

# **BEST PRACTICES FOR SERVICE DELIVERY TO MIGRANT WOMEN WITH LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

**Designed by Women, for Women**

With the support of:



Women and Gender  
Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité  
des genres Canada

**Trigger Warning:** This report discusses sensitive topics related to human trafficking, gender-based violence, exploitation, and trauma, which may be distressing for some readers. Please take care while reading.

# Land Acknowledgement

FCJ Refugee Centre is located in Tkaronto, now known as Toronto, which in Mohawk means “where there are trees standing in the water.”

Tkaronto is covered under Treaty #13 and the Williams Treaties. It is the traditional territories of many First Peoples, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnaabe, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples.

These nations continue to experience ongoing colonization and displacement– where land acknowledgements are offered in place of land itself.

This territory is part of ‘the Dish with One Spoon’ wampum, a Treaty made between the Anishinaabe, Mississauga, and Haudenosaunee, where nations entered into an agreement to protect the land and responsibly care for its resources in harmony together.

As settlers, newcomers, refugees, and Indigenous peoples, we have all been invited into this treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship, and respect.

We are also mindful of broken treaties, as well as the global structures and systems that have continued to oppress, dispossess and displace peoples across Turtle Island today. We turn our minds to conflicts and human rights catastrophes here at home and around the world where struggles for land, recognition, and reparations continue unabated.

We recognize our responsibilities as Treaty people to speak the truth, search for peace and demand justice; and engage in a meaningful, continuous process of truth and reconciliation with all our relations.

Respect.

## **Acknowledgements**

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to the migrant women with lived experiences of human trafficking and gender-based violence, as well as those at risk of human trafficking, who participated in this project. The invaluable insights we gathered would not have been possible without their courage, resilience and willingness to share their experiences. We honour their journeys.

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## Project Description

FCJ Refugee Centre is committed to addressing the diverse needs of uprooted individuals across Ontario and Canada. Through community-based programs, the FCJ Refugee Centre works to combat poverty, resource scarcity, isolation, and discrimination while promoting self-help, personal growth, community economic development, and social justice. For over 30 years, the FCJ Refugee Centre has supported hundreds of individuals and families—many in precarious situations—by facilitating immigration regularization and improving access to essential services. With an open-door policy and a holistic approach, the FCJ Refugee Centre provides a unique integrated model of providing supports, including housing, integration services and specialized assistance for migrant women.

From April 2021 to March 2025, the FCJ Refugee Centre led a regional initiative aimed at enhancing the capacity and knowledge of service providers in Canada to support women who have been marginalized by international cases of human trafficking. This initiative is part of the FCJ Refugee Centre’s anti-human trafficking women’s program, which is dedicated to supporting migrant women and gender-diverse individuals with lived experiences of human trafficking and gender-based violence, as well as those at risk.

As a result of this initiative, the FCJ Refugee Centre has developed an online resource toolkit for migrant women and a policy paper advocating for improved immigration pathways for survivors. In addition, the FCJ Refugee Centre has provided case management services, conducted survivor-led research, fostered skills development, and facilitated community-building efforts. This work has culminated in the creation of this Best Practices Toolkit—a resource designed to strengthen service delivery for women who have experienced human trafficking.

The goal of this Best Practices Toolkit is to share knowledge on service provision, identifying the systemic barriers faced by migrant women and proposing survivor-centred, survivor-led approaches to enhance support systems. Created by and for migrant women, this toolkit seeks to inform and guide service providers while also being accessible to the general public.

### *What This Best Practices Toolkit Does*

This **Best Practices Toolkit** is designed to support service providers in delivering effective, survivor-centred assistance to individuals affected by international human trafficking and domestic violence, as well as those at risk of trafficking. It emphasizes approaches that recognize the complex and intersectional identities of survivors.

- **Part 1** establishes the international and Canadian legislative framework.
- **Part 2** outlines realities on the ground, addressing stereotypes and misconceptions, mapping out populations at risk due to their precarious immigration status, and identifying key barriers faced by migrant women.

- **Part 3** presents best practices and practical guidance for service provision.
- **Part 4** offers recommendations and pathways for moving forward.

The annex offers additional tools that service providers can draw on in championing gender-responsive, trauma-informed and human rights-based approaches to supporting survivors of human trafficking and domestic violence, as well as those at risk of human trafficking.

### *Methodology*

Over a period of 48 months, we gathered both anecdotal qualitative and quantitative evidence shared by survivors and migrant women with lived experience to inform this report. Through group and individual sessions, we collected qualitative accounts of lived experiences involving predatory and exploitative practices, as well as quantitative data on cases of migrant women survivors of human trafficking and gender-based violence, including those at risk of trafficking.

Group sessions included steering committee meetings, focus groups, and capacity- and community-building events led by and for migrant women. These sessions provided space for peer-led engagement discussions on key issues related to international cases of human trafficking and the increased vulnerabilities faced by survivors, offering opportunities for community building, resilience and healing.

Individual sessions included intake conversations and qualitative interviews with survivors of human trafficking and domestic violence, as well as those at risk of human trafficking.

All information was collected in adherence to confidentiality principles and a trauma-informed approach. Research participants provided informed consent after being fully informed of their rights and the terms of their contribution. Staff researchers then analysed the data for both quantitative and qualitative insights.

The development of this report was guided by two steering committees: one composed of migrant women with lived experience and the other made up of organizations involved in the project.



## **Part 1: Setting a Foundation**

Human trafficking constitutes a significant and persistent challenge in Canada. Statistics Canada reported that in 2023 alone, 570 occurrences of human trafficking were brought to the attention of law enforcement.<sup>1</sup> Just over 4,500 cases of human trafficking were reported by police services in Canada from 2013 to 2023.<sup>2</sup> The vast majority (93%) of victims of police-reported human trafficking from 2013 to 2023 were women and girls, and about one-quarter (23%) were children and youth younger than 18 years old.<sup>3</sup>

These figures represent only a fraction of the reality. Human trafficking is a deeply hidden crime, making it challenging to capture its full scope through official statistics. While these numbers are essential for understanding trends and informing policy, they offer only a partial glimpse into the realities of trafficking. Many cases remain unreported or undetected due to the covert nature of the crime, systemic barriers, and the immense fear and mistrust experienced by survivors. Identifying incidents of trafficking relies not only on the availability of police resources and specialized expertise but also on survivors' ability and willingness to recognize their experiences as exploitation and navigate the daunting process of reporting. This underscores the need for comprehensive, survivor-centered approaches to uncover and address the full extent of human trafficking in Canada.

This raises the critical question: What is human trafficking?

### **Defining human trafficking**

Human trafficking, also known as trafficking in persons, is a grave human rights violation and a serious transnational crime. Its definition may vary across and within countries, posing challenges to developing a unified and coordinated response. Internationally, the most impactful anti-trafficking legislation thus far has been the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (herein after, the Palermo Protocol), which provides a widely accepted framework, although its interpretation and implementation may differ from one nation to another.<sup>4</sup>

In Canada, the ratification of the Palermo Protocol in 2002 was followed by a series of amendments to align domestic laws with international obligations. While Canada's adaptation of the international trafficking law stripped large portions of the definition of trafficking provided by the United Nations, extensive legal developments have bolstered anti-trafficking efforts over the years, enhancing protections for survivors and strengthening enforcement mechanisms.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, a degree of ambiguity persists regarding the meaning of human trafficking, as multiple definitions are embedded within Canada's legal framework and policies.

### *Trafficking in the Palermo Protocol*

The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime [herein after, *Palermo Protocol*] defines trafficking as:

*Trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs [...].<sup>6</sup>*

Trafficking is thus defined by three essential elements: the act, the means and the purpose, which together establish the framework for identifying and understanding this crime.

#### *The act*

The act refers to what is done, such as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons. Trafficking must be understood as a process comprising a number of interrelated actions underpinned by the intent to exploit the victim, whether or not an international border is crossed.

#### *The means*

The means encompasses the methods used to commit the crime, how it is done. In regard to this factor, the Palermo Protocol states that one cannot consent to being trafficked since the means –which include “*the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person*”<sup>7</sup>– negate any consent given at the outset.<sup>8</sup> In turn, consent can only be negated in situations where such means are used.<sup>9</sup>

However, it should be noted that any recruitment, transportation, transfer or harboring of a youth under 18 years of age for the purpose of exploitation is a form of trafficking regardless of the means used.<sup>10</sup>

#### *The purpose of exploitation*

The purpose (why it is done) is the exploitation of others. The Palermo Protocol specifies that, at a minimum, exploitation shall include:

- *The prostitution of others*: International instruments do not contain a definition of “prostitution”, though it is most commonly interpreted according to its ordinary meaning, that is “any sexual act offered for reward or profit.”<sup>11</sup> Some international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, suggest that “exploitation of prostitution of others” occurs when money made through sex work is passed on a systematic basis to anyone other than the sex worker themselves, considering the practice inherently abusive and analogous to slavery.<sup>12</sup>
- *Other forms of sexual exploitation*: The concept of sexual exploitation is also undefined in the *Palermo Protocol* and has no agreed definition in international law.<sup>13</sup> The UN Secretary-General for the purpose of preventing and addressing cases of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, has indicated that the term “sexual exploitation” means “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another.”<sup>14</sup> The OHCHR specifies that the term “other forms of sexual exploitation” includes a range of forms of abuse such as the production of child sexual abuse material, sexual slavery and forced marriage.<sup>15</sup>
- *Forced labour or services*: ILO Forced Labour Convention No. 29 defines forced labor as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.”<sup>16</sup>
- *Slavery or practices similar to slavery*: The 1926 Slavery Convention defines slavery as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised. The slave trade includes all acts involved in the capture, acquisition or disposal of a person with intent to reduce him to slavery; all acts involved in the acquisition of a slave with a view to selling or exchanging him; all acts of disposal by sale or exchange of a slave acquired with a view to being sold or exchanged, and, in general, every act of trade or transport in slaves.”<sup>17</sup>
- *Domestic servitude*: Domestic servitude is a specific form of forced labour involving the exploitation of domestic labourers. The UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) suggests that domestic labour can be readily exploited, increasing the risk of people working in this sector becoming victims of trafficking. It also indicates that, “[d]omestic labour is often undervalued and invisible and it is mainly carried out by women and girls. Domestic workers are often migrants or members of disadvantaged communities, who can be particularly vulnerable to discrimination in respect of conditions of employment.”<sup>18</sup>
- *Organ removal*: Trafficking for organ removal involves exploiting individuals to harvest their organs. Even if victims seem to consent, their consent is invalid if

obtained through deception, fraud, or exploitation of vulnerability. Traffickers, often linked to criminal networks, profit by selling the organs to recipients who cannot or will not wait for legal transplants.<sup>19</sup> The true scale of this criminal activity remains largely hidden.<sup>20</sup> However, estimates indicate that trafficked organs account for up to 10% of organs transplants performed worldwide, with Canada being one of the top countries of origin for patients seeking organs abroad and one of the recipient countries for trafficked organs.<sup>21</sup>

### *Canadian legislation*

In Canada, trafficking offences are set out in sections 279.01-.04 of the Criminal Code, which were enacted in 2005 to put the international obligations stemming from the Palermo Protocol into effect in Canada.

