



# OUR SPIRITS ARE NOT FOR SALE

2015



BCAAFC Report on the Prevention of the Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation of Aboriginal Youth in BC

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# TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION IN BC'S ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES



## Trafficking and Exploitation in BC's Aboriginal Communities

Over the last few years' human trafficking and sexual exploitation have become a major focus on the continued effort to eliminate violence committed towards women and children not only internationally, but domestically. The issue of domestic human trafficking in Canada and our understanding of its complexities is still emerging in the area of violence against women and girls. It was only recently in the year 2000, that the United Nations adopted an international protocol on human trafficking and Canada followed this global commitment by ratifying the protocol in 2002. Canada then followed with revisions to national legislation in 2005 with the passing of Bill C-49. After 14 years of Canada's acknowledgement and legislative action addressing the issues of human trafficking and Sexual Exploitation, the first case in British Columbia (BC) to have a trafficker tried and convicted occurred in 2015. This represents progress but there is a long way to go.

Studies on human trafficking in Canada to date conclude that the majority of people trafficked within Canada are Aboriginal women and girls. They are vulnerable, largely due to direct experience with intergenerational traumas, earlier enticement into the sex industry, gang recruitment pressures, family poverty, and racist victimization prevalent in the sex industry. The actual number of women and girls who are sexually exploited and trafficked is not known due to its increasingly clandestine nature. Government and national organizations do however still report a significant Aboriginal overrepresentation throughout the country. Statistics Canada reported in 2006 that Aboriginal people make up the greater portion of trafficking and exploitation victims although they comprise of only 4 percent of the total population.

Another area of concern is the lack of understanding that domestic human trafficking is a very real problem in Canada and the normalization of sexual exploitative incidents on and off reserve for our Aboriginal girls is making them more vulnerable. In reference to the murdered and missing Indigenous women (MMIW) in Canada, a large number of these women were living in urban centers. Many were documented as either 'in care' or formerly having been 'in care', of Provincial child welfare agents and often with personal histories connected to sexual trafficking.

In Canada, the exact number of women and youth who are sexually exploited and trafficked is not known due to its clandestine nature, however, several government and national organizations report that Aboriginal girls and women are significantly over represented. In 2006, Statistics Canada reported that Aboriginal people made up 3.8% of the total Canadian population however they make up the greater portion of trafficking and exploitation victims.

# TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION IN BC'S ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

Perpetrators of trafficking and sexual exploitation seek out youth with these backgrounds offering a better life, friendship, and affection. Aboriginal youth are often lured into sex trafficking over time by men pretending to be boyfriends, perceived debts owed for drugs and alcohol, or simply what is called survival sex (needing the basics to live such as food, shelter, clothing) not even recognizing at first they are victims. At some point, these youth realize they are being forced to provide sex for money. By the time a victim gains the resolve to leave, she/he may be traumatized after years of being sexually victimized.

The correlation between resource extraction and violence against women is a recurring theme globally. The increase in violence against women is in part related to sudden and significant changes not only of the increase in male workers, an influx of money, and increased drug and alcohol abuse, but the physical and emotional impacts with the sudden destruction of surrounding lands and environment.

Northern BC communities are already seeing the effects in rising housing costs, creating homelessness, and Indigenous families being displaced. Friendship Centers identified that there is a lack of affordable housing, especially in communities that get an influx of well-paid trades' people seeking rental accommodation. This impacts lower income families with children and especially those indigenous families residing in northern communities. For those families trying to flee abuse they are often left with no options but in unsafe or inadequate shelters which can often lead to increased vulnerability to exploitation while trying to avoid contact with the Ministry of Children and Family services.

BC is not only seeing the expansion of natural resource extraction and the building of pipelines through indigenous communities but also the beginning of Megaprojects (i.e. Site C dam). With the expansive growth of these types of industries BC will see the incidents of violence against Indigenous women and girls increase. Sites of resource extraction are often centers of human trafficking and sexual exploitation and violence. A 2014 report by the UN's International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that 21 million individuals are being trafficked for sex or labor globally per year and showed that sexual violence and trafficking is exponentially higher near points of extraction and worker camps than it is in locales of similar population. In Alberta, Saskatchewan, and North Dakota where resource extraction developed quickly, an influx of young male transient workers moving in and out of the area resulted in dramatic increases of sexualized violence including trafficking and exploitation.

