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OTTAWA-AREA SEX WORKERS TARGETS OF INTRUSIVE POLICE VISITS

Prostitutes of Ottawa-Gatineau Work, Educate and Resist (POWER) reacted with dismay to news that members of the Ottawa Police Service (OPS) and other police forces across the country have begun paying intrusive and intimidating visits to indoor sex workers under the auspices of an anti-trafficking initiative. The interactions begin with a male police officer posing as a client to book an appointment with a sex worker. Several police officers then appear at the sex worker's place of work, ostensibly to ensure that no coercion is taking place, but with the impact of intimidating sex workers, violating their right to privacy and putting their confidentiality and safety at risk.

"This is a huge step backwards," said Emily Symons, Chair of POWER's Board of Directors. "To effectively target exploitation, police need to work with sex workers, not intimidate them." Sex workers who experience violence or exploitation do not contact the police because they fear criminal charges and do not trust them. "Seeking access to sex workers' work locations by lying does absolutely nothing to build trust," Symons suggested. "Also, it's unreasonable to expect that any woman who might be coerced or exploited would trust or confide in four male police officers who've gained access to her and her location through deception."

"I'm really worried I will be next," said Caroline Newcastle, an independent escort and POWER member. "I don't want a police officer posing as a client to come to my door with several of his colleagues. This new tactic means that in addition to screening out potential bad dates, I need to worry about screening out police officers. This is not the type of interaction I want to have at my apartment door – I could be evicted if my neighbors knew I was working from home. Furthermore, I do not want to give the police my personal information. Being known to have had a police contact could jeopardize my future employment opportunities and mobility."

The OPS seems to have shifted from investigating suspected cases of exploitation to targeting all sex workers indiscriminately. "Do they believe that all sex workers are trafficked?" asked Fr d rique Chabot, a member of POWER. "This of course is simply not true. By targeting clearly established, independent escorts for these highly intrusive and intimidating visits, the OPS is failing to help those who might actually be in need of assistance, and once again putting sex workers at risk."

POWER is dismayed by the OPS' new tactic. Even if sex workers are not actually arrested or charged with any crime, having several uniformed police officers appear at your door when you were expecting a client puts sex workers' confidentiality and ultimately their safety at risk.

"As the experts on the industry, sex workers have a lot to contribute to helping those who may experience coercion," concluded Symons. "Once again, the police have failed to consult sex workers before developing and implementing a policy that fails to help those it is intended to help and puts sex workers at risk."



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POWER calls upon the Ottawa Police Service to immediately stop these intrusive and intimidating visits under false pretenses, and would be willing to discuss how to build trust and work effectively and respectfully with sex workers.

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