Section 279.01 of the Criminal Code provides that

*[e]very person who recruits, transports, transfers, receives, holds, conceals or harbours a person, or exercises control, direction or influence over the movements of a person, for the purpose of exploiting them or facilitating their exploitation is guilty of an indictable offence.*<sup>22</sup>

Section 279.04 of the Criminal Code specifies that a person exploits another person if

*they cause them to provide, or offer to provide, labour or a service by engaging in conduct that, in all the circumstances, could reasonably be expected to cause the other person to believe that their safety or the safety of a person known to them would be threatened if they failed to provide, or offer to provide, the labour or service.*<sup>23</sup>

While the Canadian Parliament and courts take the position that Canada's anti-trafficking laws are well aligned with the UN intentions as set out in the Palermo Protocol,<sup>24</sup> differences exist. While the act and means elements generally correspond to those under the Palermo Protocol, the Canadian legal definition of trafficking does not require the means component to be established, as it is incorporated into the determination of whether exploitation has taken place.<sup>25</sup> In turn, the purpose of exploitation element is approached differently.

In Canada's anti-trafficking offence, the concept of exploitation plays a central role in the legal meaning of human trafficking. The meaning of exploitation is defined through a global assessment of the tactics used by traffickers and the effects that those tactics would have on a reasonable person standing in the shoes of the actual victim.<sup>26</sup> Within this context, the means element becomes relevant to determining exploitation in that the court may consider the use of threat of force or another form of coercion, deception and abuse of a position of trust, power or authority.<sup>27</sup> But the court must be satisfied that the accused's conduct caused

fear in the mind of the (reasonable) victim and that this fear is what caused the victim to provide the labour or service.<sup>28</sup>

Human trafficking is also criminalized under section 118 of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, which provides for an offence of cross-border trafficking understood as “knowingly organiz[ing] the coming into Canada of one or more persons by means of abduction, fraud, deception or threat of force or coercion.”<sup>29</sup> The law applies not only to criminal organization but also to individual traffickers, and an exploitative purpose is not required to establish this offence.

### **Linking labour and human rights in addressing trafficking**

Human trafficking is not only a criminal act but also a profound violation of fundamental human rights, intersecting directly with international, national, and regional human rights legislation. Instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)<sup>30</sup> and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)<sup>31</sup> emphasize the inherent dignity and equality of all individuals, principles that human trafficking flagrantly violates through exploitation and coercion. It deprives individuals of their basic freedoms and dignity, for purposes such as forced labour, sexual exploitation, and organ trafficking. This violation is deeply interconnected with other human rights issues, such as gender inequality, poverty, discrimination and lack of access to justice. Traffickers often prey on the vulnerable, exploiting systemic inequalities and abusing the rights of marginalized individuals.

Under the Ontario Human Rights Code, every individual is entitled to equal protection and benefit of the law, free from discrimination and exploitation. Addressing human trafficking requires a comprehensive approach that upholds the rights of all people and addresses the root causes of exploitation, ensuring that those affected are supported and empowered to reclaim their autonomy.

For further exploration of human rights protections and resources, we encourage to refer to the Ontario Human Rights Commission.<sup>32</sup>

#### *The role of labour rights*

Labour rights play a crucial role in preventing and addressing cases of labour trafficking, as well as domestic servitude. When individuals’ basic labour rights are violated or not recognized, they become more vulnerable to exploitation. Migrant workers, in particular, are at heightened risk due to their precarious immigration status, lack of awareness about their rights, and limited access to legal protections. By ensuring that labour rights are upheld, we can reduce the vulnerability of workers to trafficking. Moreover, recognizing and enforcing these rights can help identify trafficking victims and provide them with the legal tools and support to escape exploitation. Addressing labour trafficking is not only about criminal

justice but also about creating a labour environment where the rights of all workers are protected, ensuring dignity and security for those at risk.

To determine the labour rights that apply to migrant workers in Canada, it is essential to consider various legal sources. Canada has both provincial and federal employment legislation. Provincial employment laws apply to the majority of Canadian workforce, as provinces have jurisdiction over employment law within their borders, while federal authority is limited to specific sectors.<sup>33</sup>

In Ontario, these provincial laws include the *Employment Standards Act (ESA)*, which sets out minimum standards for wages, working conditions and overtime,<sup>34</sup> as well as the *Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA)*, which ensures workplace safety.<sup>35</sup> The *ESA* protects most workers in Ontario regardless of their immigration status. However, minimum employment standards may not apply if a worker agrees in writing to different rules. Furthermore, while the *ESA* covers most workers in Ontario, there are notable exceptions. Certain industries and job sectors, such as agriculture, growing, breeding, keeping and fishing, hospitality services, and manufacturing, construction and mining, have special rules or exemptions under the *ESA*.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, it is highly recommended to review the specific provisions for these sectors to ensure full understanding of the applicable labour rights and protections.

Relevant federal legislation includes the *Employment Insurance Act*, which provides eligible employees with payable benefits,<sup>37</sup> and the *Employment Protection for Foreign Nationals Act (EPFNA)*,<sup>38</sup> which offers protections for foreign nationals working or seeking work under immigration programs like the federal Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). The TFWP, as well as the International Mobility Program, grant certain rights and protections to temporary foreign workers, including provisions related to wages, working conditions and the ability to change employers in cases of exploitation.<sup>39</sup> Migrant workers under the Season Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) & Low-Wage Agri-Food Stream also have housing rights.<sup>40</sup> These federal laws and regulations complement provincial protections and provide an added layer of safeguards for migrant workers, though enforcement and awareness of these rights remain crucial.

## Part 2: Information Sharing

Migrant women in Canada face heightened risks of human trafficking due to a combination of factors, including precarious immigration status and language barriers, which limit their access to essential help. Many also experience social and cultural isolation, increasing their dependence on abusive individuals, while making it more difficult to reach out for support. These challenges are compounded by other systemic barriers, such as limited knowledge about their rights, fear of deportation, or mistrust of service providers.

To address these risks, migrant women need access to reliable, culturally responsive information and services tailored to their unique needs. It is essential that they understand they are not alone and that resources exist to empower, protect and help them heal. Building awareness, trust and community support is key to addressing the complex realities of trafficking and ensuring that migrant women obtain the tools and knowledge to escape exploitation and rebuild their lives.

### Exploring the Varied Forms of Human Trafficking

Exploitation takes different forms and exists on a spectrum, with the various types of human trafficking distinguished by these forms of exploitation. Sex trafficking and labour trafficking are two of the most common types of human trafficking, and survivors have highlighted how these forms of exploitation can intersect and manifest in complex, overlapping ways. The lines between the two can blur, with individuals experiencing both sexual and labour exploitation simultaneously, as seen in cases of domestic servitude or forced labour within the sex industry. Understanding both the differences and the interconnections between varied forms of exploitation is crucial for ensuring that legal frameworks and interventions address the multifaceted nature of trafficking and the diverse experiences of survivors.

#### *Sex trafficking*

Sex trafficking is a form of human trafficking that involves the sexual exploitation of individuals through coercion, deception, or force. It occurs when someone profits from another person's sexuality without their consent, often by means of manipulation, threats, or violence. The Government of Canada describes sex trafficking as "a form of human trafficking that involves recruiting, moving, or holding victims for sexual exploitation purposes."<sup>41</sup> Grassroot, intersectional feminist organizations like Aura Freedom emphasize that sex trafficking constitutes a form of gender-based violence and a direct consequence of overlapping inequities, including gender, race and class.<sup>42</sup>

Sex trafficking can take many forms and occurs in various industries, including exploitation in sex work, massage parlours, exotic dancing, escort services, pornography, military prostitution, sex tourism, mail-order brides and more. However, it is essential to distinguish between sex work and situations of exploitation, where individuals are coerced, deceived or

forced into these industries against their will. Sex work is consensual labour where individuals retain control over their choices, working conditions, and earnings, while human trafficking is not. The distinction is critical, as conflating the two can have harmful consequences, such as policies that further marginalize sex workers or drive trafficking further underground, making it harder to identify and support survivors.

### *Labour trafficking*

Labour trafficking, as described by the Government of Canada, “is a form of human trafficking that can happen in different industries. It involves recruiting, moving, or holding victims to coerce them into doing any kind of work.”<sup>43</sup> While labour trafficking can take place anywhere, it is most common in sectors that employ low-wage and often temporary or seasonal labour, such as agriculture, caregiving, hospitality and construction.

The Migrant Workers Centre indicates that “labour exploitation occurs when employers treat workers in ways that break the law.”<sup>44</sup> This includes treatment that is against workers’ legal rights and occurs, for instance, when employers withhold pay and documents, make false promises about working conditions, responsibilities or pathways to citizenship, and issue threats of deportation and other punishment if the migrant pursues their rights.

Through our work supporting survivors of labour trafficking, we often see migrant workers being subjected to a range of exploitative conditions. Many are forced to pay illegal recruitment fees, live in unsafe and overcrowded housing, and remain isolated from the local community. Some are prohibited from leaving their workplace

### **“It Happens Here: Labour Exploitation Among Migrant Workers During the Pandemic”**

In early 2022, FCJ Refugee Centre, in collaboration with the Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, examined labour exploitation during the pandemic era. This research identified five key findings through a series of focus groups conducted in Ontario:

1. Migrant workers have a limited understanding of their rights in Canada.
2. Many migrant workers are not aware that labour trafficking occurs in Canada.
3. Migrant workers are frustrated by policies that make it difficult to acquire permanent resident status.
4. Migrant workers’ primary concern is family separation, followed by low wages and employer discrimination.
5. Many migrant workers had access to COVID-19 vaccines during the pandemic, but employers jeopardized workers’ safety by failing to implement other public health measures.

Source: Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking & FCJ Refugee Centre, *It Happens Here: Labour Exploitation Among Migrant Workers During the Pandemic*, 2023, available at [FCJ Refugee Centre](#).



without permission—or at all—while others are made to perform jobs different from what was originally promised. Workers may be unpaid or severely underpaid, forced to work excessively long hours with little to no breaks, and denied health and safety training or protections. Many have no control over their own money or identification documents, are prevented from negotiating their working conditions, and are silenced from speaking up about their treatment. In many cases, threats of arrest or deportation are used to maintain control, leaving workers trapped in exploitative and dangerous situations.

Recognizing human trafficking in practice can be challenging due to its hidden nature and the complex dynamics involved. To assist in this process, the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) has developed a national human trafficking assessment tool. This tool is designed to help service providers across Canada identify and respond to situations of human trafficking, and it is available at [CCR](#) to support effective intervention.

We find that women are highly represented in cases of labour trafficking, challenging the misconception that this form of exploitation primarily affects men. Labour trafficking is not a male-dominated issue. Women, particularly migrant women, often experience unique and compounded vulnerabilities due to gendered expectations, workplace discrimination and precarious immigration status. Many are employed in industries where exploitation is rampant, such as domestic work, caregiving, hospitality and agriculture, where they may be isolated from support networks and subjected to poor working conditions. Within our cases in 2024, 40% of survivors were migrant women.

Moreover, migrant women are often the primary targets of domestic servitude, a form of trafficking where they are coerced or forced into working in private households for little to no pay, under conditions of exploitation and control.

### *Other forms of trafficking*

Other forms of human trafficking include, but are not limited to, forced marriage, child soldier, and forced criminality.