Human trafficking is just beginning to be understood by our Aboriginal communities. Often it is thought of in the context of international trafficking portrayed in movies, not understanding that it

# TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION IN BC'S ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

is about control of the individual, through intimidation and coercion for the purpose of sexual exploitation, not about crossing borders. It is crucial for Aboriginal communities and their youth to understand and be educated about this form of violence and how it occurs in our communities.

Sexual exploitation is also misunderstood. Generally, it is perceived as a youth being used as “prostitute” for financial gain by a pimp or trafficker. It has many forms and how it is being perpetrated in our communities is going to have devastating consequences not just for the youth themselves but it will impact families and communities as a whole. Sexual exploitation and trafficking is occurring, it is in our local fast food chains, in the parking lot of the corner convenience store, in the house next door, not just on the street corner out in the open.

Finally, we need a culture shift in how the general public views Aboriginal youth that are being trafficked and exploited. Too often they are still viewed as criminal for “choosing” a lifestyle not as being exploited and a victim of a crime. This may be due in part to the racism and lack of empathy that is still prevalent throughout law enforcement and government agencies. It must be kept in mind that most Indigenous youth who are being exploited have usually been victimized prior to their exploitation. These youth have already experienced family violence, sexual abuse, homelessness, or neglect and have received no support or intervention to address these previous traumas.

# PROJECT OVERVIEW



## Project Overview

### INTRODUCTION

As part of the BCAAFC's Taking Action to End Violence against Aboriginal women and children strategic plan, the BCAAFC with other Friendship Centre provincial territorial associations (PTA's) have been working with the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) on the development of a National Friendship Centre Strategic plan on Combating Human trafficking of Aboriginal women and girls. The BCAAFC hosted dialog sessions in northern BC (due to the proximity to the Highway of Tears) inviting youth, elders, RCMP, school districts, and other local organizations to discuss the issue of human trafficking of Aboriginal women and girls in their communities.

With the information gained from these sessions, the NAFC's Advisory Committee on the trafficking of Aboriginal women, girls, and boys sent out a call for submissions from Aboriginal youth on the creation of public service announcements on the issue with specific messaging that was accumulated from communities and service providers (i.e. "our spirits are not for sale"). Four videos were approved for completion. These videos have been used by the BCAAFC for purposes that help promote awareness to the issue of human trafficking of Aboriginal youth in BC through online websites, workshops, youth forums, etc.

### DEVELOPMENT OF WORKSHOP CURRICULUM

With funding from the Ministry of Justice, OCTIP Division, the BCAAFC began the development of a prevention and education workshop for Aboriginal youth. The curriculum was developed after review of several reports written on the issue of trafficking and exploitation using an Aboriginal lens to engage Aboriginal youth and their lived realities in their communities. There was a focus on the specifics of sexual exploitation and human trafficking in relation to Aboriginal youth which included understanding the associated terminology; the who's at risk and risk factors associated with moving to, and living in an urban setting; understanding grooming and luring methods being used on Aboriginal youth; techniques used by perpetrators online; legalities; and self and peer exploitation.



The BCAAFC also developed a module on "Protecting your Spirit" based on the medicine wheels Emotional, Physical, Spiritual, and Mental elements and how each decision we make affects us. Also included in the curriculum was a component on Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and possible linkages to trafficking and exploitation.



## Project Activities

The “Our Spirits are NOT for Sale” workshop was designed as a full day workshop, delivered through a PowerPoint Presentation and a companion workbook with helpful information and resources for youth to take home to their communities.

### PROVINCIAL COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS

Workshops were delivered in 6 communities across the province. Local Friendship Centers invited and gathered registration from nearby First Nations communities, schools, MCFD workers, as well as at risk youth and youth councils. One workshop was held on reserve to the students at the Eke Me Xi learning Centre in Port Hardy. The smallest workshop was delivered to a group of 22 youth in Prince George and the largest to a group of over 60 youth in Surrey. Due to the sensitive nature of discussions that had the very real possibility of opening up traumatic experiences for youth, a counselor was available on site or nearby. Also for support and grounding, elders were invited to provide a traditional opening and closing prayer as well as provide cultural support. These elders whom had a relationship of trust with youth in their community were crucial to the success of each workshop.

