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Criminalization puts sex workers at risk

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In Canada, sex workers and their clients are criminalized under Criminal Code sections 213 and 286.1. The recent serial attacks on sex workers in Ottawa sadly show street-based sex workers' vulnerability when they, their clients, and their work are criminalized.

In a criminalized context, street-based sex workers may not be able to take the time necessary to screen clients for fear they or their clients will be apprehended or charged. They may work where police can't observe them, making them more vulnerable to being pulled off the street. In Ottawa we also see police continuing to harass and detain street-based sex workers under questionable pretenses. Sex workers tell POWER that much of the violence they experience comes at the hands of police.

More policing is not the solution. In the wake of these assaults, increased police presence in the area is likely, which may well increase sex workers' vulnerability by pushing sex workers further to the fringes as they avoid surveillance and the chilling effect police have on client traffic.

We need to decriminalize sex work **now**.

POWER has three calls to immediate action to support sex workers and try to address the threat of violence against sex workers in our city:

1. Suspend the application of anti-sex work laws.

If police refrain from applying any sex work laws in Ottawa, sex workers will be able to work in safer areas, in groups, and/or hire third parties to support their work (like security).

2. Deliver emergency funding to community organizations that can help both prevent and offer support in the case of assault.

Peer-led and community-based organizations with training in harm reduction methods are more equipped than police to handle intersecting marginalizations in the Byward Market and Vanier (e.g., drug use, racialization, homelessness). Examples include Ottawa Street Medics, Centretown Community Health Centre, Somerset West Community Health Centre, & Minwaashin Lodge's STORM.

3. Bring back the eviction moratorium

Rising rent costs in Ottawa coupled with the recent return to evictions mean sex workers may take risks to secure the money needed to retain housing.

Sex workers have been marginalized by Canadian laws for too long. The time to decriminalize sex work is now.

The POWER Board