- Forced marriage is defined as the “union of two persons, at least one of whom has not given their full and free consent to the marriage.”<sup>45</sup> It occurs when individuals are coerced or pressured into marriage against their will, often under duress.<sup>46</sup> Forced marriage qualifies as human trafficking, as it results in one person exerting control over another for the purpose of exploitation.<sup>47</sup>

The I do! Project, which works to raise awareness about forced marriage in Canada, emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between forced marriage and arranged marriage. The key difference is the absence of consent in forced marriages. In an arranged marriage, both individuals have the autonomy to accept or reject the union. In contrast,

forced marriages deny this freedom. To support service providers in recognizing and responding to forced marriage, their [training toolkits](#) are available online.

- Child soldiering refers to the involvement of children under the age of eighteen in any form of armed conflict, whether through direct participation in combat or in other supportive roles. The recruitment of a child (i.e., a person under the age of 18) for the purpose of sexual exploitation or participation in armed conflict falls under the ambit of human trafficking.<sup>48</sup>
- Trafficking for forced criminality can be understood as “trafficking in persons for the purpose of exploitation of victims through forcing or otherwise compelling them to commit criminal acts for economic or other gains of traffickers or exploiters.”<sup>49</sup>

Regardless of the form of exploitation, human trafficking is a violation of a person’s basic human rights, and it severely affects men, women and children. The effects of trafficking are not only physical but also deeply psychological and emotional, leaving survivors with long-lasting trauma. This reality is compounded by the overlapping and intersecting forms of oppression that many survivors face, which ought to be considered when developing support plans.

*“We come to Canada with skills, degrees and potential, but the system holds us back. If we’re not allowed to be ourselves, how can we rebuild our lives?”*

*-Survivor*

#### *A note on intersectionality and the ‘ideal victim’*

Intersectionality, a concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, describes how different forms of discrimination interact and overlap. Increasingly, intersectionality is used to frame social justice issues, including human trafficking.

Survivors of human trafficking are often portrayed through the lens of the ‘ideal victim’, and their experience is tokenized to support a simplified narrative that reinforces popular misconceptions about human trafficking.<sup>50</sup> This harmful stereotype erases the diverse realities of survivors and ignores the structural factors that contribute to trafficking, such as systemic oppression, economic inequality, and immigration barriers. The ‘ideal victim’ framework also excludes those who do not fit this narrow image, such as racialized, 2SLGBTQI+, undocumented or criminalized survivors, as well as people with disabilities and neurodivergent individuals, making it harder for them to access support.

Trafficking survivors have diverse experiences and identities, and they have often endured multiple, intersecting forms of oppression. These factors impact on how survivors (and us all) live, work and recover from trauma. In this context, intersectionality is about recognizing

and understanding interconnected oppressions and bringing these often-hidden dynamics forward in order to transform them in ways that are meaningful for the women we support.

Reflecting on the importance of systemic change, survivors have shared that systemic oppression shapes their ability to seek help and their journey to rebuilding their lives. Those with precarious immigration status expressed fear of detention or deportation, which prevented them from reaching out for support. Many spoke about how a lack of financial resources and employment opportunities left them with few options, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and making escape even more difficult. Others described facing racism and discrimination when trying to access certain services, including language barriers not being addressed, leading to them being dismissed, misunderstood or even criminalized rather than receiving the support they needed.

In addition to systemic oppression linked to immigration status, class and race, homo-bi-transphobia emerged as a significant form of discrimination faced by survivors, particularly those in 2SLGBTQI+ communities. Survivors who identify as 2SLGBTQI+ mentioned encountering additional layers of oppression, including social exclusion, violence and barriers to accessing support services. Discrimination within institutional settings—such as shelters, law enforcement and healthcare—exacerbates survivors’ trauma and hinders their ability to seek help. This oppression is often invisible, and many service providers may unintentionally perpetuate harmful biases or struggle to offer affirming and culturally responsive care.

Recognizing intersectionality through the lived experiences of survivors is therefore crucial for providing services that respond to their unique needs and are meaningful to them. As Audre Lorde aptly said, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we don’t live single-issue lives.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Myths and misconceptions about human trafficking**

A key element in addressing human trafficking involves dispelling the myths and misconceptions that often cloud public understanding of this issue. Through peer-led groups and individual sessions with migrant women that have lived through human trafficking and gender-based violence, we identified some of the most common myths about human trafficking and we addressed them as below, informed by these firsthand accounts and aimed to challenge the assumptions that perpetuate stigma and hinder effective support and intervention.

#### **HUMAN TRAFFICKING CAN HAPPEN TO ANYONE**

Human trafficking can happen to anyone. But some populations are more at risk than others. Significant risk factors include recent relocation, isolation and past traumatic experiences, as well as other vulnerabilities caused by intersecting systematic oppressions such as

ableism, racism, classism, sexism, displacement, homo-bi-transphobia, housing and income insecurity, and discriminatory immigration policies.

Often, traffickers identify and leverage people's vulnerabilities in order to create dependency.

#### BOTH CANADIAN CITIZENS AND FOREIGN NATIONALS CAN EXPERIENCE HUMAN TRAFFICKING

International and Canadian definitions of human trafficking include both citizens and foreign nationals. Moreover, not all foreign nationals who experience trafficking are undocumented. While a lack of immigration status exposes migrants to a heightened risk of trafficking, foreign nationals with a valid status are also trafficked.

#### HUMAN TRAFFICKING IS NOT THE SAME AS SMUGGLING

Smuggling requires an irregular border crossing and generally involves the consent of the person who pays a fee associated with the smuggling act and is free to do what they want once they have arrived at their destination.<sup>52</sup> Human trafficking instead can happen either within or across national borders, and trafficked persons have either never consented to the underlying act or their consent has been rendered meaningless by the trafficker's conduct.<sup>53</sup>

Smuggling and trafficking rings are nevertheless often closely related, with both preying on the vulnerabilities of people seeking international protection or access to labour markets abroad.<sup>54</sup> Irregular migrants relying on the services of smugglers may also experience trafficking, if the services they originally sought metamorphosed into exploitative trafficking scenarios during travel or once they arrive at their destination.<sup>55</sup>

#### "MIGRATION + SEX WORK ≠ SEX TRAFFICKING"<sup>56</sup>

Sex work is consensual, human trafficking is not. Sex workers are consenting adults voluntarily engaging in a form of labour or occupation, while human trafficking involves coercion and exploitation. Conflating sex work with sex trafficking has harmful consequences, as sex workers' agency is denied by the imposition of the 'ideal victim' narrative.<sup>57</sup> This not only stigmatizes sex workers but also obscures the true nature of trafficking, making it harder to identify and support those who are actually being exploited. By recognizing the distinction, we can better support both communities without reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

#### HUMAN TRAFFICKING DOES NOT REQUIRE PHYSICAL RESTRAINT

The legal definition of trafficking does not require physical restraint, bodily harm or physical force. Psychological means of control, such as threats, deception or abuse of a position of vulnerability, are sufficient elements of the crime. This includes coercive controls

techniques, similar to those seen in domestic abuse, which allow traffickers to maintain power over their victims, making it harder for them to seek help.

#### TRAFFICKERS ARE OFTEN KNOWN TO THOSE THEY EXPLOIT

Human trafficking often involves a slow process of manipulation, deception and coercion. A sex trafficking situation often starts out looking a lot like a romantic relationship or a friendship. Similarly, labour trafficking initially appears like a regular job opportunity before the work conditions deteriorate and the exploitation begins.

Often, people who are trafficked are lured and groomed by individuals posing as boyfriends and girlfriends, friends or employers.<sup>58</sup> This marks the beginning of a calculated grooming process where traffickers build trust, fill a need, and slowly isolate the individual, eventually leading them into a situation of exploitation. The grooming phase can range from weeks to years, with the trafficker steadily gaining control over the person's emotions, decisions, and actions.

#### THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Digital technologies play a complex and dual role in the trafficking experience, both facilitating exploitation and offering opportunities for support and intervention.

Traffickers increasingly use digital platforms to recruit individuals, with social media, job postings, and online interactions acting as gateways for manipulation. On the other hand, traffickers leverage digital technologies to control their targets. By restricting access to the internet and communications, traffickers keep their victims in the dark, limiting their access to support networks, information, and resources. This isolation is often compounded by surveillance technologies, such as GPS tracking on phones, hidden cameras in the living space, and frequent check-ins by traffickers. These tactics further contribute to the person's sense of entrapment and helplessness. Furthermore, digital technology is often misused in the form of sextortion and other forms of digital abuse, particularly within sex trafficking and gender-based violence.

Despite these negative uses, digital technologies also present opportunities for survivors of trafficking. One of the most significant benefits is the ability to provide access to information, which can be a critical lifeline for survivors or individuals at risk of trafficking. In addition, remote support and referrals play an increasingly important role in providing help to those who may not be able to physically access services due to isolation or fear of being detected. Digital technologies also help in overcoming language barriers, an issue that frequently arises for migrant survivors who may not speak the English language, and gathering digital evidence. Finally, digital advocacy is a powerful tool in raising awareness about human trafficking, supporting systemic change, and connecting survivors with resources. Online campaigns, social media platforms, and digital storytelling allow survivors to share their

experiences, organizations to spread awareness, and the general public to become informed and engaged.

Recognizing the dual nature of digital technologies allows us to better address the risks while also tapping into their potential to empower and support survivors.

#### INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING TRAFFICKING DO NOT IMMEDIATELY ASK FOR HELP

Individuals experiencing trafficking do not necessarily ask for help or identify themselves. Due to a lack of trust, self-blame, shame, fear of arrest, threats of harm to family and/or other grooming methods used by the traffickers, they tend not to immediately ask for help.

A person might not even know they are being victimized because they have a relationship with their trafficker – it could be their boyfriend or friend. They may believe that the traffickers have their best interests in mind and may be reluctant to escape. They may struggle to identify their traffickers as oppressors due to the presence of a trauma bond,<sup>59</sup> an intense emotional attachment between survivors and their traffickers.

#### THE TRAFFICKING EXPERIENCE SHOULD NOT BECOME THE ONLY AXIS

Intersectionality of different lived experiences should influence service provision so that the individuality of a survivor isn't pigeonholed by this one experience. This means that we must consider how all facets of the survivor's identity interact, acknowledging that each person's story and needs are unique.

#### NOT ONLY WOMEN ARE TRAFFICKED

While this project focuses on the provision of service to women and gender-diverse people, it is important to note that men and boys can also experience human trafficking. They are not only trafficked for the purpose of labour exploitation but also trafficked in the commercial sex industry, for the removal of organs and for other purposes.

#### **Populations at risk**

Human trafficking can happen to anyone, but some populations are more at risk than others due to intersecting systematic oppressions. Poverty, conflicts, inequalities, and persecution are just some of the common root causes.<sup>60</sup> While many people find themselves in situations of exploitation in their home communities, these root causes often push people to migrate in search of opportunities.<sup>61</sup>

Against this backdrop, increasingly restrictive immigration rules worldwide make it more difficult for people to migrate safely.<sup>62</sup> Migrants thus become particularly vulnerable to human trafficking and exploitation due to their unfamiliarity with the local context, limited legal and social protections, language barriers, dependence on intermediaries, lack of documentation and precarious living situations. And traffickers take advantage of these

situations by exploiting the extremely limited options and lack of legal and social protection that are available to migrants.<sup>63</sup>

Consequently, populations with precarious immigration status are at heightened risk of human trafficking and exploitation. Based on group and individual discussions, nearly all survivors identified out-of-status migrants as the population most at risk, followed by refugee claimants and refugees, survivors of gender-based violence and sponsorship breakdowns, seasonal and temporary migrant workers, closed work permit holders, live-in caregiver program applicants, and international students. Additionally, survivors highlighted that other diverse groups within the migrant community face elevated risks due to intersecting forms of systemic oppression and marginalization. These include LGBTQI+ people, people with disabilities, children and youth, and seniors.