A local RCMP officer was invited to attend each workshop. In some cases, it was to learn about human trafficking as there are still rural and remote law enforcement officers who believe that this is not occurring in BC. For others it was to hear from Aboriginal youth what is happening in their community and to develop a relationship of trust. This proved to be beneficial. Spending the day together, youth felt open to ask questions relating to issues they were dealing with and two youth took it upon themselves to have private conversations with the RCMP officers about incidents relating to sexual exploitation and 2 others reported other incidences not related to the workshop material.

These workshops incorporated culture in all of its teachings, group activities, and provided a space for youth to talk openly about what occurs in their communities. 182 youth took part in the community workshops with an equal attendance of those residing on or off reserve. A survey was given at the end of day to gain insight into youth thoughts on human trafficking and sexual exploitation which was used to develop an insight into the Aboriginal youth perspective about humans trafficking and sexual exploitation in their communities.

## PROJECT ACTIVITIES



### BCAAFC PROVINCIAL YOUTH AND ELDER FORUM

The BCAAFC held a provincial youth and elder forum in Feb 2015. This was the perfect opportunity to hold the provincial leadership development and training. The leadership training gave youth skills to continue to educate their peers on sexual exploitation and human trafficking. Twenty-three youth leaders were in attendance and sparked interesting conversations on the different issues their communities were facing, what was happening, and best ways to address it.

### GATHERING OUR VOICES YOUTH CONFERENCE

BCAAFC delivered the “Our Spirits are NOT for Sale” prevention workshop at Gathering Our Voices youth conference. Gathering Our Voices is the BCAAFC’s Provincial Aboriginal youth conference. The largest in Canada with 1000 to 2000 youth in attendance each year depending on its location. The workshop and survey was presented to 60 youth in 2 three hour sessions. This was a perfect opportunity to engage indigenous youth from all over the province to share the differences and experiences in their communities regionally.



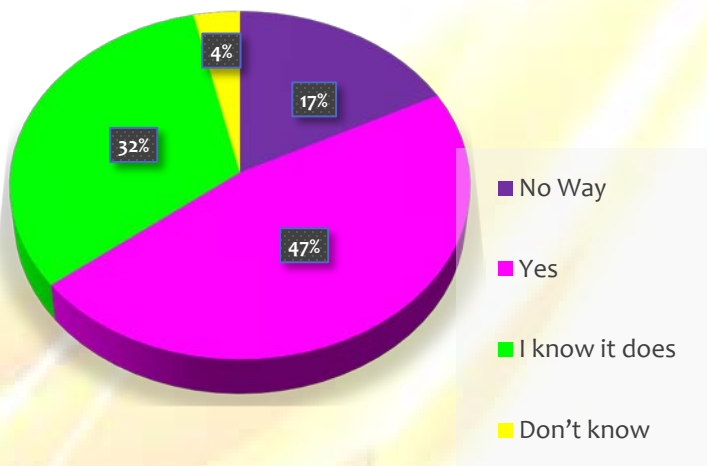


## Youth Thoughts

In total 276 Aboriginal youth took part in the “Our Spirits are NOT for Sale” workshop and training to prevent Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation. It was a great opportunity to learn from youth as well as to educate them. BCAAFC received 164 completed surveys given to youth at the end of each workshop. From these surveys and from group discussions during the workshops BCAAFC gained an insight into the Indigenous youth perspective. Every community was different as well as the youth experiences that participated. From youth at risk and in care to those living on reserve and in urban centers, the youth experience, family connection, and location defined a vast difference of realities for Aboriginal youth. This is not meant to be conclusive data but a glimpse into the lived realities of Aboriginal youth around the province of BC in relation to human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

### THE REALITIES FOR ABORIGINAL YOUTH IN BC COMMUNITIES

#### Does trafficking and exploitation occur in your community?



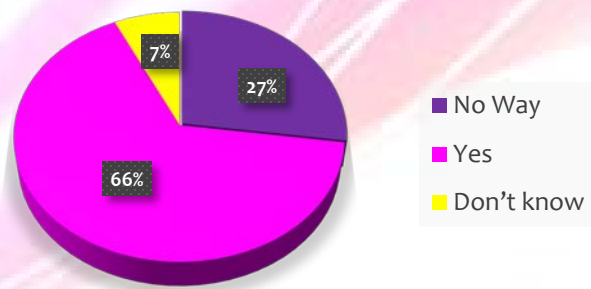
For youth who responded “I know it does!” to the question “Does trafficking and exploitation happen in your community?” most offered a reason, citing an incident of a friend or family member or offering where and how that they knew it was occurring.<sup>1</sup> Youth at risk or experienced homelessness shared their experiences in group discussions offering much different experiences and a culture of exploitation/sexual violence that is not widely known by the majority of mainstream community members. (See *Disturbing Trend*)

<sup>1</sup> By the language “Knew” or “Know”, it is referring to how these youth experience these questions and should in no way be taken as fact.

