



June 17, 2019.

ATTN: Toronto City Council

RE: "Supporting Survivors of Human Trafficking" to be considered by Council on June 18/19.

Aura Freedom is a secular Canadian charity working to end violence against women and human trafficking in Canada and beyond. Our work involves education through outreach and awareness to prevent violence against women and girls and empower youth. We are a feminist, women-led and survivor-centred grassroots organization and we work with a diverse group of allies every day to achieve our goals.

Aura Freedom is heavily involved in human trafficking prevention activities in Toronto. As a long-standing and active member of the Toronto-Counter Human Trafficking Network, we attend regular meetings to coordinate our efforts with other member organizations. We speak at both international conferences and community roundtables and have been consulted for new policies at the Federal, Provincial and Municipal levels. We have also consulted for the York Region District School Board for the development of a human trafficking awareness training for its staff and faculty.

It is important to note that Aura Freedom does not participate in "rescue industry" activities. We meet survivors where they are, recognizing their diverse backgrounds, stories, and choices.

Aura Freedom's work in partnership with the City of Toronto

In 2018, the City's Social Development, Finance and Administration's Community Funding Unit funded Aura Freedom's "Human Trafficking Peer Prevention Project". This project brings awareness to and prevents human trafficking and sexual exploitation in Toronto through presentations for youth, by youth which take place in schools, homeless shelters, group homes, and other youth spaces across the City. It also provides support and access to services for survivors of human trafficking in Toronto and beyond. The project is ending in September 2019 as funding only supported one year of activities.

Important considerations

Aura Freedom recognizes that human trafficking does not only happen in the sex industry, but in many others, including the service industry, farming industry and in domestic labour. Our comments in this submission to City Council will address human trafficking in the sex industry, as this is Aura Freedom's area of focus.

We welcome the City's distinction between consensual adult sex work and human trafficking. Indeed, Aura Freedom works with women who have engaged or still engage in consensual sex work for various reasons. However, we urge the City to refute claims that human trafficking does not exist at all in the sex industry. Aura Freedom has worked with numerous women and girls who were trafficked, exploited and abused in the sex industry in Toronto. Human trafficking is alive and well in the City of Toronto and there is considerable work to be done in order to address and prevent it.



Achieving gender equity will help eliminate human trafficking

When addressing human trafficking, it is important to do so not only through a human rights lens, but a gender lens. Those of us doing this work all recognize how gender inequality, and the resulting implications, are directly linked to gender-based violence and human trafficking. Indeed, sex trafficking is widely recognized by women's rights organizations as a form of gender-based violence.

Worldwide, 98% of sex trafficking victims are women and girls. Moreover, many of these survivors are subjected to extreme violence and abuse while being trafficked. In Canada, a 2013 RCMP study reports the victims of all domestic sex trafficking cases prosecuted in Canada between 2007 and 2013 were female (RCMP, Canadian Women's Foundation).

Human trafficking in the sex industry relies heavily upon gender inequality. Although boys and men can also be exploited, the overwhelming majority of sex-trafficked individuals are girls and young women and most of those who benefit from their exploitation are men. Indigenous women and girls, other women and girls of colour, disabled women and girls, Newcomers, LGBTQ2S+ youth, and girls in care are at an even higher risk of human trafficking.

There is a plethora of evidence showing how women and girls are the drivers of change. Everyone wins when women and girls are safe and empowered. However, half of all women in Canada have experiences at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16. (Stas Can) Indigenous women and women of colour are at an even higher risk of violence. Therefore, it is easy to recognize how human trafficking, which relies on physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional forms of violence as means of control, can break down communities and hinder development.

Prevention is key

There is no quick fix to human trafficking and ending it will take a generational change. We urge the City of Toronto to focus on prevention as much as it focuses on providing services to survivors. This would prevent youth from being coerced, exploited and trafficked in the sex industry.

Furthermore, we feel it is important to identify the type of prevention necessary. Funding and programs must be designed to tackle the root causes of exploitation and violence. If not, we will simply be doing damage control for the rest of our lives. Prevention activities must be anti-oppressive and barrier-free. Most importantly, they must highlight how **gender inequality and patriarchy, along with systemic racism, colonialism, transphobia** and more, perpetuate gender-based violence and human trafficking.



Topics such as gender equity, toxic masculinity, rape culture, racism/colonialism, self-worth, healthy relationships and consent must be officially integrated into school curricula. Having these conversations is crucial. For example, knowing what a healthy relationship looks like can empower girls to resist exploitation, especially since many of the youth we have worked with were exploited by someone whom they believed to be their intimate partner.

Why does Aura Freedom focus on gender equity and anti-oppression when addressing human trafficking? Why do we stress the importance of empowering marginalized groups with knowledge and support? Quite simply, *because it works*. Education and knowledge dissemination work.

After attending Aura Freedom's human trafficking awareness presentation:

-79% of participants said they would take action against human trafficking (get informed, speak up, challenge harmful gender norms, practice internet safety, etc.).

-94% of participants agreed that awareness makes a difference and can help end human trafficking.

-87% of our presentations thus far have resulted in face-to-face disclosure of human trafficking and/or sexual violence by youth participants, who were given on-site counselling and support and referred to crucial services.

These statistics demonstrate that preventative programs are essential to every young person in Toronto.

To summarize, we urge the City of Toronto to put its efforts into preventing violence and exploitation by working toward true gender equity and employing inclusive education that exposes the root causes of gender-based violence and human trafficking. The result will be empowered youth from diverse backgrounds who exercise their rights and live healthy lives free from violence and exploitation. I have seen this happen, and it is the one true way to end human trafficking for good.

Marissa Kokkoros, Executive Director
Aura Freedom International
marissa@aurafreedom.org