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Statement on Bill 251, *Combating Human Trafficking Act, 2021*

June 16, 2021

Queer Ontario supports the rights of sex workers to pursue their profession in a context of safety, dignity and respect. We uphold their rights to the autonomy of their bodies, sexualities, and working lives. We support the extension of full social, legal and labour rights to sex workers as enjoyed by other Ontario workers.

Queer Ontario supports the right of individuals to pursue employment in the commercial sex industry, to engage in self-employment as sex workers, and/or to become an entrepreneur in the commercial sex industry. We define sex work as consisting of street-based sex workers, escorts, phone sex operators, webcam models, stripping, erotic massage workers, and those providing professional BDSM services. We insist on the difference between consensual sex work and human trafficking.

In March 2020, Ontario announced a \$307 million investment into a [5-year anti-human trafficking strategy in Ontario](#). Claiming that over [55% of human trafficking in Canada takes place in Ontario](#) (see "Quick Facts") the Ontario Conservatives have introduced, on February 22, 2021 [new legislation](#) that seeks to advance further powers to police, increasing surveillance powers to inspectors, and introduce new charges and greater fines for those found to be in violation of this new provincial legislation.

Queer Ontario's concern with this new enforcement and regulation strategy is multifold. We oppose the conflation of the consensual exchange of money or goods for sexual services as human or "sex trafficking." Recent public education campaigns meant to raise awareness of "human trafficking" often obscure the difference with consensual sex work, are intended to assert concern for a broad public menace, while remaining vague about the empirical evidence for such claims. Such campaigns provide little reassurance that any policing or regulation strategies will not interfere in the domain of consensual sex work.

We are concerned that Bill 251 increases and extends new policing powers into the ability to search and detain individuals (especially those who are 16 and 17 years old), broaden powers to enter massage parlor premises and remove information and documentation, which introduces greater risks in the lives of sex workers within establishments or operating as independent service providers.

Queer Ontario insists, along with sex worker advocacy organizations like [Maggie's](#) and [Butterfly: Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network](#), that there needs to be a new public conversation that carefully distinguishes between illegal and criminal activities such as forcible confinement and extortion (activities that would fall under “human trafficking,” already illegal under the Criminal Code), and consensual sex work. These conversations need to privilege the lives and experiences of sex workers, be evidence-based, and responsive to the recent social science research conducted by or in conjunction with current and former sex workers and university and community-based researchers.

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Queer Ontario is a provincial network of gender and sexually diverse individuals — and their allies — who are committed to questioning, challenging, and reforming the laws, institutional practices, and social norms that regulate queer people.