

## ***“Too Many Bills to Pay” & “Poor Wages at Normal Jobs”:*** **Income Factors for Some Women in Edmonton Body Rub Parlours**

### **BACKGROUND:**

Inspired by the vision of Mayor Don Iveson and the *End Poverty Edmonton* Taskforce, CEASE wanted to learn about the income realities of women in City of Edmonton licenced Body Rub Parlours. We wanted to better understand the financial reasons why some women work in the parlours and what supports they might want if they were seeking other options to provide for themselves and their families. Fifty (50) women in 12 Body Rub Parlours completed our survey between August, 2015 and February 2016. CEASE staff visited the parlours and invited women to fill in the surveys voluntarily. We were constrained by limited staff time and were not able to invite more participation. This survey provides a scan of English-speaking women with Body Rub practitioner licences, however, we acknowledge that it doesn't represent the experiences of all women in parlours. (The survey results represent 13% of the 381 Body Rub practitioners granted licences in 2015).

Those working in Body Rub Parlours do so as contractors and have no benefits under Alberta Employment Standards. Women cover shifts between 7 am and 12 am. They pay room fees and other fees decided by the Body Rub Parlour owners. Sometimes there are no purchasers of their services and thus, no income that day for the time spent at the parlour. This is known as “blinking”.

Qualifier: We were not able to visit parlours where women primarily speak Asian languages. It is our perception that there are 15- 16 Body Rub Parlours licenced in Edmonton that advertise as providing women from China, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, and other Asian countries. We understand that many of the women speak limited English and many cycle through these parlours; some from Asia while others are from B.C. and Eastern Canada. We think this raises questions and concerns related to isolation and health needs, lack of access to language and cultural resources, and risk of exploitation and human trafficking. Police try to track unlicensed venues called “Asian micros” operating in condos, apartments and homes.

There are many sex industry advertisements on Backpage.com, and other internet sites. There are estimates that over 90% of the ads on Backpage.com are for those who are outside the licence regime of the City.

April, 2016

### **FINDINGS:**

#### **Demographics of the 50 women who completed the survey**

- YOUNG: 66% are between 18 – 34 years old (16% were 18-24); 34% are 35-50
- SINGLE: 50% single and never married; 30% divorced/separated; 20% married/common law;
- SUPPORTING FAMILY: 72% had at least one dependent living with them (child or ill parent)
- EDUCATED: 56% completed post-secondary education, while 28% completed high school
- RANGE OF TIME IN PARLOURS: 40% worked in Body Rub from 1 to 5 years; 22% for 6-9 years; 22% had worked for 10 or more years; 16% worked in Body Rub less than 6 months;

### How much money do you need every month to live in Edmonton and pay all your bills?

Note: some work for supplemental income and some for primary income. We did not distinguish.



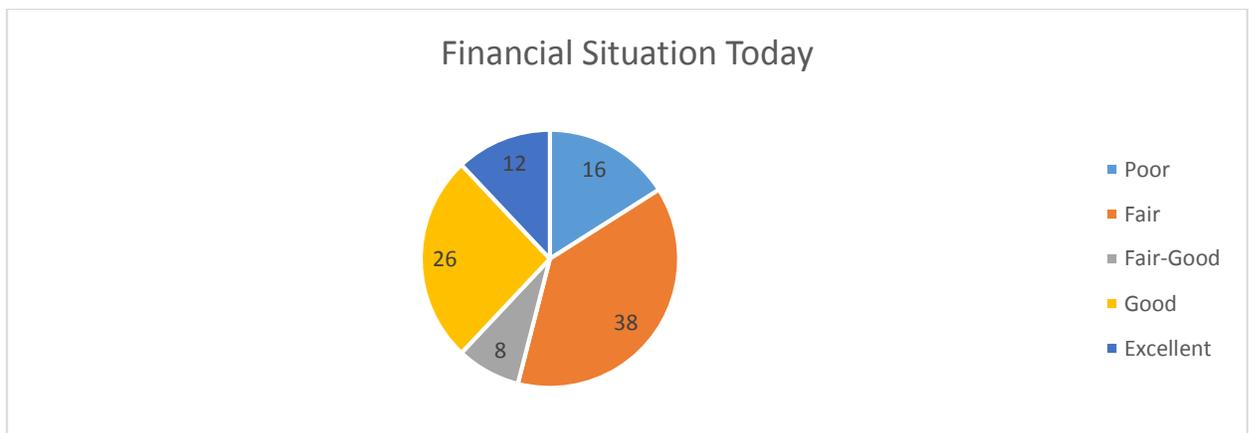
Thirty-eight (38) % said they could manage on \$3,000 - \$4,000 per month or \$36,000 - \$48,000 per year, while 32% indicated they would need to earn \$5,000 or more per month to cover their costs of living (\$60,000+).

