

Call for Action

In 2017, Bill 96, the *Anti-Human Trafficking Act*, was enacted by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. As part of this bill's enactment, February 22nd was set as *Human Trafficking Awareness Day*. This date was inspired by the February 22nd, 2007 decision by the House of Commons to officially condemn human trafficking of women and children for purposes of sexual exploitation. Since 2007, many anti-trafficking policies have been put forth on the international, national, and local levels of government; in addition, non-profit organizations have begun providing supports and conducting research to fully understand the scope of human trafficking. In 2017, the Family Services of Peel – Peel Institute on Violence Prevention (FSP-PIVP) was awarded a grant from the Ministry of Community and Social Services to work on the prevention of human trafficking in the Region of Peel.

This February, FSP-PIVP strives to raise awareness on human trafficking in the Region of Peel, in collaboration with elected members of the government, at federal, provincial, regional, and municipal levels. We seek the opportunity to provide brief awareness information sessions in the municipalities of Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon, as human trafficking occurs at disproportionate rates in these areas. Ontario is a major centre for human trafficking in Canada, with about two-thirds of reported cases arising in the province, and the Region of Peel has been identified as the largest centre of human trafficking in Ontario. There is insufficient data to precisely identify those who are most trafficked in Ontario, but from several sources, FSP-PIVP has preliminarily identified a few at-risk groups: (1) Indigenous girls/women, (2) young girls, (3) female, East Asian migrant workers, and (4) girls/women with disabilities. While there is no single profile of a victim of human trafficking, there are many common risk factors, including gender, age, race, and socioeconomic status.

One of the difficulties in identifying and targeting the crime of human trafficking is that consent is ever-shifting, as it is context-based. A woman's consent to emigrate freely to another country often makes the legal identification of trafficking unclear. It becomes even more complex when this migratory strategy includes an independent decision to work as a prostitute in the host country. When a girl of high school age agrees to go into prostitution to increase her buying power of expensive goods, she may end up being trafficked from one place to another. The relationship between prostitution and trafficking, and the distinction, where it exists, between enforced and voluntary prostitution, are controversial matters that further complicate the issue. Oftentimes, society does not look favourably upon those in the business of prostitution, while women who are trafficked in the ever-growing global sex industry are recognized as "true" victims. Clearly, human trafficking is the illegal movement of people, typically for the purposes of forced labour or for commercial sexual exploitation. While there is a fine-line between the two situations, the business of prostitution and the crime of human trafficking for sex, it remains that women are at risk.

Whatever the case may be, the work of FSP-PIVP follows the assertion that women's rights are human rights. Progressive changes happen when diverse and independent women's movements have vision, strength, resilience and collective power. Undeniably, we improve as a society when we open our hearts and resources to one of the most vulnerable sectors of our population: the girls and women who fall victim to the tragic consequences of human trafficking. Let us come together this February to raise awareness for this national crisis.