# YOUTH THOUGHTS

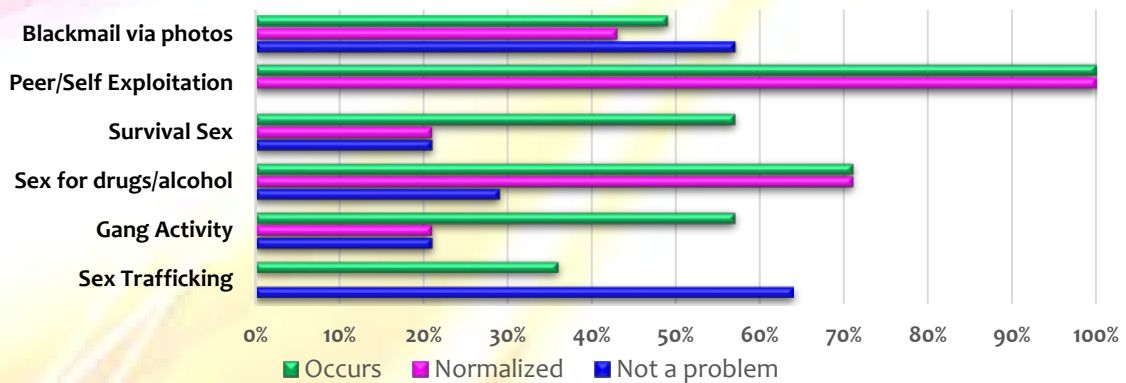
Youth overwhelming thought that peers in their community were vulnerable to being lured by traffickers and being victims of sexual exploitation. The reasons given for vulnerability were often in relation to wanting to fit in and perceived as “cool”, others wanting to feel cared for or loved, specifically targeted through racism, escaping family violence in their home, and numbers of youth homelessness.

## Do you think that youth in your community are vulnerable to Exploitation and Trafficking



Youth were asked to select specific types of exploitation that they believed occurred in their community as well as if it was considered a normal experience as an Aboriginal youth. It's these types of experiences that have become common and accepted as a lived reality and it should raise tremendous concern for all of our communities.

## Exploitation and Normalization in our Communities



Youth believed that blackmail by using of sexualized images sent via chatrooms or cellphones (Sextortion<sup>2</sup>) is common enough (47%) that 43% believe that it is a normalized by youth. Not surprisingly, but the leading factor to be to blackmailed via photos, is 100% of surveyed Aboriginal youth know peer/self-exploitation (i.e. Sexting) occurs and 100% of them believe it is normal

<sup>2</sup> Sextortion is a form of sexual exploitation that employs non-physical forms of coercion to extort sexual favors from the victim. Sextortion refers to the broad category of sexual exploitation in which abuse of power is the means of coercion, as well as to the category of sexual exploitation in which threatened release of sexual images or information is the means of coercion.

## YOUTH THOUGHTS



behavior. In group discussions the majority of youth recalled having seen a sext message of someone meant for someone else. \*\*\*Participants were not asked if they had sent a sext message to protect them from further harm or rumors when the workshop was over.

One of the most common methods of sexual exploitation of Aboriginal youth is survival sex for food, clothing and shelter. 56% of surveys responded that they felt that it actively occurs in their community but only 20% felt that it was normalized by youth in their community.

During the workshops youth were quite open about the normalization of young girls, and in some cases young men, providing sexual acts for free drugs and/or alcohol. 71% believing that it was normal, even a few stating that “everybody does it”. Sadly, many were surprised to learn that it is sexual exploitation and common way for traffickers and recruiters to lure youth in to sex trafficking.

Aboriginal gang activity was believed to occur in communities by 56% of responses but only 22% believed it to be normalized by their peers. Many youth commented that the lure of a gang was to have family and thought that a gang’s supply of drugs and alcohol may influence some of their peers.