Note: The Edmonton Social Planning Council calculated that the living wage for Edmonton is \$17.36 per hour for a family of four with two income earners and a 3 year old and 7 year old. (\$63,190 household income) This is pre-tax income. For a lone parent, with 1 three year old child, the living wage is \$19.33 per hour (\$35,180 per year, pre-tax)

Source: *More Than Minimum*, June, 2015. Edmonton Social Planning Council

### How would you rate your financial situation today?

Fifty-four (54) % identified their financial situation today as *Poor* or *Fair*.



“not making enough money at my other job (doctor’s office)”

“Tired of struggling financially, not being able to make my goals & dreams come true”

“needed additional funds to support son with autism”

“mom had a stroke, had to take over her bills, plus mine and take care of siblings”

“huge” (financial factors - 2 respondents)

“Boyfriend pimped me out”

“I was laid off at my job and my husband didn’t work much because he was lazy and never seemed to care about supporting our young family”

## What financial factor(s) contribute(d) to you deciding to work Body Rub?

Ninety-four (94)% of the survey respondents identified factors in these theme areas:

- Job loss, financial struggle, unemployment
- Cost of living and providing for children or parents; Childcare costs
- Debts and Bills
- Student Loans
- Transportation costs (car payments, insurance, gas)
- Getting ahead, saving, wanting nice things in life, money for a holiday

Six (6)% of the survey respondents only described what they saw to be benefits for themselves:

- independence, investing opportunities, increased standard of living(1)
- paid every day (1); independence and increased standard of living (2);

## In your opinion, what are the top 5 financial challenges you face (if any).

Comments are clustered in these theme areas:

- Housing (rent, mortgage)
- Transportation (car payments, insurance, gas)
- Debt
- Student loans
- Bills, Bills, Bills, cost of providing for family

“single mother with a child with disabilities”

“increase in rent/food/utilities”

“couldn’t pay bills”

## Gender Inequality Income Challenges

*“Although the job market has been strong in Edmonton, a significant percentage of the workforce can be described as the working poor, individuals who are employed full time but work for low wages and receive few if any benefits. In 2014, 123,700 working people in metro Edmonton earned less than \$15 per hour (19.5% of all employed Edmontonians). **A gender gap exists, with women representing 62% of low wage workers. Significantly, 77% are 20 years and older** (Public Interest Alberta, 2014).”*

Source: *More Than Minimum*, June, 2015, Edmonton Social Planning Council

“Working poverty means being employed (often full-time) while earning an insufficient income to be above the poverty line. Alberta has the highest rate of working poverty in the nation... Working poverty results because while jobs in Edmonton are abundant, a significant proportion are low paying... often precarious, lacking in job security and fixed hours of work; disproportionately lack benefits”

Source: *Edmonton Poverty Profile*, January, 2015. Edmonton Social Planning Council

## Do you feel that you have the same economic opportunities that men your age have?

There were 32 responses out of 50 respondents

Twenty-eight (28) responded “No”

Four (4) responded “Yes” plus one added, “Yes, if more education, I’m sure I would be fine” and, another wrote: “If both sexes have same experience and knowledge”. One was not sure; another said “No, I am capable”

*“Canadian women still take home on average 73 cents for every dollar men earn, even as educational attainment has surpassed their male counterparts. The gap remains when controlled for measures such as occupations and hourly wages.”*

Source: Globe and Mail, October 9, 2015

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/canada-slow-to-close-gender-pay-gap-despite-projected-gdp-boost/article26761080/>

## What are your suggestions to The *End Poverty Edmonton* Taskforce for the top 3 – 5 actions that would be “game changers” for people living in poverty to move beyond that poverty.

