



Congress of Aboriginal Peoples
Congrès des peuples autochtones



Unveiling Truths:

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION & TRAFFICKING

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Sexual Exploitation, Sex Work and Trafficking Defined

Because the terms sexual exploitation, sex work and trafficking are often conflated, the following definitions have been provided. These definitions are not exhaustive and only intend to provide context for the purpose of this paper.

- **Sexual Exploitation:** When a person in a position of power takes advantage of a vulnerable person for sexual purposes. This can involve exchanging money, food, shelter, drugs¹, alcohol, and/or a sense of security for sexual acts.²
- **For benefit:** A person who sexually exploits for personal gratification purposes (i.e., john).
- **For profit:** A person who makes money from sexually exploiting people (i.e., pimp or trafficker).
- **Sex Work:** “The consensual exchange of sexual services between adults for money or goods.”³
- **Human Trafficking:** The “recruitment, transportation, harbouring and/or exercising control, direction or influence over the movements of a person in order to exploit that person, typically through sexual exploitation or forced labour.”⁴
- **Survival Sex Trade:** Exchanging basic necessities (money, drugs, food, shelter, clothing) for sexual acts in order to survive.

It is important to note that there are a wide range of views on sex work within the Indigenous community. Some feel that the work is inherently exploitative and should be abolished, while others rationally choose to enter sex work and advocate for their right to do this work safely.⁵ Regardless of differences in opinions, there is a shared mission to end violence against Indigenous women and girls.

A Brief History

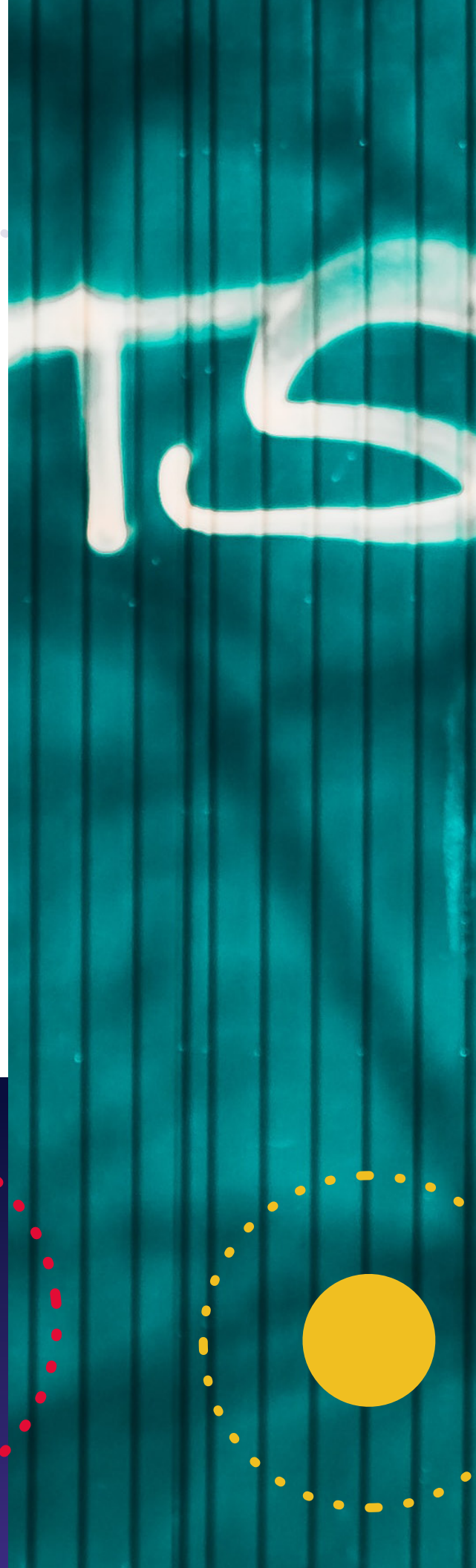
As Hunt (2010) states, “[t]he roots of sexual violence in Canada are as deep as colonialism itself.”⁶ Much of this violence stems from the European mission to assert dominance over Indigenous Peoples.⁷ Through this domination and “colonization, white settlers uprooted traditional spiritual and intellectual values accorded to Aboriginal women and replaced them with notions of inferiority, hierarchy, and the paradigm of women as property.”⁸ On the whole, these “colonial power relations- relations which are, and have always been, inherently gendered”⁹ effectively stripped Indigenous women and girls of the power they once held in traditional societies and rendered them as inferior beings.¹⁰



