

Open Letter

To:

**Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada
Rob Nicholson, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada
Provincial and Territorial Ministers of Justice**

Re: Canada's sex workers excluded from national strategy on missing and murdered women

Dear Prime Minister and Justice Ministers:

The undersigned represent Canadian sex worker and sex worker serving organizations and supporters who are dedicated to working for sex workers' legal, human and political rights.

We write to register our total opposition to your governments' decision to exclude sex workers from Canada's Justice Ministers' national strategy on missing and murdered women. We are deeply alarmed and appalled that you have chosen to discount and ignore violence against women working as sex workers in our country. We demand that you act with the greatest possible urgency to work with sex worker organizations to address violence against sex workers on the local, provincial and national level.

On October 15, 2010 the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers of Justice Ministers announced a national strategy on Canada's Missing and Murdered Women. The strategy was based on the September 2010 government report entitled, *Issues Related to the High Number of Murdered and Missing Women in Canada*, authored by the Coordinating Committee of Senior Officials Missing Women Working Group (MMWG).

As is well known, the absolute necessity to deal with violence against sex workers has been overwhelmingly brought home by the Missing Women's Case, which concerns the murders of 65 women sex industry workers in Vancouver during the 1990s. We bear witness that the physical and sexual violence and the threats of assault and/or murder faced by women in the sex industry are not isolated to major urban centres, but rather occur across all Canadian communities, including rural communities. This is especially so for street-based sex workers who experience exponentially high rates of violence.

Your governments' murdered and missing women report provided 52 recommendations based on its June 2006 mandate: "to consider the effective identification, investigation and prosecution of cases involving serial killers who target persons living a high risk lifestyle, including but not limited to the sex trade." We note the report additionally stated that sometime after 2006, the report authors were also asked to consider: "particular concerns related to missing Aboriginal women."

We can only express our complete astonishment that a report mandated to specifically consider persons involved in the sex trade proposed 52 recommendations, yet failed to propose even a single recommendation to address violence against Canada's sex workers.

On October 29, 2010, the Government of Canada announced \$10 million in funding for the national strategy. Four million was allocated to measures intended to improve law enforcement responses to missing persons' investigations. Six million was allocated to fund a variety of services and projects intended to assist the families of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and enhance the safety of Aboriginal women and girls.

All organizations signing this Open Letter absolutely support the funding being directed to Canada's missing and murdered Aboriginal women and First Nations communities under the national strategy. We also fully support the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) and Sisters in Spirit in their November 9 demands for improvements to the national strategy and for the immediate need for ongoing operational federal government funding to the NWAC and Sisters in Spirit.

Nevertheless, we must respectfully take exception to the failure of our governments' national strategy to allocate even a single dollar in funding to address the safety and protection of sex workers. Your disgraceful exclusion of sex workers comes despite the reality that few, if any, changes have been made to either policing practices or within the broader criminal justice system to protect women and youth from the violence, sexual predation and murder prevalent in the street-based sex industry.

In response to the December 2006 report of the House of Commons Sub-Committee on Solicitation Laws (SCSL), the current Conservative government stated: "Those involved in prostitution are at a significantly greater risk of abuse and exploitation," and further that "Strong and consistent responses to this serious social problem are required."

Four years later, we behold a federal government that has deliberately and callously excluded sex workers from a national strategy on missing and murdered women. We are forced to ask: How many more women will have to face violence and death before our governments take the necessary steps to begin reducing the extreme violence, stigmatization and social marginalization endured by sex workers?

To reiterate, we call on you to exercise your authority and conscience by immediately initiating discussions with representatives of Canada's sex worker organizations to address our community's urgent and critical needs for safety and protection.

To contact the Open Letter signers, please contact Susan Davis at coordinator@wccsip.ca.

Sincerely,

BC Coalition of Experiential Communities
Exotic Dancers for Cancer
FIRST Decriminalize Sex Work
Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women
HUSTLE: Men on the Move
The Naked Truth Entertainment
PACE Providing Alternatives Counseling & Education Society
PEERS Vancouver
Pivot Legal Society
POWER Prostitutes of Ottawa-Gatineau Work, Educate and Resist
Stepping Stone, Halifax
West Coast Cooperative of Sex Industry Professionals
WISH Drop-in Centre Society