There were many responses, which we clustered into these theme areas:

- Awareness of resources
- Counselling
- Help with higher education – free education like Europe
- Financial Empowerment – help with budgeting
- Housing – lower rents, subsidized housing, affordable housing
- Accessible, affordable, subsidized child care

One woman wrote: “Poverty is a part of life, things will never change”. We would like to be part of changing this perception.

## No – 28 responses

“Only in this industry do I make enough to support my son and I, in normal jobs not so much.”

“No, because I have taken jobs that men can do. They get paid higher wages” (2)

“Not with 5 children and one with special needs”

## Food for Thought:

*“Women’s equality reached its highest level in Alberta in 1993 and has deteriorated rapidly since then”*

Kathleen A. Lahey, March 2015  
“The Alberta Disadvantage: Gender, Taxation and Income Equality.”  
Parkland Institute

*“The global sex trade is as much a product of everyday people struggling to survive in dire economic straits as it is an organized crime problem. Attacking the crime and not the poverty is treating the symptom but not the disease.”*

Professor Annjanette Rosgal,  
University of Colorado

2014 Canadian research revealed that the median income for individuals in the commercial sex industry was \$39,500. (The majority of the 218 interviewed were “off street” which means body rub, escort, dancing, internet).  
Professor Cecilia Benoit, University of Victoria

Other women wrote their suggestions:

*“People for the women to talk to about their problems”*

*“Help for their children and parental support”*

*“Getting people job ready”*

*“Better accessible daycare, longer, later hours, overnight”*

**If you wanted different work beyond the sex industry, what would you want to put in place?** (e.g. if you want to go back to school, or a job training program, or a transition allowance to bridge the gaps)

*“A transition allowance would help in a huge way. The only reason to be a working girl is for the money. Once you start it is very difficult going back to a square job. If I had to chance to receive a bursary, it would be helpful. I’d like to be a nurse. “*

*“A resume builder, help with taxes, school or job training – something like addictions counselling or real estate”*

*“counselling, child care”*

*“I’m currently working on my exit strategy; completing school and working on building my own company”*

*“bursaries, previous loan forgiveness, transition allowance”*

*“easier school financing and loans” “lower tuition fees”*

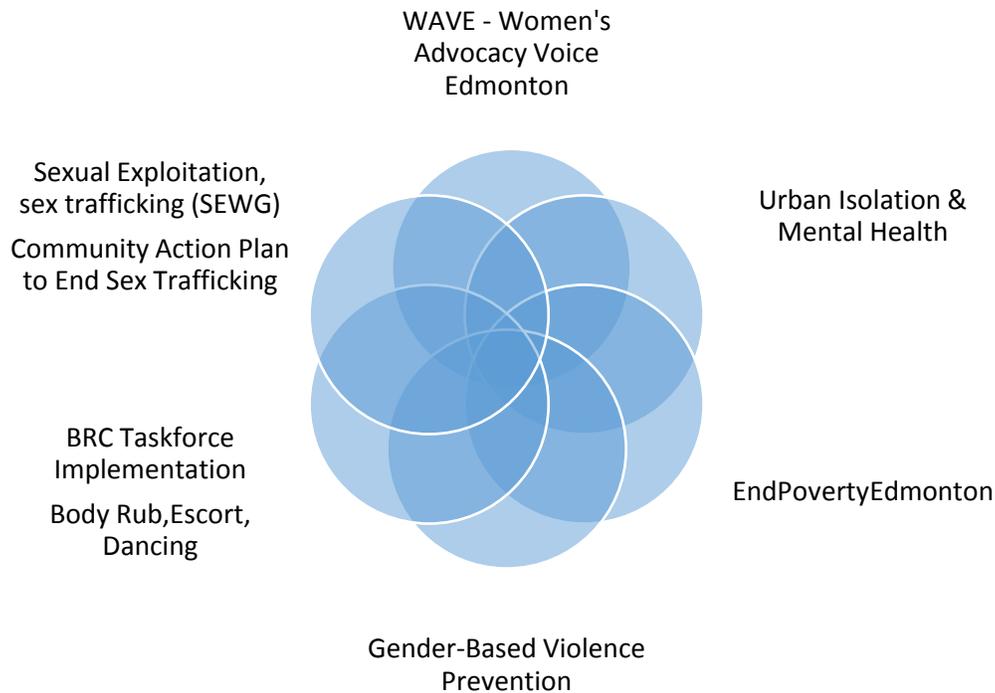
*“Yes. Rent paid, bills paid. Doing schooling.”*

*“money to start my own business”*

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

Take steps towards *exploitation reduction* and *hope creation*.