To reinforce the new social order, Indigenous women and girls were characterized as sexually available “objects” which placed them at the lowest ranks of society.¹¹ Indigenous femininity was positioned “as the ‘grotesque’ against which the ideals of Western white femininity could be confirmed as superior.”¹² Indigenous women and girls were thus “equated with prostitution”, which “allowed transgressions of Western norms of respect for women.”¹³ These demeaning labels and attitudes towards Indigenous women and girls, which were perpetuated by the media, all served to undermine and dehumanize them.¹⁴

In addition to being labelled as sexual objects, Indigenous women and girls were also seen as property. They were bought and sold until slavery was abolished in 1834.¹⁵ The impacts of slavery and the accompanying “assertion of ownership” over Indigenous women and girls’ bodies “manifested itself as a right for others (white male settlers) to determine the appropriate ‘use’ and value” of these women.¹⁶

These gendered power dynamics amongst the negative outcomes of historical assimilationist initiatives (e.g. Indian Residential Schools, displacement to reserves, Indian Act) have laid the foundation for an over-representation of Indigenous women and girls experiencing sexual violence today.¹⁷







Sexual Violence Experienced by Indigenous Women & Girls Today

Although oppressive initiatives such as those in the past are no longer tolerated, covert displays of this gendered power dynamic continue today, as do the intergenerational impacts of historical events.¹⁸ For example, the child welfare system, with its historical roots and outcomes (e.g. over-representation in the criminal justice system¹⁹), contribute to an increased vulnerability of experiencing sexual violence.²⁰ ^{21 22} Additionally, limited opportunities on reserves or in northern communities²³, precarious housing²⁴ or homelessness²⁵ can also serve as gateways to sexual exploitation and trafficking.

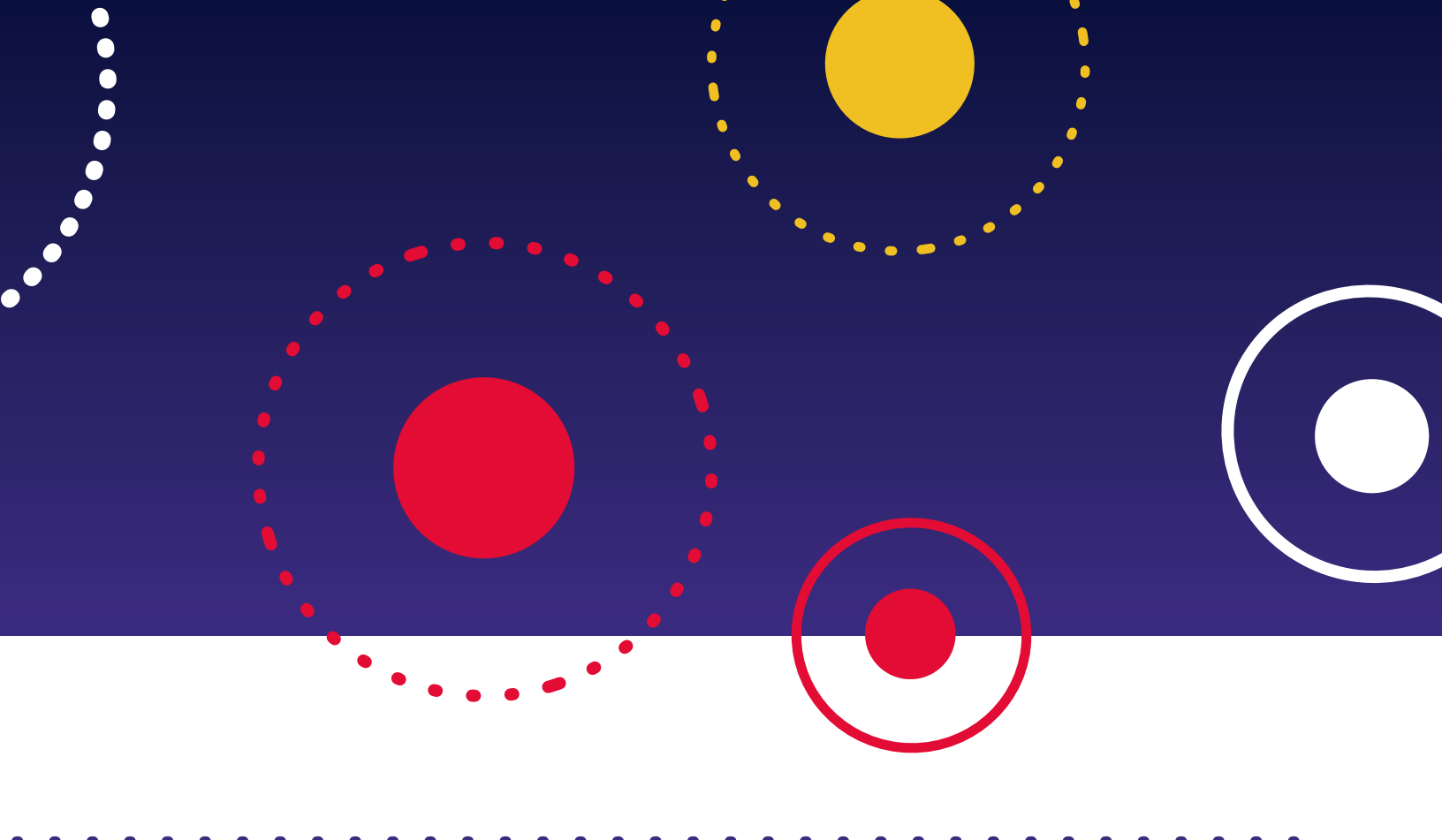
Sikka (2010) notes that involvement in child welfare is “perhaps the most common feature among girls” who are sexually exploited.²⁶ The average age girls become involved in commercial sexual exploitation is 14, meaning this is occurring while they are in the care of the state.²⁷ Shortcomings of the child welfare system are felt by sexually exploited Indigenous youth as they have identified that their experiences in care “pav[ed] the way for their commercial sexual exploitation.”²⁸ A worker in BC even noted that for one Indigenous girl on her caseload, there was “almost an assumption in the community that [this youth] will be sexually victimized and that it is only a question of when.”²⁹

