitative activities, even when participants declared experiences of coercion, force, or fraud. Defining consent was a major concern with many of the cases. Social services for Aboriginal women and girls wishing to exit the sex trade are often inadequate, and many participants desired to exit but did not have the means. High rates of drug and alcohol abuse were prevalent throughout the studies. Both physical and emotional health concerns were detailed, including gendered vulnerabilities to HIV. Violence was an ongoing theme throughout the majority of the articles, including through gang involvement. Poverty was identified as a highly influential factor that pushes Aboriginal women and girls into the sex trade. Poverty is often linked to colonialism, racism, and sexism, as marginalized populations typically face barriers when trying to access employment, education, and support. This creates a complex intersection of oppressive factors that promote the exploitation of many Aboriginal women and girls. The need for holistic prevention and intervention services was frequently stated throughout the articles. Identifying the gaps in knowledge has the potential to lead to further research that creates a space for Aboriginal women and girls to have their voices heard.