Sex trafficking was not considered normalized by youth, (n=0%). The large majority, 64%, did not believe that it was an issue in their community. The fact that the sex trafficking of underage girls is increasingly being transacted through websites like backpage.com, cell phones, and other social media, it is understandable that most Aboriginal youth would not see it happening or as an issue in their community.

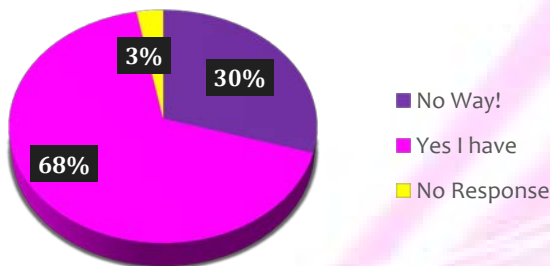
# YOUTH THOUGHTS



With the ease of technology, traffickers and recruiters are using social media as way to connect

with youth. It provides access to youth all over the province from the convenience of a computer or cellphone. This was an interesting and insightful conversation in each workshop and how youth justify talking with and making friends with someone they don't know online. Most girls admitted to having uncomfortable conversations online in which they felt uneasy but still remain open to talking with strangers. In the more remote communities' youth said that it was a way for them to feel connected to the outside.

## Have you made friends with a stranger online?



## DISTURBING TREND

During the workshops and group discussions the youth in attendance were open about their communities and what occurs. Openly discussed were incidents, in more than one community, of young Aboriginal women being drugged and taken to houses for the purpose of sexual exploitation by groups of men paying the abductor cash. Often pictures are taken and the young girl was threatened if she reported the incident.

## WHAT IS LACKING FOR YOUTH

In group activities and survey questions youth were asked what they thought would help prevent and support them from becoming victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. The four top responses were:

- ✚ Drop in Youth Centers for Aboriginal youth that have late hours providing a safe place to go at night.
- ✚ More educational workshops on trafficking and exploitation and meaningful engagement.
- ✚ Affordable housing and/or living support for youth aging out of care
- ✚ Job security and training.



## Growing Concerns

From the workshops the BCAAFC held across BC it became overwhelmingly apparent that more needs to be done to create public awareness on the issue and to educate Aboriginal youth to prevent them from becoming victims of sexual exploitation and human trafficking. Three major concerns that came to light during this project were the normalization of certain types of exploitation; growth of the natural resource sector in northern BC and its impacts; and the challenges for Aboriginal youth aging out of care.

### NORMALIZATION

Normalization of certain types of exploitation such as survival sex and sex for drugs/alcohol as well as new ways that young Aboriginal girls are being victimized are increasingly disturbing. These should not be accepted realities of these young people's lives. Pop culture in our media including music, TV and movies are all contributing factors to the behavior and normalization of sexual exploitation. Youth providing sexual acts to adults for free alcohol and drugs can ultimately lead to sex trafficking. Clearly, educational programs on sexual health, respecting your body, and sexual exploitation need to be taught at an earlier age.

### NATURAL RESOURCE INDUSTRY GROWTH

When looking at the impacts of resource extraction in communities' gender is often ignored and women and girls experience specific health and social impacts caused by its activities including threats to their housing, causing displacement and separation from family; and increase in domestic and sexualized violence, ultimately affecting their traditional and cultural values. The oil and gas industry is primarily populated by men who work for weeks at a time and then go into small towns and urban areas nearby in their off time. Alcohol and drug use fuels violence and often increases safety concerns in communities dealing with such an influx. Drug use, alcoholism and sexual exploitation all increase. As an example, the Good, the bad and the ugly of Fort McMurray stated that "the sex trade in Fort McMurray, AB, has kept pace with the booming its oil industry, and goes hand in hand with the increase in hard drug use."<sup>3</sup>. This is also resulted in spikes of domestic and sexualized violence with younger and younger Aboriginal girls being lured or victimized through threats and intimidation into sexual exploitation

BC is on the verge of a tremendous increase of resource extraction and development. With the heartbreaking history of the Highway of tears in the north there needs to be strategies in place to

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<sup>3</sup> <http://tothetarsands.ca/2007/09/11/a-tale-of-two-cities-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-of-fort-mcmurray/>

## GROWING CONCERNS

prepare our Aboriginal communities in the North and its young women for what changes may come with natural resource extraction.