These findings demonstrate that the child welfare system is not only failing to protect Indigenous girls, but is increasing their vulnerability to be sexually exploited.^{30 31}

Children in care are also at a much greater risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system.³² This occurs at such alarming rates that it is known as the “child-welfare-to-prison pipeline.”^{33 34} Once involved in the criminal justice system, these children and youth often encounter recruiters and may enter the sex trade.³⁵

Other risk factors of experiencing sexual violence can be traced back to systemic poverty, which Indigenous women and girls experience at extremely high rates.^{36 37} Such deep levels of poverty experienced in any patriarchal society often results in a high rate of sexual exploitation.³⁸

Few economic, education or housing opportunities can result in Indigenous women and girls moving to urban centres which puts them at significant risk of sexual exploitation, particularly if they lack adequate support systems.^{39 40}



Recruiters prey on the vulnerabilities of Indigenous women and girls, and are often people that should be trustworthy such as boyfriends and friends.⁴¹ They strategically place themselves in areas such as airports or bars, so they can target women and girls who are new to the city; posing as friendly locals and offering places to stay, a job, or connections with other people in the area, but with the intent of sexually exploiting them later.⁴² Even family members can be recruiters, with the effects of poverty and intergenerational impacts from Residential Schools identified as the main “driving force behind this familial trafficking.”⁴³

One female youth discusses the difficulty and fear due to familial ties to the sex trade:

“[M]y family... quite a few of them are pimps and [they] run the houses...I fear for my life, because these people will track you down like a dog and kill you.”⁴⁴

Another result of systemic poverty is housing insecurity and homelessness,⁴⁵ both of which are significant risk factors for sexual exploitation.⁴⁶ According to Farley and Lynne (2005), “when women in prostitution are asked what they need in order to escape prostitution, housing is first on their list of needs.”⁴⁷ Child welfare is also closely related to homelessness, as 70.5 percent of Indigenous youth experiencing homelessness have been involved with child welfare services.⁴⁸ Indigenous women and girls who have insecure living situations or are homeless are often recruited into sex work because it holds the promise of a better life for them such as shelter, money and a support group.⁴⁹

Women and girls are often “held responsible for their own exploitation”, with assumptions that it is a consequence of their choices and actions.⁵⁰ Yet, it is important to remember that being exposed to violence is not the product of individual choices or failures, it is part of a broader process of systemic racism.

