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Booth stirs controversy; Sex show: London's Sexual Assault Centre joins Western Fair event

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The Sexual Assault Centre of London has taken its public outreach role to new levels -- right to a booth at the Everything To Do With Sex Show -- stirring debate over whether it's the right setting for an agency working to end violence against women.

"This is about getting more information to people. We want to be where women are and our presence here does not mean we condone activities, but that we need to offer support where we can," said Louise Pitre, the centre's executive director.

The show, which opened yesterday at Western fair grounds, has come under heavy criticism from Megan Walker, executive director of the London Abused Women's Centre, for its bondage and domination display, which features men and women being tied and whipped. The show also includes men and women being led around in dog collars and leashes. In addition, pornographic videos are on display.

"If we were invited to have a booth, we would decline. We do not believe it is in the best interest of women for us to align ourselves with the sex show," said Walker, declining comment directly on the assault centre's presence there.

"We are concerned about public pornography, and about the portrayal of women being paddled and whipped. We do not support the sexual exploitation of women," Walker said.

The assault centre's booth offers information on sexual violence. Staff and volunteers are on hand to answer questions.

"We will let people know what is consent and what are safe practices," said Pitre.

There are different ways women's groups can tackle exploitation and violence, Pitre said, and having the booth at the show is taking the fight to the front lines.

"Women are now exploring different sex practices, so let's give them guidelines about what is safe and consensual," she said.

Barb MacQuarrie, director of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children at the University of Western Ontario, supports the centre being at the show.

"I think it is extremely important for them to be there. They stand for something, for a woman's right to consent to sex no matter what the circumstances. Many participants in this sex show are empowered women engaging in their sexuality. It is not about violence," she said.

While displays of domination and submission are abhorrent to many, a woman can feel "powerful" if she's in control in that situation -- and feminism has to respect that sexuality is changing for many women, she added.

"It is very paternalistic for us to think we can say what women can and cannot do -- we do not have the right to do that, morally," said MacQuarrie.

"We are in a time when our whole views and ethics on how we understand sex is changing. It may not be the decision all of us (feminists) would make, but feminists do not support someone making a decision for another woman. That is part of what we stand for."

Irene Mathysen, NDP MP for London-Fanshawe and the party's critic on women's issues, also applauded the assault centre for being at the show, adding she understands why it may be controversial.

"They are confronting it directly, saying there is another side to this. I understand how some would be upset they were there -- the consequences can be horrific -- but you cannot back off."

But Walker warned society has to be careful about what it sees as women consenting or feeling powerful, when in fact they aren't.

"What appears to be consent is not always so. People in a position of power can abuse that power, and that leads others to make a decision they do not usually make," Walker said.

The abused women's centre will discuss the sex show with city officials in an effort to have the city toughen up its adult entertainment bylaw, Walker said.