We urge the City of Edmonton to take a comprehensive approach by ensuring that there are interconnections with the Edmonton City Council Initiatives and community initiatives in the diagram below.



**RECOMMENDATION: Support women to move from *coping* with income challenges to *hoping* by creating pathways towards an improved economic future.**

**Some Edmonton Community Initiatives and Investments:**

**Philanthropy:**

Through the generosity of the Eldon and Anne Foote Fund at the Edmonton Community Foundation, \$30,000 has been provided to CEASE annually for bursaries. These funds are provided in October: Between October, 2015 and February, 2016, we disbursed over \$20,000 due to a high volume of requests. We are at risk of not being able to respond to the requests in the summer for support for courses in the Fall. As well, The Edmonton Community Foundation has directed donations from other funds for CEASE to allocate. CEASE has also established an endowment and bursaries at MacEwan University and NorQuest College thanks to many generous donors throughout the years.

CEASE Advocates are able to visit some parlours and provide information related to:

- Human Rights and Community Resources
- Victims of Crime court support and financial benefits
- Warnings shared by women about men who frequent parlours and pose risk and harm to women

CEASE staff also provide help with filing taxes online for those with incomes under \$30,000 and advice for those with incomes over \$30,000, coaching for women exploring bursaries and employment, plus referrals to other community and government resources that can provide assistance.

## A city-wide collaboration that fosters financial empowerment:

**EMPOWER U Building Confident Futures (Financial Literacy and Matched Savings).** This is led by the United Way and City of Edmonton, in cooperation with community organizations, and the corporate sector. This initiative is part of the commitment of the United Way Alberta Capital Region to mobilize collective action to create pathways out of poverty. <http://myunitedway.ca/empoweru>

CEASE is a partner in the EU Collaborative and a member of EFEC – Edmonton Financial Empowerment Collaborative, supported by City of Edmonton staff.

Closing Remarks: While some identify that they freely choose to participate in the sex industry, many others see few other options for themselves and their families.

**Food for Thought: *To what degree does the “feminization of poverty” or “precarious employment” contribute to women turning to the sex industry to make ends meet?***

***“I was working 5 part-time jobs up to 96 hours per week for 2 years. I couldn’t pay my bills and mortgage. I didn’t want to lose my condo, so, I turned to the XXX industry”.*** A former Body Rub worker

Note: She remained in the sex industry for 7 years until she could no longer endure the assaults to her physical, emotional, spiritual and mental health.

This woman’s former boyfriend was abusive to her, plus he racked up credit card debt and committed fraud. She was left to pay off the debt. She also didn’t want to lose the condo they had purchased together and become homeless. This was in 2005-2006 time period. The minimum wage was around \$7.00 per hour.

### **What was she doing for up to 96 hours per week?**

1. 28 – 30 hours per week: Detailing cars at a BMW ownership. She was required to be on site 4 days per week from 8 am – 3 pm, but, she was only paid per car she detailed (piece work) and sometimes there were few cars per day. (This may be similar to being required to be onsite at a body rub parlour, but, you only earn income if a man comes in to purchase your services. )
2. 12 to 24 hours per week, 6 hours per day from 4-10 pm: Personal fitness trainer, YMCA (paid minimum wage)
3. 14 – 25 hours per week, picking up as many shifts as she could juggle: Physiotherapy clinic assistant (receptionist, put hot packs on patients, paid \$10 per hour)
4. 9 – 18 hours per week, 6 pm – 3 am on weekends: Waitress at Yuk Yuks (\$6.80 per hour plus tips of \$100-\$150 per shift)
5. 8 – 10 hours every Saturdays at EIFW as a recreation officer (\$12 per hour)

## **PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT IN THE CANADIAN LABOUR MARKET: A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT**

6. *Cynthia J Cranford, Leah F Vosko, Nancy Zukewich, 2003*

“Precarious employment’ is a better concept for understanding labour market insecurity than the dominant concept in Canada, ‘non-standard work’... Wage work falls along a continuum of precariousness measured as regulatory protection, control and income. **Finally, employment in precarious forms is shaped by social location. White men are concentrated in the least precarious forms of employment, while white women, women of colour and youth are concentrated in the more precarious forms.”**