### YOUTH IN CARE

Many youth in care participated in the “Our Spirits are NOT for Sale” workshops however one story highlighted the realities and correlation of being a youth in care and the vulnerability to being sexually exploited regardless of gender.

The youth related his story as ... he was in care since the age of 10 and at 18 was living in a group home on a youth agreement. He, like so many other teenagers his age, went out one night and drank too much alcohol. He was then removed from his group home and released from his agreement leaving him to fend for himself with no place to go... Subsequently, he was sexually exploited for 6 months.

Many have criticized the child protection system for not providing services beyond the age of 19, finding that many youth exiting care do not have the basic life skills or decision making skills necessary to live independently. Youth who age out of care face a number of simultaneous challenges, such as finding stable employment and affordable housing resulting often in homelessness, drug addiction, and the very high possibility of sexual exploitation.

Transitioning into adulthood can be stressful even for youth in stable environments, and socioeconomic issues like poverty, racialization, and marginalization are definitely contributing factors for Aboriginal youth becoming victims of sexual exploitation. The question asked by one youth was “If youth in care are not allowed to make decisions for themselves until they age out of care why do you expect us to make good ones.” We need to rethink how we support youth after the age of 19 so they are not vulnerable to homelessness, addictions, and sexual predators.

# RECOMMENDATIONS



## Recommendations

### 1.1 EDUCATING ABORIGINAL YOUTH

Prevention education provides Aboriginal youth with tools to understand how sexual exploitation happens, how to avoid it and what to do if it happens. It also helps them identify the elements within language, media and popular culture that glamorizes behavior that may be detrimental or dangerous. Prevention education also provides Aboriginal boys and young men with tools to understand how sexual exploitation happens and what to do if they see it happening around them. And, most importantly, education teaches boys how to avoid exploiting the young women in their lives and how to protect them instead.

### 1.2 EDUCATING COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

Misconceptions of what “Human trafficking” and “Sexual Exploitation” are and what they really mean in BC communities is a main barrier to its prevention. When service providers and community members are not able to spot signs that it is occurring we will never be able to prevent it. Educational Workshops and public awareness ads on the specifics of trafficking and exploitation of Aboriginal youth are needed to be taught to communities as a whole.

### 1.3 INCREASING PARTNERSHIPS IN COMMUNITIES TO ACCESS AND PROTECT EXPLOITED YOUTH

Many communities expressed frustration that there is no safe place to send exploited youth. They cannot necessarily be returned to foster care or their families because their home life is often perilous and they might run away again. Nor can they be released onto the streets, where their exploiters are waiting. Partnerships with community organizations like Deborah’s Gate and Covenant Houses could create a safe way to move these girls out of the communities they are being trafficked and exploited in and given a chance to heal before being reconnected to their community.

In one large community where it was widely known that the trafficking and sexual exploitation of Aboriginal girls is extremely high, community services providers who specialize in sexually exploited youth, reflected that they have no access to these young Aboriginal girls and no way of intervening. Clearly, Aboriginal sexual exploitation youth workers are required in every Friendship Centre community to connect with these young women.

# RECOMMENDATIONS



## 1.4 CHANGING OUR LANGUAGE

How we talk about sexual exploited youth is challenging. Often the language used by community service providers, police, media, etc. de-victimizes youth who are the most vulnerable. Using terms such as “Child Prostitute” “underage sex worker” brands them and casts the responsibility on them that by choice they are responsible for the abuse and exploitation that they are enduring. We should all be using terms that keep the victimization of the youth at the forefront.

### TAKEAWAYS

Aboriginal youth play critical roles on both sides of the trafficking and sexual exploitation spectrum. At one end, they are the most vulnerable to becoming its victims and, at the other, the most qualified to protect themselves and their peers from being victims. We need to continue to engage them in the conversations as they have a deeper understanding of how they are being lured and recruited as well as insight into their communities that adults do not possess.

With Friendship Centre’s in 25 communities across BC and in the urban areas in which the trafficking of Aboriginal women and girls is significant, they are important partners in combatting the issue of the trafficking of Aboriginal women, girls, and boys. They have the strength and ability to be meaningful partners in the continued effort to eradicate this type of violence against Aboriginal women and children.



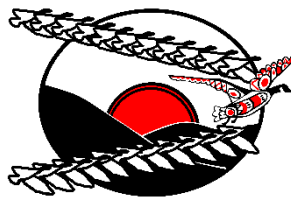
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