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MONTREAL — On Thursday June 13, the Supreme Court of Canada will hear the case of *Bedford v. Canada*, a legal challenge to Canada's prostitution laws. The high court will listen to arguments designed to strike down three laws that criminalize keeping a bawdy-house, living on the avails of prostitution and communicating in public. The plaintiffs, Terri-Jean Bedford, Amy Lebovitch and Valerie Scott, originally filed their challenge in March 2007.

In anticipation of this case being heard by the country's top court, controversy surrounding sex work has re-emerged in the public domain. This is hardly unexpected. However, it's time to put certain elements of the debate to rest.

My studies over the last 20 years have led me to conclude that it is important to avoid obscuring the central issue with extraneous ones — the central issue being the advancement of sex workers' rights to safe and secure working environments. Other issues relating to concerns about child prostitution, human trafficking and the need to help vulnerable women get out of the business are more peripheral, and have no place in the context of the *Bedford v. Canada* court challenge. Giving equal attention and weight to these issues makes it difficult to deal with any one of them effectively.

*Bedford v. Canada* is not about child prostitution or human trafficking. These are issues that are best handled using those criminal laws that apply directly to them. Nor is it about morality. In a pluralistic society such as ours, we must separate personal moral values and opinions from the legal positions we take. We've accomplished that with legislation governing birth control, abortion, smoking, homosexuality and gay marriage. Why not with sex work?

*Bedford v. Canada* also isn't about assisting vulnerable women to get out of the business. This is something that is more appropriately handled through education and job training. Leaving is something that can, and should, happen for anyone interested in doing so, regardless of the outcome in *Bedford v. Canada*.

In the end, *Bedford v. Canada* is about being able to work safely on the job — something we would expect for any occupation. In the words of the plaintiffs, taken from the Plaintiff's Memorandum, "It is about whether or not we believe that sex workers are people deserving the same rights and dignity as the rest of the public."

Once extraneous issues are stripped away, we must recognize the diversity in the sex industry. Many studies, including my own, indicate that sex workers include women, men and transgender people from a variety of demographic backgrounds: some are married with children, others are single; most have had other jobs. The age at which they enter the sex trade varies, as do their

reasons. Some drift into it gradually or with support from friends; a small number are coerced. Economic motives may well predominate, but the issues are complex, and the underlying reasons diverse.

Working environments are diverse as well. They include street-based prostitution, massage parlours, escort agencies, strip clubs, bar and casino work, the pornography industry, telephone-sex agencies, online entertainment and social-media sites.

Another point to bear in mind is that clients are not all violent perpetrators. Recent studies indicate clients come from a wide variety of demographic backgrounds. Motivations for buying sexual services vary. Some clients are unsatisfied with the sexual aspects of their current relationships; others wish to avoid the long-term “obligations” of conventional relationships; still others seek a limited, quasi-romantic connection.

Overall, client violence is exaggerated.

Reaching a solution also means realizing that the plaintiffs in *Bedford v. Canada*, and their lawyer Alan Young, are a demolition team. Their objective is to strike down bad laws — not to generate better ones.

That’s the job of legislators, at all levels. And that job should involve consulting with all stakeholders to create legal and institutional frameworks that clearly distinguish the issues involved, recognize the diversity among clients and workers, and ensure that conditions are safe and secure for all.

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