

## Naming Systemic Violence in Winnipeg's Street Sex Trade

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### *Abstract*

Violence is common in Winnipeg's street sex trade but research about the nature and causes of this violence, as well as what strategies might be undertaken to address it, is limited. To shed further light on the nature and causes of violence, and possible strategies which might be undertaken to address it, qualitative interviews with twenty diverse women who have at times worked in the street sex trade in Winnipeg were conducted. Their views lead to the conclusion that this violence is often caused by the fusion of systemic factors which constitute a pattern that is gendered, racialized, class-based, and spatialized in nature. This violence is made worse by Canada's prostitution laws and the view, expressed by some police officers, that violence simply "comes with the streets." In addition to law reform, long-lasting solutions involve addressing sexist, racist, and colonial attitudes that mark some as less human, as well as root causes—such as poverty and past and present colonialism—which lead to the overrepresentation of economically marginalized and often racialized individuals in Winnipeg's inner-city street sex trade.

*Keywords:* violence, bad dates, street hassles, perpetrators, colonialism, inner city, sex work, prostitution

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*Résumé*

La violence est courante dans les rues du commerce de sexe de Winnipeg, mais la recherche sur la nature et les causes de cette violence, ainsi que les stratégies qui pourraient être prises à cet égard, est limitée. Pour apporter un nouvel éclairage sur la nature et les causes de la violence, et les stratégies possibles qui pourraient être prises à cet égard, les entretiens qualitatifs avec une vingtaine de femmes divers, qui ont parfois travaillé dans les rues du commerce de sexe de Winnipeg ont été menés. Leurs points de vue conduisent à la conclusion que cette violence est souvent causée par la fusion des facteurs systémiques qui forment une structure fondée sur le sexe, la race, la classe et l'espace. Cette violence est aggravée par les lois canadiennes sur la prostitution et de l'opinion exprimée par certains policiers, tout simplement que la violence "est livrée avec les rues." En plus de la réforme du droit, des solutions durables impliquent s'attaquer aux attitudes sexistes, racistes et coloniales qui marquent certains comme moins humains, ainsi que les causes profondes-telles que la pauvreté et le colonialisme passé et le présent- qui conduisent à la surreprésentation des personnes économiquement marginalisées et souvent racialisées dans le commerce du sexe dans les rues de centre-ville de Winnipeg.

*Mots clés:* la violence, dates mauvais, tracasseries de la rue, les auteurs, le colonialisme, le centre de ville, le commerce du sexe, la prostitution

Violence is common in Winnipeg's street sex trade. Since the late 1980s there have been at least twenty recorded unsolved murders of women and transgenders who worked in this trade (CBC September 6, 2007), and women continue to go missing, especially from the West End and North End, two marginalized and stigmatized inner-city areas in Winnipeg. In many instances, women's bodies are literally evicted from the city, dropped off or disposed of in isolated fields on the city's outskirts. Indigenous women are disproportionately the targets of this violence (Lowman 1998; Kingsley et al. 2000).

While research exists on the violence that occurs against adult street sex workers in the United States and Canada (Fraser and Lowman 1996; Lowman 1998 and 2000; Dalla 2002; Prenger 2003; Lewis et al. 2005; Jeffrey and MacDonald 2006, 89-93), in-depth studies specific to Winnipeg are limited. Kendra Nixon and Leslie M. Tutty's (2003a and 2003b) research draws on interviews of 47 adult women from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta who had been in the sex trade before the age of eighteen. Participants in this study reported that the violence they experienced in street prostitution is pervasive and perpetrated by a variety of

people including customers, the public, pimps, other women involved in prostitution, and the police. Nixon and Tutty's research is part of a larger study led by Kelly Gorkoff and Jane Runner (2003) which uses qualitative interviews with women who had worked in prostitution since they were youth. This larger project examines entrance into prostitution, stigmatization, health issues, and experiences with programming aimed at sexually exploited youth. Augustine Brannigan, Louis Knafla, and Christopher Levy's (1989) Department of Justice Canada report assesses street sex work and the impact of prostitution laws primarily in Calgary. The report also discusses Regina and Winnipeg but in less detail. In addition, some brief but helpful qualitative research discussing violence against street sex trade workers in the Winnipeg context has been undertaken (see, for instance, Seshia 2005; Canadian National Coalition of Experiential Women 2006, 19-30; Brown et al. 2006).