As emphasized by Aura Freedom, “human trafficking is a human rights abuse that thrives in situations of inequity.”<sup>64</sup>

### **Barriers faced by migrant women**

During group and individual discussions, survivors highlighted a range of key barriers that significantly increase the risk of exploitation for migrant women in Canada.

Chief among these barriers is the uncertainty surrounding immigration status, limited access to critical information about their rights or available resources which results in limited access to their rights, and discrimination. Survivors have pointed out that biases, particularly those directed at the 2SLGBTQI+ community and racial minorities, exacerbate the barriers they face, making it even more difficult to access services and support.

In addition, survivors discussed how the shelter and housing crisis affecting many parts of Canada, as well as the unaffordability of post-secondary education, exacerbate their vulnerability. Language barriers, social isolation and diverse cultural backgrounds also play a role, making it harder for migrant women to navigate their environment and access necessary resources. Survivors also noted a deep mistrust of authorities, often rooted in past experiences, as well as the compounded impact of trauma, which can impair their ability to seek help or advocate for themselves. These interconnected challenges create a complex web of barriers that heighten the risk of exploitation for migrant women.

**Trigger Warning:** The following testimony shares deeply personal and sensitive experiences of trauma. Please take care of yourself in whatever way you need.

***Lived Realities: A Survivor's Perspective on Human Trafficking and Support Systems in Canada***

I am an immigrant woman who came to Canada from Africa intending to pursue a master's degree at a Canadian university. When I was in my home country, I contacted a travel agency to seek assistance with the immigration process to Canada. The travel agency connected me to a travel agent who ended up becoming my trafficker. The agent assured me that he could obtain all the necessary documents for me to travel and study in Canada. I trusted him and paid him \$18,000. Later, the agent gave me an admission letter to a Canadian university, a payment receipt, and other documents which seemed legitimate to me then.

I travelled to Canada with all the documents provided by the travel agent. The agent picked me up at the airport when I arrived in Canada. He told me that we still needed to conclude my school admission process and that we had to do it while I waited for the school year to start - which, according to him, was two months after my arrival. The agent suggested that I live with him to save money, and I accepted his offer.

When we arrived at his house, he confiscated my passport and other documents under the pretense of keeping them safe. He told me I could not just sit at home doing nothing, so he sent me to work in a factory. He assured me that my study permit allowed me to work in Canada.

I was getting paid biweekly, but the agent, who I would refer to as "my trafficker" from here, retained all my salary. He claimed he was saving the money for me, but in the end, I never received the money. He also sexually assaulted me.

In his house, I met two other girls whom he had also brought to Canada and who were in a similar predicament to mine. The three of us shared a room, and each had to pay \$400 per month to our trafficker. He isolated us and controlled every aspect of our lives. He would not allow us to leave the house on our own. If we needed to be anywhere, he would transport us and surveil us at all times. He told us not to share any information with anyone at our work.

Eventually, I managed to escape his house. Unfortunately, I was unable to escape his control. He threatened to cancel all my immigration and school admissions if I did not do what he asked. He said that he was the one who brought me to Canada, so he had the power to deport me back to Africa.



When I was supposed to start my master's degree program in January, my trafficker told me that there had been a complication and that my school would start in April instead. I was confused and devastated when I heard that, but there was nothing I could do but wait. Three months later, I reminded my trafficker that it was time for me to start my master's program, which was the reason why I paid him to bring me into Canada. When he heard that, he became angry and started threatening me. He said that my documents were counterfeit and there was nothing I could do against him because he had friends in immigration.

My trafficker knew everything about me. He knew where I lived, where I worked and where I bought groceries; he knew everything. He once came to my work and attempted to kidnap me. He tried to force me into his car, but, luckily, a friend noticed and came to help me. I was terrified for my life, so I went into hiding.

One day, with the help of my friend, I decided to go to the police. The police investigated my report and eventually arrested my trafficker and charged him with human trafficking, among other crimes.

During the investigation, I discovered that I never held a student permit and was out of status. I feared that immigration would deport me. I was also terrified because I believed that my trafficker had powerful friends who could find and harm me. I remember that he used to ask me, "What can the grasshopper do to the elephant?" It was one of his ways of letting me know that he could easily hurt me if he needed to.

My trafficker spent three months in jail before being released on bail. He called my family back home and offered them \$20,000 if they could persuade me to drop the charges. My husband (now ex-husband) tried to convince me to accept his offer. My husband contended that if my trafficker went to jail, we would never get our money back. Despite his plea, I refused to drop the charges. I told him and my pastor, "I want justice." What my trafficker had put me through was a nightmare. I was not his first victim, but I hoped to be the last.

We went through the court trial, but in the end, the judge concluded that I did not have sufficient evidence. My husband held a vital piece of evidence but refused to present it to the court. I cannot prove this, but I believe that my husband took the money from my trafficker in exchange for keeping the evidence hidden from the court. I have since divorced my husband.

My trafficker fled Canada soon after the trial ended. He went back to his home country, which is also mine. He continued to threaten me so I could not return home.

After filing a police report, I was connected to Victim Services, a women's shelter, and other organizations that assisted me in getting out of my dire situation. These organizations helped me with shelter, food, transportation and therapy. I was connected to FCJ Refugee Centre, which provided me with an immigration lawyer who helped me apply for refugee status. I was granted protected status in Canada.

I was able to reclaim my life because of all the support I received. Since then, I have been living my life. I found a new, loving husband who truly cares about my wellbeing. I continued my studies as I had always wanted. I successfully created a new life for myself. I am happy.

I had no idea that I was being trafficked when I was in the middle of it all. Therefore, I advise other women to watch out for the warning signs, such as isolation and control. My trafficker took advantage of my precarious immigration status and used it to control me. I was hesitant to fight back because I believed that my trafficker would get me deported. However, please remember that in Canada, a person cannot deport you on a whim. Also, remember that no one has complete control over your life. You can break free. There are people and organizations that can support you out there. Reach out to them.

During our anti-human trafficking work at the FCJ Refugee Centre, we encounter migrant women being exploited in all sectors. We see them trafficked for sex work, domestic servitude or to work in factories, restaurants, hotels, farms and cleaning services. These women have limited options to exit their situation and are often threatened with violence or with deportation. Traffickers often used their victims' precarious immigration status against them, as a form of control and coercion. In addition, we often see how women have difficulties securing safety due to an inadequate integration of gender perspective and analysis in relevant law enforcement services.

Understanding the barriers migrant women face is essential for developing effective strategies to support them in addressing those barriers.

- *Uncertainty of immigration status*

#### *The importance of an early assessment*

Despite the impact of trauma, survivors with precarious immigration status must choose between alternative, often incompatible pathways from the very beginning. Many of them must choose between claiming refugee protection and applying for a Temporary Resident Permit (TRP) for Victims of Trafficking in Person (VTIP.) As one option excludes the other one, these early decisions may have strong implications in the long term.

As such, it becomes essential that a survivor's immigration options be assessed early on. And these assessments must be holistic. They are trafficking survivors, but their lived experiences should not be seen exclusively through this one lens. There are many lenses, and keeping an open mind enables the identification of the stronger immigration option in light of all the circumstances. There are trafficking survivors who don't meet the refugee definition, refugee claimants with valid trafficking claims and women with other refugee claims who have experienced trafficking. For instance, a woman may migrate to escape forced marriage or may be forcibly married *en route* or upon arrival at destination after feeling persecution on other grounds. People's journeys aren't linear. A comprehensive early assessment is thus essential to identify the best path forward for each survivor.

#### *Options to regularize immigration status are limited and lack stability*

For women with precarious immigration status who don't meet the refugee definition, there are limited remedies to secure stability. Key immigration remedy is the Temporary Resident Permit (TRP) for Victims of Trafficking in Persons (VTIP), whose purpose is to "respond to the vulnerable situation of victims of trafficking in persons by providing these individuals with a means of legalizing their temporary resident status in Canada, when appropriate."<sup>65</sup>

However, these remedies are inadequate and uncertain. First of all, even though IRCC's policy does not require survivors to collaborate with law enforcement agencies or testify against their traffickers in order to receive a Temporary Resident Permit for Victims of Trafficking in Persons,<sup>66</sup> in our daily practice we observe that many such TRP applications are denied when a case against the trafficker is not pending - whether this is because no investigation was initiated by law enforcement or it has been concluded in court. This is particularly true for both initial and subsequent TRPs for individuals affected by labour trafficking, which in our experience are refused at a higher rate than those for sex trafficking survivors. As a result, if there is no criminal investigation ongoing or the case has been concluded, she is left with no status, no justice and very few options to safely remain in Canada.

Furthermore, while some survivors may be granted a TRP, there are almost no permanent immigration remedies. Current options are exceptional in nature, making it difficult for people to be successful in obtaining permanent residency. In turn, this creates uncertainty in the lives of survivors and their families whose future depends on the unpredictable outcomes of their immigration and criminal proceedings.

Finally, if granted a TRP, the survivor will face barriers in accessing essential services such as housing subsidies available to domestic survivors of trafficking and other vulnerable women, provincial financial assistance (in Ontario this would be Ontario Works) and most importantly, she will have no right to family reunification. As a result, mothers are unable to reunite with their children in Canada and have difficulties visiting them in their countries of origin without losing their status.

Other issues surrounding the TRP process that we identified through our work include long processing times, inconsistent outcomes due to different interpretation and application of relevant policy by decision makers, lack of trauma-informed training displayed by some of the immigration officers interviewing survivors, and short validity of the TRPs (generally, one year for the first TRP and for each renewal, if granted). These systemic barriers not only undermine survivors' ability to rebuild their lives but also leave them in a state of prolonged insecurity, forcing them to navigate an immigration system that fails to recognize their long-term needs for safety, justice, and reunification with their loved ones.

*"The struggle to get permanent resident status makes it much harder to heal from trauma. The long wait times mean living in constant uncertainty, without peace of mind. Each time I renew my Temporary Resident Permit (TRP), I face even more disruption—waiting for months without knowing if I'll be approved, at times losing status in the meantime, and being cut off from income and essential services. There should be a clear processing timeline, so survivors know when to expect a decision. Without information, it feels like we are left in limbo. I hope FCJ continues to advocate for a better, more accessible immigration pathways for survivors like us."*

*-Survivor*

For information on the provision of legal support to racialized women with experience of gender-based violence living with precarious immigration status in Canada, see:

- Deepa Mattoo's *Race, Gendered Violence, and the Rights of Women with Precarious Immigration Status* (November 2017), available at [Schlifer Clinic](#), and
- Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic's *Gathering Evidence for Humanitarian and Compassionate (H&C) Applications: A Toolkit for Advocates Supporting Women Survivors of Gender-Based Violence* (2018), available at [Schlifer Clinic](#).

