



### **Time for Evidence:**

## **More than 300 Canadian academics call for the decriminalization of sex work and voice opposition to criminalizing the purchasing of sex**

*Open letter issued to the federal government this morning calls for decriminalization of sex work as a critical evidence-based policy and strongly opposes criminalizing the purchasing of sex*

**Vancouver, B.C. [March 27, 2014]** — In an open letter sent to the federal government this morning, more than 300 academics and researchers are calling for evidence-based decriminalization of sex work in Canada and voicing strong opposition to criminalizing the purchasing of sex.

On December 20, 2013, in a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down three criminal laws relating to prostitution as causing harm to the safety, health, and human rights of sex workers. The Government of Canada was given until December 2014 to create new laws, should they choose to.

The signatories express their concern that the federal government is considering the introduction of new legislation that would criminalize the purchasing of sex. Often referred to as the “Swedish” or “Nordic” Model, the letter states criminalizing the purchase of sex “is not scientifically grounded and evidence strongly suggests it would recreate the same social and health-related harms of current criminalization.”

“Evidence in Canada and globally has clearly shown that criminalizing any aspect of the sex industry—whether targeting sex workers, their working conditions, their clients, or other third parties—has devastating consequences on the safety, health, and human rights of sex workers,” said Dr. Kate Shannon, associate professor of medicine at the University of British Columbia and director of the Gender and Sexual Health Initiative at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS. “The Supreme Court of Canada’s decision was very clear, and yet the federal government continues to ignore the science.”

The letter, addressed to the leaders of the five federal political parties and delivered to all MPs in Canada this morning, expresses concerns the Canadian government is ignoring the large body of research from Canada, Sweden, Norway, and globally demonstrating:

- Criminalizing any aspect of sex work, including the purchasing of sex, undermines access to critical social, health, and legal protections;
- Criminalizing any aspect of sex work, including the purchasing of sex, elevates risks for violence, abuse, and other health and social harms to sex workers and communities;
- There is no evidence that criminalizing the purchasing of sex reduces or eliminates prostitution;
- Criminalizing any aspect of the sex industry undermines efforts to address human trafficking as a critical human rights issue.

“We call on the Canadian government to meaningfully work with sex workers, as well as researchers and human rights experts, to ensure evidence-based laws or policies in Canada do not further recreate the same harms as the current criminalization regime,” said Dr. Chris Bruckert, associate professor of criminology at the University of Ottawa.



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The letter calls on Canada to adopt the decriminalization of sex work recommendations of major international policy bodies, including the World Health Organization, United Nations Population Fund, UNAIDS Advisory Group on HIV and Sex Work, and the Global Commission on HIV and the Law.

“The New Zealand model of decriminalization of sex work provides a clear evidence-based example from which we can learn and adapt to Canada,” said Dr. Frances Shaver, professor of sociology at Concordia University. “Research and the New Zealand government’s own evaluation has demonstrated improved health and safety for sex workers and communities.”

A copy of the open letter and list of signatories can be found at [www.gshi.cfenet.ubc.ca/openletter](http://www.gshi.cfenet.ubc.ca/openletter).

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### **About the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS**

The BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) is Canada’s largest HIV/AIDS research, treatment and education facility and is internationally recognized as an innovative world leader in combating HIV/AIDS and related diseases. BC-CfE is based at St. Paul’s Hospital, Providence Health Care, a teaching hospital of the University of British Columbia. The BC-CfE works in close collaboration with key provincial stakeholders, including health authorities, health care providers, academics from other institutions, and the community to decrease the health burden of HIV and AIDS. By developing, monitoring and disseminating comprehensive research and treatment programs for HIV and related illnesses, the BC-CfE helps improve the health of British Columbians living with HIV.

### **About the Gender and Sexual Health Initiative**

The GSHI is a program of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) with the overall mission to ensure research of the highest scientific and ethical standard informs evidence-based policy and practice in gender, sexual health and HIV/AIDS and reduces health and social inequities among marginalized populations in Canada and globally. GSHI, on behalf of the BC-CfE, was an official legal intervener in the *Bedford* case at the Supreme Court of Canada.

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