This paper intends to provide a space for, and give voice to, individuals who are seldom consulted respectfully about this violence. Twenty diverse women who, in addition to being artists, activists, inner-city community members, and students—as well as mothers, daughters, sisters, and aunts—have at times worked in the street sex trade in Winnipeg are key contributors to this project. I use what they say to assist in answering two questions: What factors explain this violence? What strategies might be taken to address this violence?

Their views lead to the conclusion that violence is systemic, constituting a pattern that is gendered, racialized, and class-based (Goulding 2001; Razack 2002; Amnesty International 2004). Rather than there being a single cause, it is the fusion of factors that motivates attacks against street sex workers. Street sex work takes place in the marginalized spaces of the inner city, a problem made worse by aspects of the law. Street sex workers are typically poor and racialized, and are further stigmatized because of their sex trade status and sometimes because of their gender identity as transgender participants. In combination, these factors produce an exceptionally violent working environment in which assaults against street sex workers are so common as to be normalized.

### **The Street Sex Trade**

Though difficult to verify, recent reports suggest that street sex work accounts for only 5 to 20 percent of all sex work in Canada (Kingsley et al. 2000, 54; Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights and the Subcommittee on Soliciting Laws [hereafter Standing Committee] 2006, 19). Yet, it is this sector of the sex trade that is most likely to be the focus of criminal justice intervention, with workers experiencing significantly higher criminalization rates than their clients (Standing Committee 2006, 19). It is also the sector where violence is most common (Lowman 2000).

Little is known about those who purchase sex and who are the perpetrators of violence. We do know, however, that the trade is deeply gendered: those who buy sex are “mostly men” (Standing Committee 2006, 22), while some 75 to 80 percent of all street sex workers in Canada are women (Kingsley et al. 2000, 28). The street sex trade is also class-based in that, while not all individuals who work the streets experience poverty, most do. And it is racialized. Indigenous women are significantly overrepresented in Vancouver’s street sex trade (Amnesty International 2004, 22), and in Winnipeg it is estimated that 70 percent of individuals in the street sex trade are of Indigenous ancestry (Standing Committee 2006, 12; see also Fontaine 2006, 118; Nixon and Tutty 2003a, 29; and Kingsley et al. 2000), suggesting that the street sex trade cannot be divorced from colonization and the construction of a white settler nation.

### **Colonial Violence and the Street Sex Trade**

Canada has an extensive history of colonial violence that continues today. Indigenous and critical race feminist scholars and activists have linked the overrepresentation of Indigenous women and girls exploited on Canadian streets to colonization, patriarchy, and capitalist exploitation of the earth (Gorkoff and Runner 2000, 17-18; Razack 2002; Fontaine 2006; Monture 2007; Kuokkanen 2008). Patricia Monture (2007, 210-211) notes that dispossession from land and resources has resulted in the social, economic, and spatial marginalization of some Indigenous women. Confinement to reserves, the lack of housing and employment on and off reserves, loss of women’s tribal status (a result of sexist aspects of the *Indian Act*), and the residential school system and its after effects have also played a role (Razack 2002, 132-133.) Homophobia and rigid gender categories have altered two-spirited peoples’ positions. These factors, combined with the unrelenting racism endured in all aspects of Canadian society, have contributed to the political, economic, social, and spatial marginalization of some Indigenous peoples, particularly women and two-spirited individuals (Kingsley et al. 2000; Razack 2002; Fontaine 2006; Comack 2006, 69-70). Amnesty International notes that the sex trade is “one means that some Indigenous women have resorted to in the struggle to provide for themselves and their families in Canadian cities” (2004, 21; see also Kuokkanen 2008, 220).