- *Discrimination*

Survivors shared their experiences of discrimination in Canada, highlighting how both societal and institutional biases create additional barriers for migrant women, particularly within the 2SLGBTQI+ community and those who face racial discrimination.

Many survivors recounted instances of mistreatment in the workplace, particularly related to gender identity and sexual orientation. They emphasized the widespread lack of respect for gender identity in both professional and social spaces, which often led to further marginalization. In addition, survivors pointed to the limited availability of specialized services for 2SLGBTQI+ adults, stressing the need for more tailored services and educational opportunities that specifically address their unique needs.

Racial discrimination emerged as another prevalent theme in survivors' conversations. Several individuals shared how they have been told to "go back home" or faced other forms of racial hostility due to their Black identity. Some survivors also recounted being passed over for job opportunities or struggling to secure childcare placements due to their racial or immigration status. Discrimination against racialized communities in Canada, especially Black and Indigenous people, has been widely documented, with these groups facing systemic barriers in multiple areas of life.<sup>67</sup> This includes barriers to employment, with racialized candidates facing bias in hiring practices, as well as disparities in access to services like healthcare and housing.

Harmful instances of linguistic discrimination were also reported, especially during interactions with law enforcement, highlighting the systemic failures that occur when survivors are not provided with the necessary support. One survivor shared how, when police intervened in what was reported as a domestic dispute, they did not provide an interpreter, despite her limited English skills and visible distress. The police disregarded her inability to fully communicate her experience, failing to listen to her side of the story. Without an interpreter and lacking a trauma-informed approach, the police criminalized the survivor with domestic violence (technically, assault) charges for merely attempting to defend herself.

These accounts highlight the need for stronger enforcement of existing laws, greater societal acceptance, and more specialized services that are responsive to the unique needs of diverse migrant communities, ensuring survivors are not silenced or re-victimized by the system meant to protect them.

- *Limited access to information*

Many migrant women surviving human trafficking in foreign countries find themselves in unfamiliar contexts, unable to connect with the local community due to language barriers and isolated. They lack access to information, from awareness of what they are going through to services available to them.

Some of the questions commonly raised by migrant women with lived experiences are as follows:

*How to navigate a new city/town? How to open and manage a bank account? How to build credit and why is it important? How does health care work and how to apply for health cards? How to find bus routes? How to rent a house and obtain reference letters to do so? What are tenants' rights? How do food banks, Ontario Works, Legal Aid work? How to access mental health support?*

It should be noted that while these questions may be common settlement concerns for many newcomers to Canada, for survivors of human trafficking, they are critical to their ability to escape violence and avoid further harm. These women are often in immediate need of stability and autonomy, and having access to this type of essential information is crucial for their safety.

*“For a long time, I felt hopeless, believing there was no support available for me. It took me two years to finally find help.”*

*-Survivor*

Knowing how to navigate the local system, understand their rights as tenants, access healthcare, and find mental health support, it all can make the difference between staying in an abusive situation and finding a path to safety. Moreover, being equipped with practical knowledge such as how to open a bank account or how to build credit can help survivors regain a sense of control over their lives and avoid further exploitation or revictimization. Without these resources, survivors face a heightened risk of being re-trafficked or falling into cycles of abuse. Therefore, addressing these informational gaps is not just about facilitating settlement; it is about empowering survivors to escape violence and rebuild their lives.

- *Shelter and housing crisis, and education unaffordability*

The shelter and housing crisis in Canada is deeply felt by migrant women, who often face severe challenges due to their precarious immigration status and limited access to resources. Survivors shared how unaffordable housing is, with rent for a simple accommodation reaching \$2,000 or more, and a lack of available beds in shelters exacerbating the situation. One survivor recounted seeing a former colleague living on the streets, highlighting the real threat of homelessness faced by many. Another survivor shared how the high cost of rent left her unable to afford basic necessities like food and clothing for her child, further compounding the stress of living in inadequate spaces. When attempting to find shelter, migrant women are often confronted with a lack of space and hostile conditions, especially in shelters that have few resources and high demand.

The housing crisis is exacerbated by discrimination. Survivors mentioned that even with all the required documents, they were still denied housing because of their identity, such as being a same-sex couple. This reflects a broader pattern of discrimination in housing markets, where 2SLGBTQI+ individuals, racialized communities and migrant populations are disproportionately affected. The difficulties migrants face in securing housing are compounded by a general lack of affordable options and systemic barriers.

Education affordability is another pressing issue for migrant women in Canada, particularly international students. Survivors shared how expensive education is, and how they are often unable to access it due to their immigration status or lack of financial resources.

The combination of these challenges means that many migrant women face a constant struggle for survival, with limited opportunities to build a better future.

- *Language barrier*

Language barriers are a significant challenge faced by many newcomer migrant women in Canada, profoundly impacting their ability to communicate and navigate their lives. For survivors who speak a different language, overcoming this barrier is essential to their survival and well-being. Many struggle with making phone calls or communicating effectively with service providers, while others face difficulties getting around for appointments or performing day-to-day tasks. This lack of access to language support often leaves survivors feeling isolated, powerless, and frustrated. Many express feelings of shame and vulnerability, as not being able to speak English can further exacerbate their sense of invisibility and disempowerment within Canadian society.

Additionally, the failure to address language barriers in crucial moments, such as when survivors interact with law enforcement, exacerbates their isolation and vulnerability. When adequate interpretation services aren't provided, survivors are left voiceless, unable to share their side of the story or properly navigate the system that is meant to protect them. This lack of linguistic support may result in misinterpretation, where survivors' actions are misconstrued, and they may be wrongfully criminalized or blamed for their victimization.

It should be noted that these challenges in accessing services are also encountered by Francophone individuals in Canada. While Canada officially recognizes both English and French as official languages, service delivery in French is often inconsistent, leaving francophone communities underserved in provinces and territories where French is a minority language. Francophone migrants, in particular, face compounded difficulties, as services tailored to their specific needs may not be available in French, or may not be known within their communities and among anglophone service providers. This forces them to navigate complex systems in English. This disparity not only exacerbates systemic inequities but also contributes to feelings of exclusion and isolation among francophone communities.

- *Physical and social isolation*

Isolation is a common element in trafficking experiences, as it facilitates abuse and prevents women from seeking help. Traffickers often use a combination of isolation tactics to maintain control over their victims. These include harboring women in rural areas, forbidding them from seeing “outside” people, restricting the use of transportation or communications, and

preventing contact with friends and family. In addition, we often see a shrinking of safe social spaces and an elimination of privacy and social support.

- *Diversity in cultural backgrounds*

Diversity in cultural backgrounds influences communication and understanding between individuals. Understanding any kind of information received is culturally determined.<sup>68</sup> The way in which cultural backgrounds influence the delivery and interpretation of information from one person to another is problematic, as culture can be subjective.<sup>69</sup> Because of this, misinterpretation of statements and behaviour is a particular danger in the context of cross-cultural communication. A failure to recognize the cultural relativity of words, norms and concepts can be a major source of misunderstanding and harm to survivors.

- *Mistrust of authority*

Often, we see traffickers threaten migrant women (and men) with deportation as a means of control. Survivors are manipulated to believe that they cannot seek help because they would be arrested, detained and deported by Canadian authorities due to their immigration status, and they fear approaching authorities. Many survivors feel helpless as a result.

In addition, many survivors may lack trust in state authorities due to their experiences back home. It is widely recognized that a person who was in fear of the authorities in their own country may still feel apprehensive vis-à-vis any authority.<sup>70</sup> Some survivors may also believe that their trafficker holds networks and connections with immigration authorities, as these are claims sometimes used by traffickers as control techniques.

- *Impact of trauma*

Complex layers of multiple traumas impact on survivors. Understanding these layers requires an understanding of how trafficking occurs, the abuse faced by survivors, the stigma they face from their own families and communities, and the lasting impact of trafficking on human development, mental health and relationships.

Traffickers use a variety of control tactics that have a profound impact on survivor's wellbeing, as many don't realize they had been trafficked until later or feel responsible for the abuse they faced. These control tactics range from physical and sexual violence to seizure of passports and other documents, debt bondage, humiliation and psychological manipulation.

It is important to note that, in most forms of trafficking, we see coercive control tactics similar to those seen in domestic violence—longstanding patterns of domination where an abuser engages in repeated psychological and emotional violence while using intimidation, deprivation, degradation, isolation and humiliation.<sup>71</sup> Controlling behaviours include making a person question their reality and themselves by distorting the truth (i.e., gaslighting), withholding money and depriving them of basic needs, pressuring them into



signing documents, imposing detrimental immigration decisions, technological surveillance, and abuse of the justice system (such as making false reports to police or child welfare authorities.)

Stigma, a sense of shame and/or fear of rejection can also inhibit survivors from seeking help and disclosing information.

A trauma bond, which is an emotional attachment between survivors and their abusers, may also compel individuals to continued exploitation and protect their trafficker. Service providers need to be cognizant of this to meet survivors where they are at, validate their feelings, raise awareness about trauma bonding, and improve material circumstances of survivors.

Research conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) shows that trafficking survivors are highly vulnerable to re-victimization immediately after having exited an abusive situation and *en route* to assistance, if they are not provided with adequate supports.<sup>72</sup> The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime confirms that “the long-term consequences of human trafficking for the individual are complex and depend on many factors, with no guarantee of recovery. Re-victimization is often a further consequence of the experience.”<sup>73</sup> It also specifies that the vulnerability of survivors exposes them to further abuse, if effective measures to protect them from re-victimization are not implemented.<sup>74</sup>

## Part 3: Best Practices for Services Provision

Drawing from our anti-human trafficking work at FCJ Refugee Centre and informed by group and individual discussions with migrant women, we have identified key best practices to guide service provision. These practices are designed to improve the supports available to migrant women who have experienced human trafficking and gender-based violence, as well as those at risk of such abuse. By fostering an approach centered on trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and gender-sensitive care, these strategies seek to address immediate needs while empowering migrant women on their paths to healing, resilience, and long-term stability.

Before delving into these best practices in detail, which outline actionable steps to enhance service delivery and advocacy, we present a testimony offering a firsthand perspective that underscores the importance of these recommendations.

**Trigger Warning:** The following testimony shares deeply personal and sensitive experiences of trauma. Please take care of yourself in whatever way you need.

### *A Migrant Woman's Reflection on Surviving and Healing*

My story begins in 2017 when I arrived in Canada for the first time. I travelled to Canada to visit some of my relatives. I planned to be here for only six months and then return to my country. When I arrived in Canada, I was single and in those months, I had the opportunity to find and meet new people.

One day, I found myself in a subway station looking for someone to help me with directions because I didn't know how to speak English or French. I decided to approach a man and ask him for help. The man was very kind, and he helped me. We had a spark of harmony in our initial interaction, and after a few minutes, it transformed into laughter. He invited me to have coffee, and I accepted his invitation. At that moment, I didn't think that anything wrong could happen. Before I knew it, we started dating.

Everything happened very quickly. I felt that I had found the love of my life. It was like a miracle. After only four months of dating, he proposed to marry me so we could be together forever. I loved him very much and wanted to be with him. When I said yes, it felt like a dream.

But soon after we were married, the dream ended, and the nightmare began. I started to see things about my husband that I didn't see while we were dating. I discovered that he liked to do drugs. He never mentioned that to me before then. I am timid and religious, and I had never seen drugs in my life before. That was why I felt so shocked to learn that my husband used drugs. Suddenly, I realized I didn't know who I had married.

