



# Apprising the Evidence:

A National Workshop & Symposium  
on Mobilizing Sex Workers in Canada

March 18 & 19, 2023  
Victoria, BC

# TERRITORY ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We acknowledge with gratitude that our symposium took place on the lands of the Lekwungen'athun speaking peoples, today represented by the Songhees and Xwsepsum (Esquimalt) Nations.

We wish to express our gratitude to Elder Eydie Pelkey who began our symposium in a good way - sharing her teachings on listening with open minds and open hearts.

We express our gratitude to all those who traveled to share their words and wisdoms on Lekwungen Territory and hope that our efforts in reporting back to the community captures the essence of our time together.





# BACKGROUND

Since the 1970s, sex workers around the world have been formally mobilizing for their rights. However, both the underfunding of sex work organizations and the continued criminalization of sex work in Canada have created challenges to sex worker activism and mobilization. In 2018, Dr. Cecilia Benoit received a fellowship from the Pierre Elliot Trudeau Foundation (PETF) to engage in a research project aimed to overcome some of the barriers that hinder the mobilization of people in sex work in Canada around their health, safety, and rights.

In partnership with seven sex work organizations located across Canada, the team co-developed a mobilization training curriculum, the Sex Worker's Activist School Facilitation Guide (SWASFG). The curriculum had two central goals:

1. Sustaining and strengthening organizations led by people in sex work
2. Forging relationships between sex worker organizations and national and local allies

The trainings have been piloted by 6 sex work organizations across Canada. These sessions have brought small groups of people with experience in sex work together for two to three days of learning, debate, discussion, organizing around legal and social rights, media training, and planning for community action and mutual aid.

## Symposium Objectives

As part of the project's final activity, the event titled *Apprising the Evidence: A National Workshop & Symposium on Mobilizing Sex Workers in Canada* provided an opportunity to discuss the findings from the PETF project, share key learnings from piloting the SWASFG, hear from academic experts on diversity in the sex industry, and share knowledge between academics and community leaders. The symposium was hosted by the Canadian Institute of Substance Use Research and held in Victoria, British Columbia at the Fairmont Empress.



## Project Funders & Organizers

This event received financial support from the Canadian Institutes for Health Research, the PETF, and the Canadian Institute of Substance Use Research. The event was organized by Dr. Cecilia Benoit, Dr. Andrea Mellor, and Brett Koenig.

## Project Partners

The original seven community organizations involved in the creation of the SWASFG were: Peers Victoria Resources Society (Victoria), Pace Society (Vancouver), Shift, SafeLink Alberta (Calgary), Sex Workers Advisory Network of Sudbury (Sudbury), Stella/L'aime de Maimie (Montreal), Butterfly: Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network (Toronto), and the Safer Harbour Outreach Project (St. John's).



# PRESENTATIONS

*Overview of the Pierre Elliot Trudeau Foundation Fellowship*  
Cecilia Benoit

*Introduction to the Sex Workers' Activist School Facilitation Guide*  
Jenn Clamen

## **SWASFG Presentations**

Sarah Smith (Peers Victoria); Hanako Rodgers (Shift, Calgary), Tracy Gregory and Sarah Gartshore (SWANS, Sudbury), Susan Smith (SHOP, St. John's), Jenn Clamen (Stella, Montreal), Rabbit Richards (Pace, Vancouver)

## **Diversity in Sex Work Research Presentations**

*Diversity in Sex Work Research - Reaching Hidden and Underserved Groups*

Andrea Krüsi

*Diversity in Sex Work Research from the Perspective of Third Parties*

Chris Bruckert

*Diversity in Research from the Perspectives of Clients*

Chris Atchison

*Diversity in Sex Work from an International Perspective*

Gillian Abel

## **Keynotes**

*Sex Work, Indigeneity & Social Justice*  
Lacey Jones, Mary MacLeod-Beaver & Brenda Andrews

*Collaborating Across Differences: Reflections from 40 years of Sex Industry Research*  
Fran Shaver