Sherene Razack (1998; 2002) argues that colonial processes have not only resulted in the overrepresentation of Indigenous women in the street-level sex trade, and force some to engage in what has been called “survival sex” (see also Brown et al. 2006, 43 and Fontaine 2006), but also that such processes—specifically, the dynamics involved in the construction and maintenance of spaces of privilege and marginality, as well as white masculine heterosexuality—lead some men to travel into marginalized and often racialized areas to purchase sexual services.

### **Participatory Action Research**

This study is guided by the idea that experiential women—women who have been or are in the street sex trade—are the most knowledgeable about their circumstances and, based on their experience, are best able to offer practical solutions. From the outset, reciprocity, respect, and establishing on-going communication with the communities I was working with have been critical to this project. Feminist participatory action models fit with these goals.

Participatory action research “synthesizes the knowledge of communities and academics” (Coy 2006, 422). This methodology aims to produce holistic and practical knowledge by situating community members involved in studies as “experts” (Coy 2006, 422). The research process involved close collaboration with a Winnipeg inner-city health, outreach, and resource centre for women working in the street sex trade. It builds on previous relationships I have formed and work I have done with the organization, as well as with individuals who access its services (Seshia 2005).

### **The Participants**

Twenty women who have, at various times in their lives, supported themselves by working in the street sex trade were interviewed. Consistent with participatory action research models, the interviews were loosely structured and questions were open-ended (Barnsley and Ellis 1992, 14). An interview guide was used but it did not dictate the specifics of our discussions, nor were there time constraints placed on the interview process. Before formally agreeing to take part, potential participants and I verbally discussed the project in detail and reviewed the consent form that outlined the project's purpose, participants' rights, and what would be done with the interview material. All participants said they felt comfortable being recorded; requests regarding the omission of certain material were respected.

Immediately after the completion of each interview, time was allotted for participants to reflect on the interview process and discuss any concerns, questions, and emotions that might have resulted. Some provided feedback about the research process, including the wording of questions and issues discussed, leading to a number of suggestions. All participants were given a card with the community organization's number and hours of operation. The card also listed the names and phone numbers of emergency counseling and shelter services.

Participants in this study comprised a diverse group; each person has had distinct life experiences, both on and off the street. Bearing in mind the heterogeneity among participants, some general demographic information can be provided. Participants ranged in age from twenty-one to forty-five; the aver-

age age was thirty-one. Fifteen participants were of Indigenous ancestry; five were Caucasian. Fifteen participants identified as women; five as two-spirited or transgendered women.

All of the participants occasionally worked the streets or had in the past supported themselves by working in the street-level sex trade. The average duration working in the street sex trade was just under twelve years. However, this figure is potentially misleading because it may imply that participants worked consistently for that period of time. Life situations dictate how often individuals work the streets. Some participants worked daily or weekly; others worked a few times a year. Some worked one weekend per month to supplement meagre welfare cheques and cover the costs of rent and bills. The frequency changed according to life circumstances. Three participants had worked the streets in the past but had, for various reasons, stopped. Fourteen participants were, in their own ways, transitioning off the streets and were at different stages in their transition journey.

### **Safety and Security in Winnipeg's Inner City**

Like most Canadian cities, Winnipeg's street sex trade is situated in marginalized spaces within the inner city. Winnipeg is geographically segregated: the city's suburbs are, for the most part, sprawling, white, middle to upper class enclaves; the inner city is an economically marginalized, racialized, and stigmatized space (Silver 2006). According to Elizabeth Comack and Jim Silver (2006, 8) the processes of colonization, globalization, suburbanization, and racism in the job market have resulted in "the concentration in Winnipeg's inner city of poverty and, to a considerable extent, racialized poverty."