Soon, he began to force me to do cocaine. My body reacted horribly to it and wanted to vomit. But when I told him I felt bad, he started abusing me. Everything suddenly went from bad to worse. He sexually assaulted and raped me. He was so aggressive that he hurt me. He drugged me and forced me to do everything that he wanted to do. After he finished with the sexual acts, he left me alone on the floor, crying and not knowing what had just happened, while he went to the refrigerator and drank beer. I felt violated. I felt like the worst trash in the world. That was my life for three years. While it was happening, I didn't know that it was sexual violence.

My husband (I would refer to him as my abuser from here) didn't have a regular job, and he exploited me by sending me to work. I had to work "under the table" because I was undocumented. I received my payment in cash, and every time I got home, my abuser took what little money I had earned that day. If I didn't have money because my employer had not paid me, my abuser would get furious and punish me by raping me or leaving me without food.

Often, my abuser also got angry and physically assaulted me because he didn't like that I believed in the church.

He said, "*No one can help you because you have no rights to anything here.*" He kept telling me, "*You do not have papers, and you do not have rights.*" I believed his words. I believed that no one could help me. I became so depressed that I contemplated suicide.

After three years of abuse, I felt like my life was disappearing. I didn't care if he raped me, lied to me, or forced me to take drugs. I was determined to commit suicide.

However, something inside me suddenly made me strong enough to seek help. I could not take it anymore and didn't want to live like that anymore, so one morning, I called 911. Three minutes after I made the call, the police arrived. I was surprised that everything moved so quickly. The police arrived at the right moment, just as my abuser was doing cocaine, and they saw how I was broken,

beaten and raped. The police sent me to a shelter for victims of domestic violence. My life began to change from that moment. It was in that shelter that I learned the levels of violence that a person can reach, and from 1 to 9, my abuser's violence was at 10.

My abuser then found out where I was staying, and he came to look for me and threatened to kill me. Fortunately, I was protected by the shelter workers.

Later, I found myself at the door of the FCJ Refugee Centre. I don't know where I would be if it weren't for the FCJ Refugee Centre. They have assisted me in my journey to get justice, and for that I am grateful.

After receiving so much help from FCJ, I decided to give back. I started teaching language classes at the FCJ Refugee Centre and doing other volunteer work. Thank God, I was granted my permanent residency on compassionate and humanitarian grounds. I cried a lot when I received the letter from the immigration telling me I was welcome in this country.

After so much violence, miracles do exist. But it depends on how you handle it. For all the help, I am very grateful.

I tell this story for other women to know not to be afraid. We all have the right to peace and happiness and not to be exploited. Today, I consider myself a strong woman, capable of facing any situation because I am no longer afraid of barriers, fear and threats. I speak Spanish, English and French and I have a good job. Thanks to my strength and everyone who supported me, I am alive, thriving in my life, and happy with who I am and what I do.

With this powerful testimony in mind, we now turn to an in-depth exploration of the best practices essential for supporting migrant women and addressing the unique challenges they face.

### **Importance of cultural competence and humility**

Cultural competence is about promoting inclusivity, respect and understanding within our communities and organizations. It involves acknowledging and celebrating differences, promoting education and inclusivity, encouraging open communication, and leading by example. Culturally competent individuals can adapt their behaviour and communication to suit different situations and they are able to build relationships with people from diverse cultures.

In the provision of services, this means fostering mutual respect between the worker and the survivor. With a greater understanding of other people and cultures, we are able to interact with people from a wide range of backgrounds and increase our abilities to help them receive the highest level of support.

However, many survivors indicated that showing respect for other people and cultures is not enough. They shared that it is neither necessary nor feasible to be experts on all cultures. Instead, what truly matters is asking thoughtful questions and avoiding judgements, which helps build real rapport. One survivor said,

*“Take the time to learn how to pronounce my name. If you are unsure how to say it, simply ask—asking is far better than making assumptions. Put in the effort to get it right.”*

We must consider our bias, admit that we are not an expert of knowledge in every culture, and be willing to ask questions and listen to survivors’ words rather than making assumptions about cultural identities and backgrounds.

In fact, it is through admitting what we don’t know and our willingness to listen that we move beyond cultural competence to what is known as cultural humility, demonstrating genuine understanding and true mutual respect.

### **Overcoming the language barrier**

Effective communication is vital for survival, as previously highlighted, and it is crucial for service providers to actively support migrant women in overcoming language barriers. This could be achieved through multiple strategies. Ideally, increasing the proportion of same-language interactions would be the most effective approach, as this would enable migrant women to express themselves clearly and receive information without the added stress of translation. This could involve hiring multilingual staff or creating peer support networks.

Given Canada's bilingual nature, it is especially important for service providers to ensure that both English and French services are available, to effectively support the diverse linguistic needs of the population. To enhance the accessibility of Francophone communities, providing a list of French-language resources tailored to their needs is an important step in making sure these individuals feel respected and supported throughout their journey. Of particular relevance for Francophone migrant women in Ontario is [Fem'aide](#),<sup>75</sup> the Francophone helpline for women dealing with violence, offering support, information and referral to appropriate front-line services within their communities.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> For women in the Greater Toronto Area and Halton-Peel, Oasis Centre des Femmes provides Francophone support to women affected by violence, helping them regain their agency and pursue the path of their choice. See; Oasis Centre des Femmes, *A propos de nous*, (undated), available at [Oasis Centre des Femmes](#).

In the alternative, when same-language interactions are not feasible, ensuring reliable access to interpretation becomes critical to providing meaningful services. This should include both consistent access to professional interpreters for regular appointments and immediate, on-demand solutions such as direct translation support lines available in times of crisis. In general, interpretation services should be trauma-informed and sensitive to cultural nuances to ensure that communication is not only accurate but also empathetic, and service providers should be trained to work effectively with language professionals. Learning techniques for communication through an interpreter, including how to convey a message clearly and concisely, may help overcome language barriers and build bridges between people, fostering connection and rapport.

Some of the available interpretation services are as follows:

- [Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic](#), offering free language interpretation or sign interpretation services to service providers serving women and gender-diverse people who have survived violence.<sup>76</sup>
- [R.I.O. \(Remote Interpretation Ontario\) Network](#), providing affordably priced on-demand immediate phone and video interpreting.<sup>77</sup>
- [MCIS Language Solutions](#), non-profit social enterprise offering interpretation and translation solutions.<sup>78</sup>

In times of crisis, critical services available are:

- The [Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline](#), which offers confidential, multilingual service, operating 24/7 to connect trafficking victims and survivors with social services, law enforcement, and emergency services across the country.
- The [Assaulted Women's Helpline](#), which provides a 24-hour telephone and TTY crisis line in over 200 languages to support, listen and guide women who have experienced any type of abuse anywhere in Ontario.<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, survivors suggested that service providers facilitate access to English language programs or referrals for those interested, empowering and enabling them to further integrate in Canadian society. They also emphasized the importance of supporting migrant women in making use of all the technology out there to assist them in language learning or navigating Canadian society, as well as organizing or referring them to interactive English learning opportunities such as movie nights or conversation circles. These activities would empower migrant women to practice and become comfortable in English within a safe, welcoming and judgement-free space, while simultaneously building community connections.

Free, low-barrier English language learning opportunities and events that migrant women can access regardless of their immigration status include:

- [English learning tools and conversation circles](#) at the Toronto Public Library.<sup>80</sup>
- [English Language Learning \(ELL\) classes](#) at FCJ Refugee Centre.<sup>81</sup>
- [Migrant Women’s Counter Human Trafficking Alliance](#) at FCJ Refugee Centre, organizing migrant women’s connection events.<sup>82</sup>

### **Determining short-and long-term goals of service**

Survivors recommended that best practices for determining long and short-term goals in service provision should prioritize conducting thorough early assessments, meeting basic needs first, and empowering people to express their priorities.

Conducting a comprehensive assessment of a person’s needs at the outset is crucial for developing an effective support plan. This assessment should encompass immediate concerns such as housing or health issues, as well as longer-term aspirations. Establishing both short and long-term goals in service provision allows service providers to tailor support effectively.

In developing this survivor-centred support plan, it was seen as imperative that a person’s immediate survival needs are met before addressing long-term goals. By prioritizing basic human necessities, service providers can foster a sense of stability and security, enabling survivors to focus on longer-term goals. Furthermore, case studies involving refugee and migrant populations in Canada illustrate that a failure to meet essential necessities can lead to persistent mental health issues, ultimately diminishing long-term success of service.<sup>83</sup>

Above all, service providers should empower people to take an active role in articulating their needs and setting their goals.<sup>84</sup> Instead of making assumptions, it is essential to facilitate a collaborative process that allows survivors to identify what is most important to them. Service providers should ask open-ended, empowering such as, “How can I assist you?” or “What can we do to support you?”, and they should listen to people’s responses without judgement or bias. This approach ensures that clients receive personalized, effective support that aligns with their immediate and future goals. In turn, tailoring services to individual needs, particularly when legal and immigration assistance is necessary, maximizes the likelihood of long-lasting, meaningful benefits.

### **Systemic barriers: Setting realistic expectations**

While we work towards eliminating systemic barriers to access to services, survivors denoted as essential that we set realistic expectations about how those systemic barriers present themselves and what they entail. Setting realistic expectations in this context means that both survivors and service providers understand the potential outcomes and limits of the available services, including obstacles to accessing these services on account of survivors’ immigration status. It also means that service providers know and communicate the risks connected with the precarity of survivors’ immigration status. This involves understanding consequences of service access, such as the issuance of removal orders

against out-of-status migrants seeking support or the criminalization of migrant women working in the sex trade.

Expectations regarding waitlists and the timing of access to services should be properly managed, along with a clear understanding of the restricted eligibility that migrant women face on account of their precarious immigration status. In our daily practice and lives, we see that most services are not available to migrant women with temporary status, including temporary resident permit (TRP) holders and other temporary residents, and those who are out of status. Most notably, they face barriers in accessing essential services such as shelter and housing, as well as financial assistance, which are generally available to domestic survivors.

It is therefore essential that eligibility criteria, waitlists and waiting times are thoroughly investigated before developing a support plan and referring survivors for services. When limitations exist, being straightforward and explaining them to survivors from the very beginning is the least painful option. This helps avoid disappointing and revictimizing survivors by exposing them to a denial of services that were promised to them and are much needed. To ensure clear and up-to-date information, a survivor recommended creating directories of relevant service providers that include not only general information about the services offered but also specific details about intake processes and expected timelines. They highlighted the importance of transparency regarding eligibility criteria and processes, noting that having clear information could help people avoid worsening situations while navigating critical support systems.

Moreover, many observed that whenever some advice is offered, a referral is made or goals and expectations are shared, it's good practice (when safe and feasible<sup>\*ii</sup>) to send a quick follow-up note in writing providing a concise summary of what was discussed. This helps to ensure clarity and avoid misunderstandings.

