

Hearing Them: Survivor Stories by the Numbers

YWCA Halifax

“All the money was taken. We could only keep gifts as long as we made money.” – Hearing Them survey participant

People with experiences of commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking have a unique and important perspective to offer. They are the real experts of their lives and have first-hand knowledge of the policies and programs intended to support their needs. Hearing their voices is foundational if we, as a community, are to move forward to heal trauma and support survivors.

YWCA Halifax has been active in addressing gender-based violence for a very long time. As Atlantic Canada's largest multi-service organization supporting women and girls, we provide housing, financial assistance, employment programs, settlement supports, and child care for diverse women in our community. In recent years, we have advanced our work in human trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth. In addition to our peer outreach workers, our family and community outreach worker, and our safer house, we are working with more than 70 organizations and agencies across the province to convene the Trafficking and Exploitation Services System (TESS) community of practice.

In 2020, with funding from the Community Foundations of Canada, YWCA Halifax and selected TESS Partners engaged in a survivor survey project “Hearing Them.” The purpose of Hearing Them was to engage with people who are or were engaged in the sex trade. We asked to hear their stories of how, why, and when they became engaged. How did they leave? Or, if they were still engaged, what were the barriers they faced in leaving? We asked questions about how their lives intertwined with systems – be that non-profit, health care, child welfare, education, or justice. We also asked about histories of systemic and gender-based violence. We did all of this to bring their voices to those who can make their lives a little better: those in positions of power and influence over the systems meant to support them.

“Made it seem like it was going to be easy... he was very convincing and I was naïve.” – Hearing Them survey participant

The results of Hearing Them were remarkable. We were humbled by the responses we received and the confidences entrusted in our care. Even while knowing that there were some data related limitations, the information was invaluable.

We heard stories from 95 women, girls (85%) and gender diverse folks (15%) with direct experience of the sex industry. (Although the survey was open to boys and men, no agency was able to engage them for input. This is likely because most agencies involved predominantly serve women-identifying community members. The absence of boys and men should not be interpreted as representative of the whole population.) Although survey participants were mostly over the age of 19 (89%), more than two-thirds indicated that they were under the age

of 19 when they first became involved in the sex industry (68%). Survey participants were disproportionately racially diverse; 39% self-identified as being Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, Bi-Racial or another ethnicity. The sample included participants currently living in HRM (68%) and outside of HRM (32%). Those interviewed from outside HRM were predominantly from the Truro, Windsor, and Sydney areas of the province.

The stories of engagement in the sex industry were also diverse. Participant perspectives provided key insights into the various experiences of 3rd party control as well as independent engagement. Survey participants reported a variety of pathways to enter the sex industry although predominantly related to the main themes of poverty, isolation, family breakdown, and systemic inequality. Survey interviews revealed participant histories of violence and complex trauma, challenges, and needs from services and service providers.

“Mental health for trauma from being hurt as a little kid and other supports like boundaries learning to say no without fear.” – Hearing Them survey participant

Most significantly, participants told us they want services to be trauma-informed, harm-reduction, non-clinical, relevant and accessible.

“Everybody was welcoming. I do not usually feel welcome. When you actually get the help you are looking for.” – Hearing Them survey participant

We were moved how all of the stories revealed that every victim, survivor, victor and thriver is resilient and an expert in their own life - they know what they need, and how to get it!

Now that survivors have shared their stories with us, it is our turn to honour their participation through a commitment to action. YWCA Halifax has been bringing the results to service providers and all orders of government as a blueprint for systemic change, policy and planning.

While this project only captured a point in time snapshot of information and experiences of Nova Scotians in the sex industry, the intention of YWCA Halifax is to continue “Hearing Them” long into the future. Our plans are to gather data annually, allowing us to identify trends and evaluate the impact of new and improved services and programs being delivered by YWCA Halifax and TESS partners.

“Someone to believe in me.” -- Hearing Them survey participant on what makes a good service

YWCA Halifax and the TESS partnership would like to thank CFNS and our many other funders including the Canadian Women’s Foundation, the Government of Canada, and the Government of Nova Scotia for supporting the work being done in the community to support youth who are exploited. A special thanks from all of us at YWCA Halifax to the TESS partners and participants for placing trust in us to move the needle on the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth in Nova Scotia.