The inner-city streets where sex workers are situated are also spaces where violence is more common than in the city as a whole, and more common than it used to be. Numerous participants said things such as "it's scary to walk alone" and "I'm scared to walk at nine o'clock," even when they were not working, "cause it's the North End." Many stated that they thought violence in the inner city in general, as well as within the context of the sex trade, had become worse in recent years. One woman said, "it's getting bad in the North End, man," while another participant stated, "it's getting to be more violent on the streets now." A few said that if they were experiencing an assault on a public street in the inner city they had little confidence that witnesses within the vicinity—pedestrians, people in cars driving by, the police, and other women working the street—would intervene.

Similar to the residents who took part in Comack and Silver's (2006) study of safety and security in inner-city communities, participants in this study were concerned about gang violence, the prevalence of crack cocaine, children being exposed to drugs and the sex trade, and the sexual exploitation of youth.

Describing what she sees in the North End, one woman said:

There's kids running across the street, there's moms pushing their babies, and there's a girl standing on the corner. It makes me sad to see that but I mean that's how she has to live. And half of those girls out there now they're all under eighteen. . . . There's nothing that can change it. Just choose not to go. But how can you make somebody want to choose if they don't have the necessities in life? Like, if you're hungry and you have nothing to eat what are you going to do at ten o'clock at night? You're gonna go get money so you can eat. You're hungry.

Issues of safety and security are accentuated for those who work in the street sex trade, especially given the stigmatization associated with that work.

### **Stigmatization of Street Sex Workers and Violence in Winnipeg's Street Sex Trade**

Many of the 20 participants in this study described the stigmatization associated with being street sex trade workers. This stigma made them especially likely targets of abuse, as it motivated attacks and was used to justify assaults against them. A two-spirited participant said that violence against prostitutes occurs because society thinks street sex trade workers are "just another statistic and that's nobody. You know? That's what they think of us sex workers. We're just a statistic. We're just another hooker, a wasted life. That's how people see it." There is a dehumanization, an 'othering', that makes street sex workers especially vulnerable to violence. A female participant stated that people target them "because we're prostitutes. They feel it's okay and it's normal and they have a right to treat us this way." Echoing these comments, a two-spirited participant said:

That john looks at us and says 'well, you're not respected,' but then the rest of society says, 'nobody is going to damn well care if I smack you around because, to everybody else, you're nothing. You're the lowest of the low.' They're not going to be having a big community rally just to come to your defence and, you know, take up arms and write all the politicians, change all the policies.

Many comments like this made it clear that working in the sex trade in the "lower parts of the city" and being poor and racialized leads to a powerful process of dehumanization whereby participants are rendered disposable. It is this subhuman "othering" that motivates and is used to justify attacks against them. The combi-

nation of these factors produces, in Winnipeg's low-income, marginalized, racialized and stigmatized inner city, an exceptionally violent working environment where assaults against street sex workers are sufficiently common as to become normalized.

The violence encountered in the street sex trade can be divided into two types: street hassles and bad dates (Comack and Seshia 2010). Whereas street hassles involve "violence perpetrated by a person who is neither a client nor posing as a client against someone who is, at the time of the incident, working the streets," bad dates involve "violence perpetrated by a client or a predator posing as a client against someone who is, at the time of the incident, working the streets" (Comack and Seshia 2010, 220). One participant explained what was involved in street hassles:

One of the worst things that we experience, I think, is having shit thrown at us all the time. ... When you're standing around on a street like Higgins or Isabel, you get like people, especially late at night, like after parties and whatever, that, like, they've thrown bricks and bottles and pennies and food and CDs.

A two-spirited participant commented on the spatialized and classed nature of street hassles:

You don't go driving by someone and shoot them with fucking paintball guns and shit. That's what I would experience as a hate crime, or bottles thrown at you. You don't do that. People aren't doing that walking down the street, you know, in the Fort Richmond area but it happens, unfortunately, on the lower parts of the city, and where the sex trade workers or sexually exploited girls and transgenders are working. Why does it happen there? I don't see them driving down Henderson Highway throwing beer bottles at people, you know.

Another two-spirited woman commented on other forms of stigmatization: "The young ones drive around, they don't buy none of the girls, they just like to raise shit. Say 'trannies. Fags.' Or they go, 'show us you're tits.' We get stuff thrown at us too. I've seen many of my friends get bashed with big, big bricks, flying. . . . [They yell] 'You Indian. You squaw. Fucking squaw. Go back to the bush.'"

