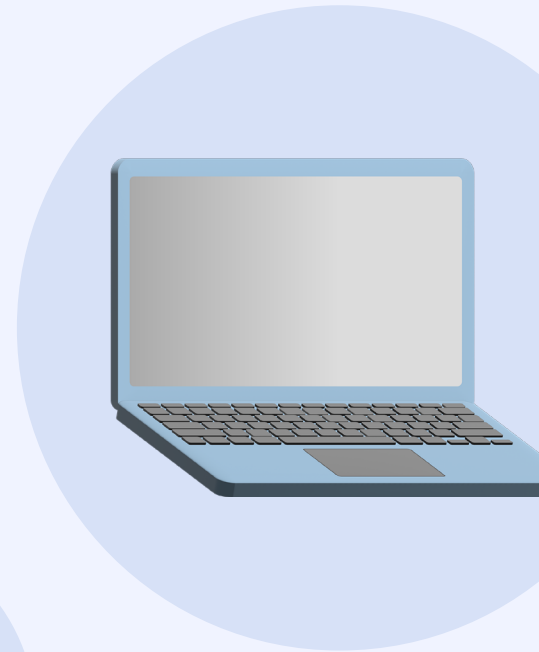


“We cannot advertise without hesitation”

Impacts of third-party advertising criminalization & online censorship on sex workers in Metro Vancouver

Like all service industries, sex workers rely on online advertisements to expand and communicate with their clientele. However, there is limited investigation on the implications of Canada’s criminalisation of third-party advertising and increased censorship of sex work, especially for sex workers who work in formal venues (e.g. massage parlours).

Through cohort data with 900+ sex workers and 47 in-depth interviews with indoor sex workers and third-party supports (e.g. managers, reception), our team found that online advertising facilitates safe(r) workplaces and third parties reduce financial burdens. Im/migrant sex workers face additional barriers due to compounded criminalisation.



What did we find?

Online advertising is essential for income security & facilitates safe(r) workplaces

Online advertising significantly reduced experiences of physical and sexual violence, as well as work-related stress. However, third-party criminalisation and the increased censorship of adult websites and social media impedes access.

To avoid punitive measures by websites (e.g. blocked ads), participants self-censor by using vague terminologies or by omitting service descriptions. This ambiguity impacts their earnings and facilitates distorted client expectations, placing sex workers in precarious situations.

14%

of 900+ AESHA participants primarily advertised online

“When we put on this other layer of criminalization, when [clients] get sketched out, this is when things can go awry. Their energy shifts, they get a little wiggled out, and now it’s not clear communication, they get fearful. Usually fear can lead to aggression.”

— Canadian-born, BIPOC massage parlour worker

Third-parties reduce sex workers' financial & labour burdens

Participants shared that third-party laws disrupt the division of labour in their workplace. Third-parties usually take on the financial and labour burdens of advertising, screening, and price negotiations, but criminalisation shifts the burden solely onto sex workers.

These difficulties are especially heightened for im/migrant sex workers with language barriers, who depend on third-party supports to bridge the communication gap with clients.

Racialization, im/migration status & barriers to online advertising

Due to the compounded criminalisation of third parties and im/migrant sex work, coupled with racist policing, racialised and im/migrant sex workers face increased fear of punitive surveillance. This acts as an added barrier to both online advertising and third-party support.

“She [third party support] does the advertising, which apparently is illegal. She does it for all of us. You know what I mean? She’s there to, deal with the, difficult clients. She gets clients in for us... she does her fucking job well.”

— Canadian-born, racialized worker & co-manager

“Even though they [indoor sex workers] are working legally, they are still not safe. It would be more dangerous if they were working alone and have to advertise themselves. I help them advertise. ...If I were to explicitly advertise the truth, I probably will get more business, but I am afraid. We cannot advertise without hesitation.”

— Im/migrant, manager/owner

What do we recommend?

- Decriminalize all aspects of sex work, including third parties and im/migrant sex work to support client screening, negotiation, and income security.
- Eliminate punitive regulation of online sex work spaces, and refrain from introducing additional policy that push online sex work underground.
- Collaborate with sex workers to build accessible online spaces that promote sex workers' occupational health and safety.



¹Pearson, J., Machat, S., McDermid, J., Goldenberg, S.M., Krüsi, A. Impacts of Sex Work Criminalization and Censorship for Indoor Workers: Exploring How Barriers to Online Advertising Shape Occupational Health and Safety. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*. 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-024-00964-x>

²Machat, S., Lyons, T., Braschel, M., Shannon, K., Goldenberg, S.M. Internet Solicitation Linked to Enhanced Occupational Health & Safety Outcomes Among Sex Workers in Metro Vancouver, Canada 2010 – 2019. *Occupational & Environmental Medicine*. 2022 June; 79(6): 373–379. <https://doi:10.1136/oemed-2021-107429>