

Criminalization of clients undermines sex workers' occupational health & safety

Since 2014, sex work in Canada has been regulated under a legal framework known as 'end-demand criminalization'. A central part of this framework is to **criminalize sex workers' clients**.

Drawing on 47 in-depth interviews with sex workers and third parties (e.g. managers & phone handlers) in Metro Vancouver, **we found that client criminalization:**

- 1 Frames all clients as violent or coercive**, despite most participants describing their clients as non-predatory, 'average' people.
- 2 Exacerbates experiences of industry-wide stigma**, and negatively influences client-sex worker interactions. This increases risk of occupational harms and reduces access to protective services.
- 3 Increases clients' fear of being 'outed'** and thus reduces clients' willingness to share personal information. This limits sex workers' ability to screen clients and increases the risk of violence.
- 4 Reduces workers' ability to report violence or theft to police.** Lack of police protections heightens risk of violence and put indoor sex work venues at increased risk of robbery & theft.

- 5 Perpetuates structural and institutional racism and xenophobia.** Racialized and im/migrant sex workers disproportionately experience negative impacts of end-demand criminalization, including increased police surveillance and barriers to health, social and protective services due to fear of discrimination, loss of immigration status or criminal charges.

"For most people, their understanding of what a client is, is very far from what we know a client to be. [...] People that do not work in sex work [see all] clients as perverted predators, horrible men."

"If clients are nervous about giving away their personal information, then it makes me not as safe because I don't have as much about their background."

Recommendations to supports sex workers' health and safety:

- Fully decriminalize sex work, including the removal of laws, policies and practices that criminalize clients.
- Implement policy interventions that address the structural conditions that harm sex workers (e.g. occupational protections, efforts to eliminate stigma).