Participants' experiences with bad dates reveal similar patterns. One two-spirited participant explained:

I had bad dates, numerous and bad. People basically just attacking you for no reason, just because you're a street worker. We've had a



whole lot of stuff thrown at us. We've been beaten up, we've been ganged up on, some of us have already been killed 'cause of violence. I've lost so many friends of mine through that. I'm lucky to be alive today, even though I suffered a lot through violence. With the transgender community it's just not, we're just not that accepted.

One woman stated that she had "been punched and burnt, held against my will, and whatever, like lots of times." A two-spirited participant said she had "been thrown out of a moving semi. I've been hit by a car a few times." Two participants explicitly identified sexist and racist stereotyping as causal factors in such attacks. One relayed the following experience:

Actually, I had a bad experience. This guy, he was sitting there. He was alright at first.... and all of a sudden I could feel like his hands come to the back of my head. And then he like kept pushing. He was calling me, he was saying, 'Oh, come on. Don't you know how to do it? You're a squaw. Like you dirty Indians know how to do this. This is the only job you guys, you Indians have, is selling yourselves.' Like, he was kind of going on about like Native girls.

Referring to two near-death encounters she had experienced, a two-spirited participant stated that racism "definitely played into both":

... especially because I am Aboriginal. Yeah. Yeah. Definitely. I would say that was a major factor. I think because in their eyes they just didn't value me period. They knew that no matter what they did to me, no matter what violence they inflicted upon me, that not even the policemen who came to tend on me, not even the ambulance attendant who came to tend on me would even care.

Some participants in this study were aware of the deep extent to which they have been devalued, and even dehumanized, as the result not only of the work that they do, but also for reasons having to do with the stigma attached to their gender, race, class, and spatial location. Articulating this, one woman said:

I've always said to the women, and they think about it, the most disposable people in Canada are Aboriginal women who, who are sex trade workers. And when they think about it and it kind of [snaps fingers] wakes them up a bit. 'That's not true [they say]'. I say, 'Oh yes it is. It's true. Honestly.'

### **The Role of the Police**

According to participants, some police officers appear to take the view that violence simply “comes with the streets.” Participants repeatedly said that police officers expressed the attitude that violence against street sex workers should be expected and, hence, when it occurs is deserved. A two-spirited participant said: “We tell the cops and [they say] ‘it comes with the streets.’ That’s all I kept hearing for the past ten years while I was out there, and I was out there for twenty years, me, myself. Been off for seven years now.”

When asked if they would feel comfortable reporting street hassles or bad dates to the police, a handful of participants stated they might, depending on the circumstances surrounding the assault, but many responded with a clear “no.” They said that filing a police report would not be their first choice and they would, instead, prefer to put the report in the street newsletters which are distributed by two inner-city community outreach organizations to other sex trade workers. When asked why they were hesitant to file a report, one participant responded by saying: “I think the cops just don’t understand a lot about the sex trade,” while another remarked: “there’s a lot of police that look down on you because of, you know, you’re a hooker.” A third participant said: “it’s almost like they are looking at us as if it was our fault.” Although they are the victims of almost constant violence, street sex workers’ experience has led them to conclude that the police cannot be relied upon for protection.

Some participants explained that they had, in the past, contacted the police to report a bad date, but the responses they received were less than adequate. One woman who was held against her will said that she “called the cops” but they “didn’t do anything. They just drove me back to where my part of the neighbourhood was.” Another participant said she “called the cops to a bad date and they told me that they’d charge me, like that they could be charging me, so they didn’t press charges against him. They just drove me back into the inner city, dropped me off, and told me that I should be grateful ‘cause they could be charging me because I told them that he picked me up in exchange for money.” Another woman stated: “If a prostitute does phone cops they’re gonna charge you for prostitution anyway, regardless of if you got raped or not. Yeah. It’s pretty pathetic. They charge you for prostitution, they let the john go, and they keep you. ‘Oh you got raped but you were prostituting.’” Kendra Nixon and Leslie M. Tutty’s (2003b, 77-78) research revealed similar findings: a number of participants in their study remarked, “that they would not seek help from the police, fearing criminal charges, arrest or being assaulted.”

