



Back to Sex workers press Ottawa over unsafe conditions

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OTTAWA – A leading advocacy group for decriminalizing prostitution in Canada is planning to take the federal government to court over laws that it says endanger the lives of sex workers across the country.

Valerie Scott, executive director of Sex Professionals of Canada, says the legal action will go ahead in January.

"The communicating and bawdy house laws are arbitrary," Scott said in an interview from Toronto.

"They do more harm than good, and we'll be filing in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice. We're hoping to get a judgement from them within two years. Then we'll go to the Supreme Court of Canada with it."

The common bawdy house laws can evict women from their homes, since landlords receive a notice of their alleged activities, said Wendy Babcock, spokeswoman for the Sex Professionals of Canada.

Scott, who expects to be one of the plaintiffs in the court case, says the group will challenge the country's solicitation laws on constitutional grounds.

The sex trade in Canada falls into a legal grey area because, while prostitution itself is not illegal, activities related to it are. Individuals who communicate for the purpose of prostitution or who sell sexual services can be charged under the Criminal Code.

"It's really unfortunate that our profession is one of the few professions that doesn't have any legal protection to it," Babcock said. "Making it illegal is just forcing women into dangerous situations."

News of violence against sex trade workers has garnered headlines in recent weeks. The slayings of five women in Ipswich, England, triggered warnings for prostitutes there to stay off the streets.

In Canada, a seven-months-pregnant mother of three was stabbed to death in Gatineau, Que., after an alleged "bad date." And jurors have just been selected for the trial of Robert Picton, the alleged serial killer of at least 26 sex workers from Vancouver's notorious Downtown Eastside.

A 2006 Statistics Canada report said women in the sex trade are extremely vulnerable to violence which "often goes unnoticed."

"According to police reports submitted to Statistics Canada, between 1991 and 2004, 171 female prostitutes were killed and 45 per cent of these homicides remain unsolved," the report said.

Statistics on the homicide rate of sex workers are "almost certainly lower than the real figures," according to a report issued this month by a Commons subcommittee. Three-quarters of the homicides reported to the panel took place in Vancouver, Montreal, Edmonton, Toronto, Winnipeg and Ottawa-Gatineau.

But after hearing testimony from over 300 witnesses, MPs from the various parties on the subcommittee couldn't agree on legislative changes to the prostitution laws.

Many advocates of sex workers' rights, such as Samantha Smyth of the Canadian National Coalition of Experiential Women, say it's time to have a national debate.

Violence is a daily threat in the lives of sex workers, said Smyth, noting that Sunday was the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers. In Canada, marches and candlelight vigils were scheduled in Montreal, Vancouver and Ottawa.

There are no official figures on how many people are engaged in prostitution in this country. It's estimated that only five to 20 per cent of those involved in prostitution work on the streets. A majority work in such venues as hotels, strip clubs or private homes.

Jenn Clamen, mobilization co-ordinator of Stella, a Montreal-based support and information group by and for sex workers, slammed the Commons panel for failing to recommend decriminalizing prostitution. Instead, the report urged increased education and programs to prevent people from entering the trade.

"The lack of legal protection and non-recognition of the work of sex workers is leading to violence and marginalization," Clamen said.

Stella publishes a "bad date" bulletin in a city estimated to have about 5,000 to 10,000 sex workers.

Jody Paterson, executive director of the Prostitutes Empowerment Education and Resource Society in Victoria, said a solution to the problem of violence is urgently needed.

"How come the only time people talk about prostitution is when a few sex workers have been murdered? I just don't get this," said Paterson.

John Lowman, criminology professor at Simon Fraser University and a leading expert on prostitution, agrees.

Lowman predicts the upcoming court case will be successful because federal legislation violates the rights of sex workers to ``life, liberty and safety."

"It's high time these laws were struck down," says Lowman. ``They make no sense."

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