Connections to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG)

Sexual exploitation and involvement in the sex trade are common in cases of MMIWG.⁵¹ This is due in part to the colonial and racist roots that have contributed to an over-representation of Indigenous women and girls in the sex trade today and risks associated with this work.⁵² Simply put, without adequate supports for poverty or trauma, women and girls may feel they have few options but to participate in sex work in order to survive or support their families, where they are often exposed to violence.⁵³

This lack of adequate supports and over-representation of poverty are examples of systemic racism and structural violence; and according to Hunt (2015), this “[s]tructural violence is concealed through the naturalization of these spaces as degenerate, such that the places of Indigenous women and sex workers can only be visible as spaces of expected violence.”⁵⁴ Victim-blaming and failing to adequately investigate crimes committed against Indigenous women and girls involved in the sex trade also serve to normalize this violence, and enables it to continue. As Razack (1998) notes, “[w]e care less about the bodies in degenerate spaces...We do not ask what the spaces of prostitution enable nor what happens in them. There are simply designated bodies and spaces where so called contractual violence can happen with impunity.”⁵⁵

Indigenous sex workers are aware of the negative opinions held about them which can make them feel isolated and even worthless.⁵⁶ One female youth voices her frustration and sadness over this judgement of Indigenous sex workers:

“In Vancouver, some people would just let us [sex trade workers] die, somehow other people get to decide who gets to live and who gets to die, and who deserves it. A lot of them are Aboriginal, so if you are Aboriginal and work in the sex trade, [the general feeling is] who cares, another problem over.”⁵⁷

A staggering average of 70 percent of women involved in the most dangerous form of sex work,⁵⁸ (street survival sex work) are Indigenous.⁵⁹ Women involved in this type of sex work are roughly 60 to 120 times more likely to be murdered than other women.⁶⁰ Additionally, 51% of women trafficked in Canada are Indigenous.⁶¹ This data paired with the knowledge that simply identifying, or being identified as an Indigenous woman is a risk factor for experiencing violence should indicate the severity of these circumstances.⁶²

Not only do Indigenous women and girls face unsafe conditions, they are also “routinely victim blamed by authority figures, including police officers, judges, and social workers,” who may also be exploiters.^{63 64} Negative responses from people who are supposed to protect and support citizens can result in a distrust of authority figures and a reluctance to report crimes.⁶⁵

When Indigenous women and girls do report crimes, they are often “told they were in the wrong place at the wrong time [and] that they made poor choices.”⁶⁶ There have also been situations where authority figures have ignored missing sex workers despite calls for action, attributing the disappearances to their transient lifestyles, or their ‘double lives’.⁶⁷ This indifference is highlighted by the findings that between 1991 and 2014, 34 percent of homicides of sex workers are unsolved, compared to a 20 percent unsolved rate for cases that didn’t involve a sex worker.⁶⁸ Failures to adequately investigate, or choosing to turn a blind eye conveys to perpetrators there will be “minimal or no consequences” for their offences against Indigenous women and girls,⁶⁹ and can make them a target for violence.



Recommendations

It's important to note that while systemic racism may be present and a root cause of sexual violence, this is not to undermine or disregard positive relationships or allies that have historically or currently exist. A first step to build on these positive relationships is for Canadians to educate themselves on the colonial past and learn about how it influences our society. To move forward in reconciliation, it is essential to understand how colonialism has worked to erase Indigenous Peoples and how it perpetuates racism and violence.⁷⁰

Sarah Hunt (2010) very aptly describes recommendations that addresses the main concerns identified in this paper:

“[P]ainting all Aboriginal sex workers as victims does nothing to empower their situation, and has the damaging effect of stripping them of their agency. Instead, a rights-based framework which focuses on Aboriginal women’s rights to adequate housing, protection from violence, safe transportation, health care and an acceptable standard of living would go a long way in giving women an actual choice as to whether or not engage in sex work.”⁷¹

Holding exploiters accountable for their crimes and ending the normalization of violence against Indigenous sex workers are also critical.

For other recommendations to protect Indigenous women and girls, see the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and the MMIWG National Inquiry Calls for Justice.

The murders and disappearances of Indigenous women and girls can no longer be ignored. It is time that all Canadians stood with Indigenous Peoples and worked to dismantle the structures that contribute to MMIWG.



Appendix

¹ **Feeding drug habits is a complex topic that is often linked to the sex trade. In some cases, exploiters push women and girls into addiction, so they are forced to continue working; some women and girls rely on drugs to numb the life they live as a sex worker, and some women and girls become addicted from other life circumstances.**

² Department of Justice Canada, "Canada Criminal Code."

