

# Sex trafficking will be part of Toronto's Pan Am Games, says head of church organization



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Karen Hamilton, general secretary of the Canadian Council of Churches, speaks on human trafficking.

Robert Sibley / Ottawa Citizen

Cities that host international sporting events put on their best face for the world to see, but they ignore an ugly reality behind the spectacle: the exploitation of women and children shipped in to cater to the sexual proclivities of spectators, says the general secretary for the Canadian Council of Churches.

“Human sex trafficking goes with national and international sporting events,” Karen Hamilton said Wednesday in one in the series of Stuart Ivison Memorial Lectures sponsored by Ottawa’s First Baptist Church on Elgin Street. “And it will be coming to my city, because Toronto is hosting the Pan Am Games this summer.”

Canadians — and the politicians and government agencies who serve them — need to face the reality of both human trafficking and sex trafficking, Hamilton said, suggesting that many of those who attend will be as interested in illicit sex as in the athletes, if not more so.

Hamilton said she has drawn the attention of David Peterson, chairman the board organizing the games, to the issue, but to date isn’t satisfied it is being taken seriously.

“Last summer I asked him what plans he has (to respond to the problem of sex trafficking). He looked at me with shock and horror and said, ‘I had no idea this was a reality.’”

That, suggested Hamilton, is the core of problem: too many people don’t want to admit, much less confront, the fact that hundreds of thousand of people — mostly women and girls, but also boys — are being trafficking around the world to work as de facto slaves or forced into sex work.

The United Nations defines human trafficking as “the implicit use of threat, force, or other forms of coercion against an individual for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, debt bondage, or slavery.” Sex trafficking refers to “force, fraud, or coercion as related specifically to the illegal sex trade business.”

Both forms of trafficking are old problems, Hamilton said, citing references to it in the Old Testament. “The abuse of women and the trafficking of women is an ancient practice, but it is also very much a part of our future.”

Statistics support that claim. The International Labour Organizations estimates there are 12.3 million adults and children in forced labour, bonded labour or commercial sexual servitude.

According to the United Nations, sexual exploitation accounts for 79 per cent of the world’s human trafficking, involving mainly women and children; forced labour accounts for 18 per cent. Worldwide, 20 per cent of all trafficking involves children.

Within Canada, the RCMP estimate 600 women and children are trafficked into this country each year for sexual exploitation, and at least 800 are trafficked into Canada for all domestic markets, including the drug trade, domestic work, or labour for garment and other industries. Another 1,500 to 2,000 are trafficked through Canada into the United States.

Scholarly studies of human trafficking also reinforce Hamilton’s contentions regarding human trafficking, including in regard to sporting events.

“Concerns have been raised that large global sporting events are magnets for the sex industry, notably human trafficking for sexual exploitation,” Rebecca Finkel and Madelon Finkel write a 2014 study in the journal *Public Health*.

While the media tend to focus on the athletes, the host city and the social and cultural offerings surrounding the event, “The ‘dirty downside’ sporting events, such as worker abuse, corruption, and fraud, is often ignored,” they write.

At the same time, though, the two scholars acknowledge solid empirical evidence on the extent of human trafficking — and sex trafficking — is hard to come by, especially when government authorities make little effort to obtain that evidence.

Hamilton shared that assessment, saying that a lack of government and political focus on the issue — with the exception of the RCMP, she noted — hampers an effective response to human trafficking.

But the biggest impediment to sex trafficking, she observed, is “male demand for sexual access to the bodies of women and children. If there was no demand, there would be no problem.”