The notion that violence simply “comes with the streets,” that it is an inevitable part of working in Winnipeg’s inner-city sex trade, has important implications. It obscures the broad systemic factors, such as colonization and poverty,

that lead to the overrepresentation of low-income racialized women in the street sex trade (Bittle 2002; Razack 2002; Gotell 2008). Moreover, the notion that violence simply “comes with the streets” shifts blame from the perpetrators onto the victims. It distorts beyond recognition the concept of “consent”: it is clear that victims’ stigmatized status as sex workers, their spatial location in the inner city, and the marginalization many experience as a result of their gender, race, and class combine to nullify the legal definition of consent. The result is that such women are rendered “unrapeable”; they are beyond the protection of the law (Razack 2002; Gotell 2008). This, in turn, enhances the likelihood that perpetrators will continue to commit violence because, as one participant said, “they figure they can get away with it. You know? If we report them then we get in trouble and then they go out and try to find more girls.” Understandably, many participants had internalized the “lifestyle” rhetoric—the problem is their lifestyle—and the notion that “violence simply comes with the streets.” They blame themselves and not the perpetrators or broader societal attitudes for the violence to which they are so regularly subjected.

### **The Role of the Law in Promoting Violence against Street Sex Workers**

Prostitution laws also play a role in aggravating the dangers to which street sex workers are exposed. Section 213 of the *Criminal Code*, known as the communicating provision, was enacted in December of 1985. It “prohibits communicating in a public place for the purposes of buying or selling sex” (Lowman 1998, 1). While adult sex work is technically legal, communicating for the purposes of prostitution is not. The aim of this law, when passed, was to reduce the visibility of street sex work, and respond to perceived nuisances (such as increased traffic, litter, and its impact on businesses) associated with it (Prenger 2003, 5). Scholars and policy analysts argue that Section 213 of the *Criminal Code* is gendered and classed and thus discriminatory; the law predominantly criminalizes marginalized low-income racialized women (Prenger 2003, 3-4; Standing Committee 2006, 53); and it appears to have promoted violence against street sex workers.

The women participating in this study confirmed that this is the case. Some stated that the legal context in which they work and the social environment fostered by laws regulating prostitution made them vulnerable to violence. For instance, to avoid being charged for communicating for the purposes of prostitution, a few participants said that their already marginalized spatial positioning on inner-city streets was exacerbated because the law forced them into isolated industrial areas within these neighbourhoods. Citing the legal context in which she and others operate, a female participant said: “That’s what makes a lot of girls go into the darkness because they don’t want to be caught and seen by the police.” A two-spirited participant commented on the environment in which she works:

The industrial areas are the most dangerous parts and that's where you'd experience violence most likely, is the industrial area because nobody can hear anything, nobody can see you. You know? You're fucked if you're in an industrial area. So I risk my chances every night that I go in the industrial areas that I work because I can be murdered anytime, without anybody even realizing or knowing. Yeah, I'd be another statistic of a missing person.

These comments are echoed in the 2006 report produced by the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights and the Subcommittee on Soliciting Laws (see also Jeffrey and MacDonald 2006, 109). During the Subcommittee's consultations "a number of witnesses indicated that the enforcement of section 213 of the *Criminal Code* forced street prostitution activities into isolated areas" where clients were granted anonymity, and community services and access to police were limited (Standing Committee 2006, 63). John Lowman (2000, 7) suggests that misogynist individuals are more apt to target women working in secluded locations. Academic and government reports have demonstrated that the communicating law increases the antagonism between street-involved women and the police (Fraser and Lowman 1996; see also Lowman 2000, 21 and Jeffrey and MacDonald 2006, 112); enhances sex workers' already marginalized status by framing prostitutes as criminals rather than citizens, thereby enabling perpetrators to justify violence (Lowman 2000, 21); and further marginalizes racialized women by exacerbating the stigmatization and rates of criminalization they already experience as a result of racism.