³ Canadian Public Health Association, "Sex Work in Canada," 3.

⁴ Public Safety Canada, "Human Trafficking."

⁵ National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, "Power and Place."

⁶ Hunt, "Colonial Roots," 27.

⁷ Bourgeois, "Settler Colonial Canada."

⁸ Sikka, "Trafficking," 207.

⁹ Hunt, "Representing Colonial Violence," 26.

¹⁰ Roudometkina and Wakeford, "Trafficking."

¹¹ de Finney, "Indigenous Girls' Resilience," 10.

¹² Bourgeois, "Settler Colonial Canada," 382.

¹³ Ruttan, LaBoucane-Benson and Munro, "Aboriginal Young Women," 33.

¹⁴ **See the Media paper for more information.**

¹⁵ Sikka, "Trafficking."

¹⁶ Sikka, "Trafficking," 207.

¹⁷ Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), "Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking."

¹⁸ NWAC, "Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking."

¹⁹ Sikka, "Trafficking."

²⁰ Kingsley and Mark, "Sacred Lives."

²¹ Sikka, "Trafficking."

²² NWAC, "Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking."

²³ Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, "Inuit Vulnerabilities."

²⁴ Roudometkina and Wakeford, "Trafficking."

²⁵ Gaetz et al., "Without a Home."

²⁶ Sikka, "Trafficking," 213.

²⁷ Kingsley and Mark, "Sacred Lives."

²⁸ Kingsley and Mark, "Sacred Lives," 26.

²⁹ Social Worker quoted in Turpel-Lafond, "Sexualized Violence," 32.

³⁰ NWAC, "Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking."

³¹ **See the Child Welfare paper for more information.**

³² Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC), "Interrupted Childhoods."

³³ OHRC, "Interrupted Childhoods," 28.

³⁴ **See the Justice paper for more information.**

³⁵ Sikka, "Trafficking."

³⁶ Sethi, "Domestic Sex Trafficking," 62.

³⁷ de Finney, "Indigenous Girls' Resilience."

³⁸ Farley and Lynne, "Prostitution of Indigenous Women."

³⁹ Sethi, "Domestic Sex Trafficking."

⁴⁰ NWAC, "Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking."

⁴¹ Sethi, "Domestic Sex Trafficking."

⁴² Sethi, "Domestic Sex Trafficking."

⁴³ NWAC, "Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking," 15.

⁴⁴ Female youth in Kingsley and Mark, "Sacred Lives," 29.

⁴⁵ **Note: Research tends to focus on visible homelessness, however there is a significant gap in research and knowledge about 'hidden' homelessness, which can include precarious or temporary, transitional or over-crowded housing (i.e. "couch surfing"). However, it is known that Indigenous women are more likely to experience both of these types of homelessness than non-Indigenous women.** (NWAC, "Indigenous Housing.")

⁴⁶ NWAC, "Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking."

⁴⁷ Farley and Lynne, "Prostitution of Indigenous Women," 1.

⁴⁸ Gaetz et al., "Without a Home."

⁴⁹ Kingsley and Mark, "Sacred Lives."

⁵⁰ Sikka, "Trafficking," 223.

⁵¹ National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, "Power and Place."

⁵² NWAC, "Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking."

⁵³ National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, "Power and Place."

⁵⁴ Hunt, "Representing Colonial Violence," 28.

⁵⁵ Razack, "Race, Space and Prostitution," 358.

⁵⁶ Kingsley and Mark, "Sacred Lives."

⁵⁷ Female youth quoted in Kingsley and Mark, "Sacred Lives," 24.

⁵⁸ Amnesty International, "Stolen Sisters."

⁵⁹ Chettiar et al., "Survival Sex Work."

⁶⁰ Lowman and Fraser, "Persons Who Prostitute."

⁶¹ Public Safety Canada, "Forum on Human Trafficking."

⁶² Boyce, "Victimization of Aboriginal People."

⁶³ de Finney, "Indigenous Girls' Resilience," 15.

⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Abusive Policing and Failures."

⁶⁵ Palmater, "Addressing Police Racism."

⁶⁶ de Finney, "Indigenous Girls' Resilience," 15.

⁶⁷ Pratt, "Abandoned Women."

⁶⁸ Rotenberg, "Prostitution Offences."

⁶⁹ Dhillon, "Settler Colonial Policing," 9.

⁷⁰ Pon, Gosine and Phillips, "Racism in Child Welfare."

⁷¹ Hunt, "Colonial Roots," 29.

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