# KEYNOTES

## *Sex Work, Indigeneity & Social Justice*

Lacey Jones, Mary MacLeod-Beaver & Brenda Andrews

Lacey Jones, Mary MacLeod-Beaver, and Brenda Andrews' keynote discussed the outreach program QomQem Coastal Connections. QomQem is an Indigenous-led outreach program developed in partnership with Peers Victoria Resource Centre which provides outreach services to Indigenous peoples who experience housing precarity and may be using substances. The program centers Indigenous laws and uses a decolonial framework to provide cultural care and support to their community members. The program emphasizes that holding space for community, providing non-judgmental services and peer supports, supporting one another with grief and loss, and holding one another in a good way are crucial to their member's health and wellbeing.



# KEYNOTES

## *Collaborating Across Differences: Reflections from 40 years of Sex Industry Research.*

Fran Shaver

Fran Shaver discussed the history of sex work policy in Canada through her 40 years of experience as a researcher. From the Fraser Committee in 1985, to the Subcommittee on Solicitation Laws in 2003, and finally to the Supreme Court of Canada's Bedford decision in 2013 and the government of Canada's current legislation, the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act*. This period of time saw an increase in both sex work research and sex work activism. Concluding her talk, Fran Shaver left us with a few final pieces of advice, including:

- Engage respectfully with all interested parties to ensure continued collaboration
- Celebrate the advances we have made
- Keep your friends, allies, and networks close





# DAY I: SEX WORKER ACTIVIST SCHOOL FACILITATION GUIDE

## Overview

The first day of the symposium focused on discussions of sex worker activism. Following a keynote talk by members of QomQem and Sacred, the day was spent discussing how sex worker organizations across Canada administered the Sex Worker Activist School Facilitation Guide. Every organization adapted the guide to fit the distinct needs of their communities, and highlighted that the workshops were well received by sex worker participants.

## Other highlights:

- Organizations emphasized the flexibility and adaptability of the SWASFG, such as providing online or in-person trainings, choosing which sections to focus on,
- Organizations emphasized the importance of integrating wellness into sex worker activism and provided examples of how they integrated wellness into their workshops
- Each organization highlighted the intersections of sex work activism and other forms of social justice, such as labour rights, disability activism, art, and Indigenous sovereignty and activism



## DAY 2: DIVERSITY IN SEX WORK RESEARCH

### Overview

The second day of the symposium focused on discussions of the importance of diversity in sex work research, both in Canada and globally. The day started with a keynote talk by Dr. Fran Shaver on her 40 years of experience conducting research with sex workers and the role of research in Canada's history of sex work policy. Following this talk, other researchers from across Canada shared their experiences conducting research with sex workers, clients, and third-parties and the importance of collecting diverse data, especially when examining the impacts of sex work policies. Dr. Gillian Abel ended the day by discussing sex work activism and sex work research in New Zealand in a decriminalized context.



# GRATITUDES

We are grateful to have been able to spend the two-days together, sharing knowledge, building community, and discussing the important work being done by community leaders, sex worker activists, and academics across Canada and globally.

We extend our huge gratitude to the individuals and organizations who were able to join for our two-day symposium. These included community leaders from Peers Victoria Resources Society (Victoria), QomQem (Victoria), Pace Society (Vancouver), Shift, SafeLink Alberta (Calgary), Sex Workers Advisory Network of Sudbury (Sudbury), Stella/L'aime de Maimie (Montreal), and the Safer Harbour Outreach Project (St. John's). We thank you for making the journeys to Victoria and sharing your tremendous expertise and experiences. We also thank the researchers who shared their decades of empirical research on the complexity of the sex industry across Canada and globally, and the barriers to achieving equality in society.

We acknowledge that without the work of those activists and community members who have come before, meeting at our table would not have been possible.



THIS REPORT USES IMAGES OF THE CAMAS LILY, A FLOWER FOUND ACROSS GARRY OAK MEADOWS ON THE TRADITIONAL TERRITORIES OF THE LEKWUNGEN PEOPLE. THESE ICONIC FLOWERS HAVE BEEN CULTIVATED AND HARVESTED BY COAST SALISH PEOPLES FOR THEIR EDIBLE BULBS.