### **What Can Be Done?**

Participants in this study were asked what steps could be undertaken to address the violence against street sex workers. Responses varied, though most recommendations focused on solutions that could enhance immediate safety. A few suggested longer outreach hours and a 24-hour safe house. A two-spirited participant said:

More outreach or a safe house that is open twenty-four hours is what I would like to see. But, unfortunately, it lands on government funding so governments sure wouldn't value funding that because, again, we're sex trade workers.

Two participants stated that they would like to have a confidential sexual assault telephone line for sex trade workers set up, and all thought that having access to a cell phone would increase their sense of security.

A number of women expressed the desire to have a safe space where they would not be criminalized. One female participant suggested “having a safe place to go do dates. . . . Even a safe house to go do dates.” Others said: “In my opinion, any city, town, whatever, needs a safe prostitution place;” “I don't see the point of keeping it illegal;” and it would “probably be somewhat safer, not a lot, but somewhat” if prostitution was decriminalized. The Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights and the Subcommittee on Soliciting Laws (2006, 86) agreed, reporting that “the social and legal framework pertaining to adult prostitution does not effectively prevent or address prostitution or the exploitation and abuse occurring in prostitution, nor does it prevent harms to communities.” Yet, the federal government does not endorse decriminalization (Standing Committee 2006, 91).

To date, *Criminal Code* prostitution-related offence provisions “have not been found to breach the *Charter*” (Prenger 2003, 7). Nonetheless, opposition to these provisions is growing and, on March 22, 2007, a constitutional challenge against laws regulating the sex trade was launched.<sup>1</sup> Increased resistance, coupled with the impact of the highly publicized trial of Robert William Pickton, may compel politicians, police, and the public to conclude that the law is deeply flawed. Any decision regarding changes to the law should involve street workers.

As important as such legal changes would be, the interviews with the 20 participants in this study confirm the systemic character of the causes of violence against street sex workers. These systemic variables include, in particular, the highly gendered, racialized, classed and spatialized character of the stigma attached to street sex work in Winnipeg's inner city.

The participatory action research method used in this study relies on solutions recommended by participants' whose lives are constrained by oppressive conditions, such as intense poverty; their most pressing concern is daily survival for themselves and for their families. As a result, their recommendations tend to be immediate and practical. Short-term solutions are certainly needed but, ultimately, they will not disrupt systems of domination—such as white power and privilege, patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism—which foster gendered, racialized, and classed-based violence (Razack 1998, 375).

Effective, long-lasting solutions to violence involve addressing, in a holistic fashion, sexist, racist, and colonial attitudes that mark some as less human than others. In addition, real and lasting solutions involve addressing root causes—such as poverty and past and present colonization—which lead to the overrepresentation of economically marginalized and often racialized individuals in Winnipeg's inner-city street sex trade. In the words of one two-spirited participant:

Until you change the very fabric of what this country is built up and made out of then we're not going to get anywhere. It's still going to

be the same in 50 to 100 years. More Aboriginals are going to be dying in vast numbers. More Aboriginal children are going to be dying . . . It has to start with the very fabric of society. . . . Until the actual governing body or the main members of society actually wake up and smell the coffee, only then will we get somewhere.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> In October, 2009, three sex workers' rights activists, Terri Jean Bedford, Amy Lebovitch, and Valerie Scott, as well as law professor Alan Young completed their arguments to the Ontario Superior Court that section 210 (the bawdy house provision), section 212(1)(j) (living off the avails), and section 213 of the *Criminal Code* are endangering sex workers' lives. Specifically, they asserted that these laws violate "section 7 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms by depriving sex workers of their right to liberty and security in a manner that is not in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice" (Sex Professionals of Canada 2007). A ruling is expected in spring, 2010.

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Naming Systemic Violence in Winnipeg's Street Sex Trade

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