

## Maylissa Luby, April 4, 2019



During the April 4 lunch, MCW had the privilege to welcome Maylissa Luby, who worked with La Sortie as a full-time social worker. She grew up in Quebec City and started in the sex trade as a teenager. In the presence of her grandmother for the first time, Maylissa spoke to us from the heart while also generously sharing her lived experience and that of other women she works with to give us a better picture of this issue and its prevalence in Montreal specifically.

La Sortie is the first safe house in Quebec dedicated to the survivors of sexual exploitation.

During her thought provoking presentation, Maylissa shared statistics on the magnitude of the issue. This is the second fastest growing industry in the world and, contrary to what some believe, sex trade is prevalent in Montreal to the extent that it is known to many as the "Bangkok of the North" and an international destination for sex tourism.

Through sharing stories of women's experiences, Maylissa highlighted that a trafficked person is often coerced by subtle manipulation rather than overt physical force, and painted the picture of a long process, and why many women have major challenges in getting out. As she noted "pimps sell you a dream". She shared a story of a teenager, for example, who was bought a ticket to Toronto by a pimp to live with him. Coercion started with him noting how expensive it is in Toronto and that exotic dancing would be the way for her to pay her way. This woman had prior experience of domestic violence, and started to recognize the signs of coercion and abuse when he threw a pizza box in her face. Maylissa powerfully shared that this woman, in her bathrobe, ran outside to a police station to get away. Unlike this woman, many do not have the lived experience to recognize the signs of coercion and for some, also equate touching and sex with love. As noted, 40% of survivors of sexual exploitation, according to Maylissa, have experienced incest or a form of sexual abuse in their lives and may have cognitive distortion from past unhealed trauma and/or a lack of boundaries given family experiences. Some women enter the industry, as did Maylissa with a mindset of "I have been abused, why not get paid for it."

Other shared alarming statistics gave a picture of particular risk factors, for example, indigenous women make up 1% of our population but account for 50% of the women in the sex industry. As many as 78% of women who leave the sex industry say they have experienced mental health problems. According to Maylissa, 90% of survivors want to leave. Many may experience a type of "dissociation" to sustain themselves.

When asked about sex worker's rights groups and the debates within feminist circles on this issue, Maylissa raised the point that when this issue becomes too politically polarized, the unfortunate side effect is that the lived experience and empathy for suffering is lost. She noted that La Sortie is not a political advocacy organization.

MCW thanks Maylissa for her courage to share her story, her passion, and purpose with us, which raised much discussion.

For more information on La Sortie's work or to see how you can support them further, here is their website:

<https://www.lasortie.org/en/what-is-the-way-out/>