Setting clear boundaries is also consistently highlighted as an essential practice. Survivors emphasized the importance of service providers outlining their roles, the scope of their support and the limits of what can be expected from the services. This helps to prevent confusion, establish and maintain trust, and ensure that both service providers and survivors are aligned on expectations. Clear boundaries also contribute to empowering survivors by giving them control over their interactions and the support they receive, which is especially crucial for individuals who have experienced trauma and may feel disempowered and

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<sup>ii</sup> \*In cases where meeting summaries contain sensitive information that could compromise a client's safety, such as plans to flee an abuser or trafficker, locations of safe housing, or addresses of domestic shelters; it may not be safe or appropriate to send written summaries. This is especially critical if the client's email or phone is compromised and accessible to their trafficker.



vulnerable. Establishing these boundaries up front helps to create an atmosphere of transparency and mutual respect, where survivors can feel their dignity is upheld.

### **Engaging with referrals and follow-up care**

Many survivors identified the referral process as a critical time in their journey, where both the potential for support and the risk of further harm or abandonment is at play. Conversely, from the service provider's perspective, at the point of referral there is both an opportunity to address a person's unmet needs and a potential danger of losing them, if not handled with care and not followed up accordingly. To avoid further harm, adopting an intersectional, holistic view of survivors becomes thus critical for any service provider making referrals to other providers or agencies.

Collaboration among service providers and agencies is the key to avoiding fragmentation. In other words, collaboration is crucial for preventing people from "falling through the cracks" among independent and autonomous organizations. In this context, collaboration becomes the cornerstone of effective support. Another approach to prevent fragmentation is to designate one service provider as the primary contact/caseworker both for the survivor and for the other agencies. In this case, ideally, the primary caseworker would provide a holistic assessment that is comprehensive enough to satisfy all the service providers and agencies involved and accompanies the survivor throughout the referral process.

In general, when making a referral, survivors should be guided through the referral processes in a supportive way that increases their engagement with community resources and services. As highlighted by several survivors, when providing referrals, it is important to ensure that people fully understand the information being shared. People come from diverse backgrounds, and certain domain-specific terms or phrases—especially Canadian terminology—might have different meanings in other countries or languages. Clearly explaining these terms can be helpful. Additionally, following up in writing, whenever possible, is crucial to help clarify any misunderstandings. Clear communication is especially important during such a critical time, when people may be navigating complex decisions about their rights and next steps.

Finally, while some survivors wish to narrate their experiences to service providers themselves, many others express tiredness and frustration for having to repeat their story over and over again across different service providers and often even within the same organization. A supportive referral involves checking with the survivor about their preferences in that situation to ensure their needs are met while minimizing re-traumatization. This means service providers should ask how they want the referral to be handled and act accordingly. Research confirms that even if it's been years since the traumatic event occurred, trauma symptoms can resurface if the person is exposed to reminders of the original event.<sup>85</sup> Stressors can include interviews where survivors are

asked to recount traumatic events, discussions about past trauma, and any behavior that disregards their wishes or takes away their sense of control.<sup>86</sup>

### **Ensuring respect and empathy throughout service provision**

Providing services to women who have experienced human trafficking and gender-based violence requires a foundation of respect and empathy, as emphasized by many survivors. They shared that trauma, stigma and systemic barriers make it difficult to seek support, highlighting the need for safe environments where their dignity is prioritized.

When asked to elaborate on respect and empathy in service provision, survivors reflected on their journeys and identities to offer insights into best practices for delivering care. For many, respect and empathy begin with creating a supportive and nonjudgmental environment where they feel safe and valued. Some survivors emphasized the importance of being able to speak—or remain silent—without pressure, and for service providers to break the ice gently, whether through offering a warm drink or introducing relaxation techniques like breathing exercises or soothing music. Simple gestures of care, such as providing a hot beverage or allowing time to rest before beginning a conversation, were noted as meaningful ways to establish trust.

Survivors highlighted that **true empathy involves listening actively**, without assumptions about their needs or experiences. It means respecting their identities, pronouns and names, and refraining from behaviors that feel patronizing or insincere. Several survivors expressed frustration with service providers who rely on scripted responses, such as repeatedly saying “sorry” without meaning it or without addressing the issues at hand. For them, genuine empathy means showing understanding through meaningful actions, not empty words.

**Privacy and confidentiality** are also central concerns, with survivors emphasizing the distress caused by being required to disclose personal information in public settings, such as a crowded reception area. They also spoke of the harm caused by victim-blaming or reactions that made them feel guilty or diminished their dignity. Respect and empathy, they noted, should validate their experiences without imposing blame or re-traumatizing them by forcing them to repeatedly recount their stories.

Survivors also called for **personalized services** that recognize their unique journeys and provide practical, realistic support without judgment. They stressed the importance of culturally sensitive care that understands the emotional and psychological burdens migrants often carry. For some, having service providers with lived experience is particularly valuable, provided they understand that no two stories are the same and adapt their approach accordingly.

The following reflections from survivors further illustrate what respect and empathy in service provision means to them.

*"For me, it means not pushing my limits or pressuring me to do things I'm not ready for. It's about respecting my pronouns and my name and making an effort to learn how to pronounce them correctly. Take the time—do the work to get it right. Don't push me socially, respect my identity and most importantly, respect my name."*

*"Respect where we are in our journey and recognize how far we have come instead of telling us how much further we have to go."*

*"Listen without judging me. Too often, people place you in a box and make assumptions. If you don't know how to say my name, just ask. It's better to ask than to make assumptions. Confidentiality is also essential. If I share something, I expect it to be kept private. And please, don't pity me. I don't want to feel like someone is feeling sorry for me. If you do, at least don't let me see it."*

*"I want to feel that my dignity is respected when I seek help. We're often already hard on ourselves, and the last thing we need is to feel judged. I need someone who takes the time to listen and offers comfort—someone who reassures me that what happened wasn't my fault and that these things can happen, without making me feel worse about myself."*

Ultimately, respect and empathy in service provision involve empowering survivors, recognizing their resilience and providing compassionate, patient and trauma-informed care. It means always protecting the dignity of people, while ensuring that they are not alone in their healing journey and truly understanding the need for care that is both practical and deeply human.

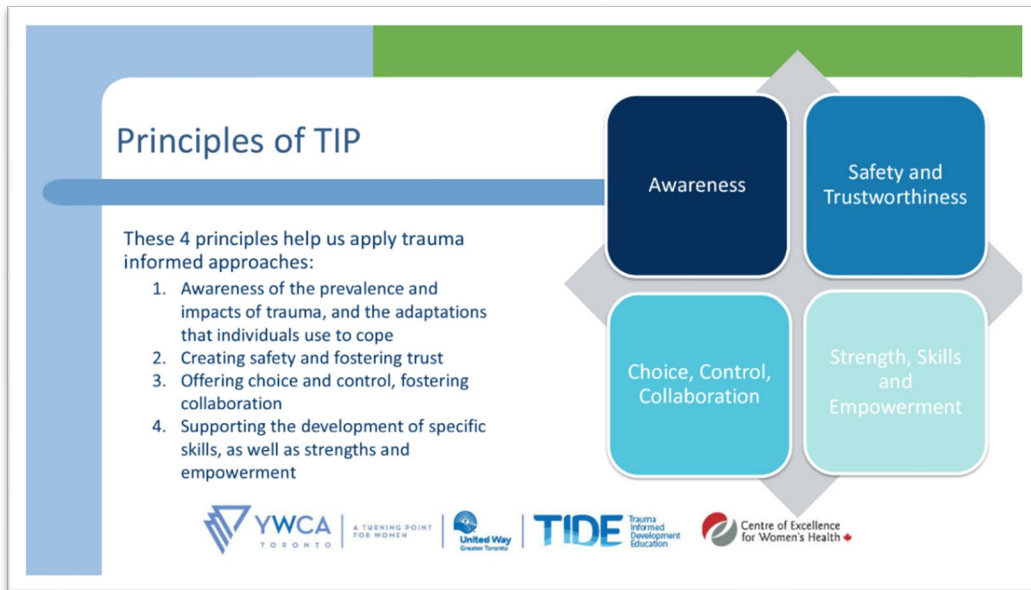
### **Providing trauma-informed care**

Understanding trauma and its impacts on the lives of us all was emphasized by many survivors as a critical foundation for providing service that is both safe and empowering. Trauma is a common experience for survivors of human trafficking. Trauma can have a significant and long-lasting effects on an individual physically, emotionally and psychologically. An individual's behaviour may be shaped by trauma, and this behavior may continue even after the survivor has exited the trafficking experience.

Trauma-informed care is a strengths-based framework grounded in understanding and responding to the impact of trauma. It emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety while creating opportunities for survivors to regain control and empowerment.

Essentially, it means recognizing how violence has affected someone and how trauma may shape their behavior in order to reduce harm. Working with a trauma-informed approach is not easy—it requires patience, flexibility, and understanding.

For instance, YWCA Toronto in collaboration with the Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health developed a project entitled TIDE (Trauma Informed Development and Education), to adopt a consistent Trauma-Informed Practice (TIP) as a framework centered on the understanding that many forms of violence and trauma impact staff, clients and the broader community.<sup>87</sup> The TIDE project identifies four principles of Trauma Informed Practice, as follows:<sup>88</sup>



Similarly, Covenant House Toronto offers a model of trauma-informed care based on the following four principles:<sup>89</sup>



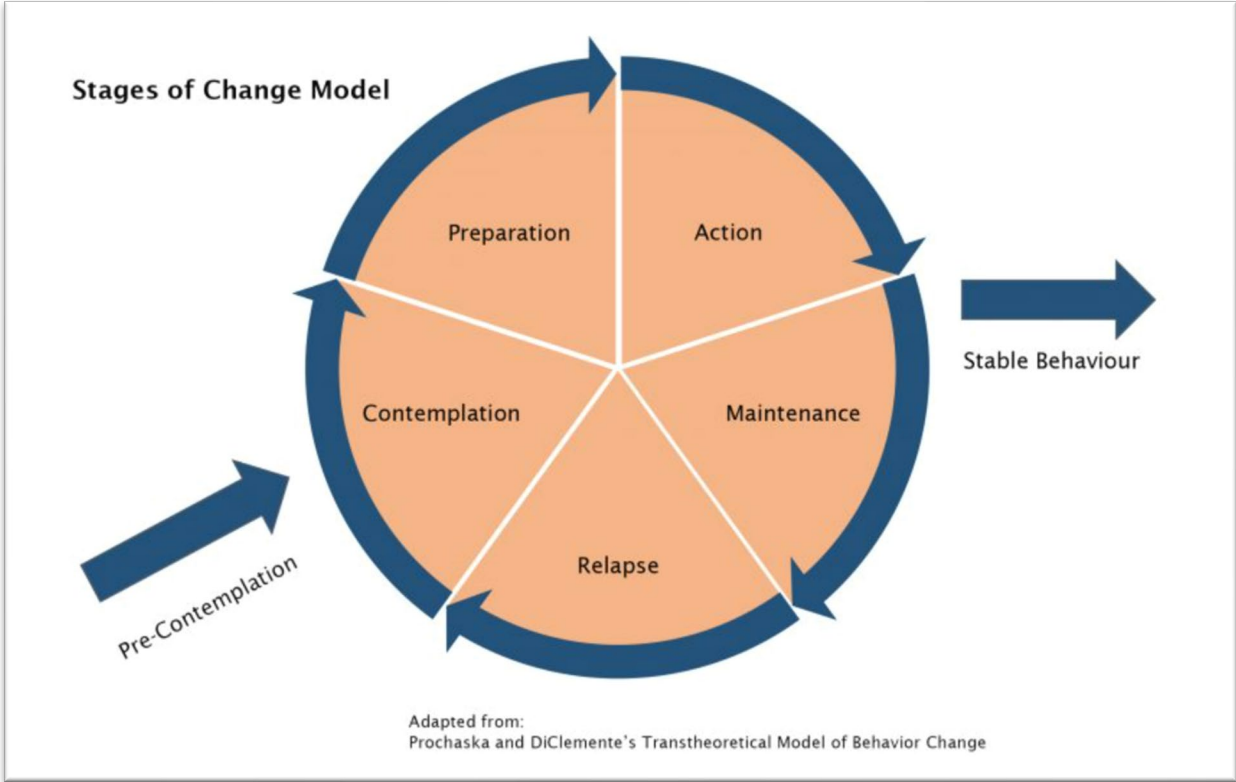
We also note that The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health [CAMH, Canada's largest mental health teaching hospital] designed a toolkit to build capacity of settlement, social and health services to better support the unique mental health needs of immigrants and refugees. This toolkit, which is available at [CAMH](#), is designed to provide a snapshot of essential information, tools, resources, and examples of promising practices that can be integrated into the daily work of settlement, social, and health service providers across Canada.<sup>90</sup>

**Working with intersectional and survivor-centred approaches**

When working with a survivor, we must consider how all facets of their identity interact, acknowledging that each person’s story and needs are unique. The specific needs of individual survivors must be considered instead of putting them all together and assuming they need the same services on the path to recovery. We must refute the patriarchal ‘ideal victim’ narrative that has a limited view of what a trafficking survivor looks like.<sup>91</sup>

It is essential that we meet survivors where they are, recognizing their diverse backgrounds, stories and choices. This includes acknowledging that not all survivors may be ready to leave the trafficking experience at any given moment in time.

*Change Model*



This stages of change model, adapted by the Kristen French Child Advocacy Centre Niagara from Prochaska and DiClemente’s Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change,<sup>92</sup> depicts the dynamic, complex process trafficking survivors experience as they prepare to leave the

trafficking experience. The model consists of six phases, which are not necessarily linear; survivors may move through the stages in any order or sequence. Change is described as cyclical, as survivors may enter, revisit, or complete stages multiple times before achieving stable behaviour or a new situation. This reflects the non-linear nature of their journey.

### Applying the “Do No Harm” principle

Survivors spoke of the harm caused by behaviours that left them feeling guilty or dismissed, as well as misguided interventions that can deepen their trauma or hinder their healing process. They highlighted the importance of creating an environment that prioritizes their wellbeing and safety at every step.

The principle of “Do No Harm” should serve as a foundational guideline for all activities and actions taken by service providers. Originally rooted in medical ethics through the Hippocratic Oath, this principle has expanded beyond healthcare to inform trauma-informed, survivor-centred practices. Its growing adoption reflects a heightened awareness of the responsibility service providers hold to avoid actions that could unintentionally cause harm or exacerbate the challenges faced by those they support.

For migrant women and others with precarious immigration status, this principle takes on added significance. They often navigate complex intersections of systemic oppressions, which can be exacerbated by misguided or harmful interventions. Historically, anti-human trafficking has enforced colonial systems of oppression. Decolonizing anti-human trafficking work requires critically examining and dismantling approaches rooted in colonialism, paternalism, and carceral responses that disproportionately harm marginalized communities<sup>93</sup>. An example of this caution comes from the *Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network Butterfly*, which has highlighted the harm caused by anti-trafficking policies rooted in white saviourism and misogyny.<sup>94</sup> The organization warns against what it describes as “whorephobia masquerading as anti-human trafficking rhetoric,”<sup>95</sup> underscoring the critical need to differentiate between consensual sex work and exploitative trafficking. This conflation not only harm sex workers but also diverts resources and attention away from the needs of human trafficking victims and survivors, while alienating those who might otherwise seek support.

Human trafficking is not sex work, and efforts to address trafficking must be rooted in respect for agency and self-determination, rather than moralistic or punitive approaches that risk criminalizing or disempowering those involved in sex work by choice. A decolonial lens challenges the dominant narratives that conflate migration, trafficking, and sex work, pushing instead for survivor-led, community-based solutions that prioritize dignity, autonomy, and justice. By applying the “Do No Harm” principle, service providers and policymakers can avoid perpetuating harm through misguided interventions, instead focusing on creating pathways to safety and justice that respect the diverse realities of migrant women and gender-diverse people.

## Part 4: Moving Forward

Considering our practice and the insights that migrant women shared with us, the FCJ Refugee Centre recommend a gender-responsive and rights-based approach to anti-human trafficking laws and policies to address the challenges expressed by survivors in Canada.

### **A Gender-Responsive and Right-Based Approach to Anti-Human Trafficking**

A gender-responsive and rights-based approach to anti-human trafficking laws and policies acknowledges the gendered dynamics of trafficking and the specific challenges faced by survivors in Canada, particularly women and gender-diverse people with precarious immigration status. This approach ensures that laws and policies address the root causes of trafficking, such as systemic gender inequality, economic insecurity, and migration policies that limit safe and legal pathways, while safeguarding the rights and dignity of people. It prioritizes trauma-informed and culturally responsive services, offering tailored support that reflects the diverse experiences and needs of survivors.

In Canada, survivors with precarious immigration status express challenges such as fear of deportation, discrimination, limited access to information, inadequate access to housing and shelter, and scarce education or employment opportunities. A gender-responsive framework would address these challenges by ensuring access to wraparound services and protections irrespective of immigration status. By integrating survivor voices into policy design and implementation, this approach fosters trust, enhances effectiveness and promotes long-term recovery and resilience.

#### *The importance of ongoing consultations*

As emphasized by the Toronto Counter Human Trafficking Network (TCHTN) in its recommendations for renewing the National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking and informing future initiatives,<sup>96</sup> we underscore the critical importance of inclusive and sustained consultations. These must involve service providers, grassroots organizations, Indigenous groups, advocates, survivors, children and youth, and other community stakeholders to ensure that anti-human trafficking efforts are rooted in lived experience.

Policy reforms aimed at mitigating exploitation should be developed within this collaborative framework. Centering the voices and expertise of those with lived experience is essential to creating effective, survivor-informed policies. Such an approach not only addresses systemic gaps but also strengthens protections and advances human rights.

Equally critical is the establishment, maintenance, and adequate funding of a Survivor Advisory Table, with diverse representation from individuals affected by all forms of human trafficking. Recognizing the unique nature of each form of trafficking, survivors must be actively engaged at every stage of policy development and implementation. Their ongoing

involvement ensures that anti-human trafficking efforts remain relevant, effective and rooted in the realities faced by those they aim to support.

### **Advancing Immigration Pathways**

To support both immediate safety and longer-term stability and healing, it is critical that tailored immigration programs are developed to respond to the needs of migrant women with lived experiences of human trafficking and gender-based violence. These regularization programs should be comprehensive and based on clear and simple criteria, and they should not be discretionary in nature. Procedural safeguards must be put in place to ensure that migrant women are not at risk of deportation if they apply for these remedies.

In addition to temporary pathways, survivors' permanent residency options should be expanded and the root causes leading to precarious immigration status in Canada should be addressed. Clear and consistent options for permanent residency must be developed to respond to the needs of survivors, and immediate access to permanent residence for those experiencing gender-based violence or exploitation should be prioritized. In addition, the refugee claim process should not hinder access to regularization programs, and criteria for permanent residency on humanitarian and compassionate (H&C) grounds should be adjusted to reduce the hardship requirements, offering relief to survivors. Furthermore, there should be a consistent application of a policy to stay removals for persons with a pending H&C application. Overall, a human rights approach and gender lens to decision-making should be implemented.

At the same time, we advocate for systemic changes to dismantle the structures of immigration policies that negatively affect migrant women, and particularly those aspects that lead to precarity and loss of immigration status. Work permit restrictions should also be eased, and employer specific and sectorial work permits should be abolished, with open work permits available to all migrant workers. Furthermore, we recommend repealing immigration regulations (e.g., ss. 183 (1) (b.1) and 196.1(a) of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations) and Ministerial Orders pertaining to migrants without permanent status working in the sex industry.

Moreover, we should foster expanded, safer access to support and services. A gendered perspective in law enforcement services, combined with trauma-informed, survivor-centered support, is critical for empowering migrant women to report abuse. Social services, including housing, financial assistance and education, should be available to all survivors, regardless of immigration status. Procedural safeguards are essential to ensure that migrant women accessing support services do not face deportation.

By addressing these gaps and adopting a comprehensive, gender-responsive regularization framework, Canada can better protect and empower migrant women with lived experiences of human trafficking and gender-based violence, promoting both immediate relief and long-



term stability. These measures would foster a more inclusive, equitable society where migrant women can thrive without the fear of discrimination, exploitation or deportation.<sup>iii</sup>

### *Final Thoughts*

To close, we share powerful messages of encouragement and resilience offered by migrant women with lived experiences of human trafficking and violence, aimed at providing guidance to others who may find themselves navigating similar challenges. These words highlight the strength, determination and hope that can emerge even in the face of adversity, while underscoring the importance of seeking support and trusting in one's journey.

*"You are the only person the universe has assigned to carry your essence—don't delegate your happiness."*

*"Don't be afraid or ashamed to share what you're going through. Ask for help. Find a trusted agency like FCJ Refugee Centre, and speak with them."*

*"No one can live your story better than you. Be brave."*

*"Personally, I have a phrase that always helps me keep my head up: Remember that after the storm, there will always be calm—that ray of light that signifies something new has emerged after a dark and rainy day."*

*"When you're ready, there is help for you. Don't feel ashamed to ask for it. I won't lie; it's scary, and some days get harder before they get better. It may not feel like it in the moment, but trust me—you can do this. You're stronger than you think and feel right now. It might take many tries before you succeed in turning your life around, but don't give up. It does get better, and you deserve it!"*

*"If you are seeking support while living with your abuser, proceed carefully and avoid sharing your intentions with your abuser or anyone close to them. Take some time to research the organization you're reaching out to and confirm that they offer the specific support you need. Be mindful about the information you provide—it's important to share enough to receive the most accurate resources, but avoid disclosing unnecessary details that could lead to re-victimization."*

*"We are not to blame for the mistreatment we have endured, and we can overcome the fear we once felt. It's valid to take a step back and experience your emotions because that is what allows us to seek help and move forward. It's okay to ask for help and to feel vulnerable."*

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<sup>iii</sup> For an analysis of existing immigration responses to gender-based violence and human trafficking in Canada, see: FCJ Refugee Centre, *Ensuring Equity - Advancing immigration pathways for women with lived experiences of gender-based violence and human trafficking*, April 2024, available at [FCJ Refugee Centre](#).

*"Follow your heart and trust the way you feel to guide your actions."*

These reflections shine a light on the incredible resilience of survivors and the importance of compassion, courage, and community in the healing process. They remind us how powerful it can be to truly listen, offer understanding, and provide real, meaningful support. At their heart, these messages encourage embracing vulnerability, trusting in one's journey, and finding strength in connection with others. They are a testament to the fact that healing is possible, no one must face their struggles alone, and even in the toughest times, there's hope for a brighter, more promising future.

We thank and honour the people who shared their words and journeys with us.

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