

The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Women and Girls: A Survivor Service Provider's Perspective

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After decades of silence, in 1996, the child victims of commercial sexual exploitation were given a voice at the First World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children.¹ For the first time, the scope and horror of the buying, selling, trafficking, and exploitation of children was revealed to world. Testimony after testimony described the stories of brutally stolen childhoods. Their stories mirror my own and those of the thousands of individuals we serve every year at Standing Against Global Exploitation Project, Inc. (SAGE) in San Francisco: the “toss-aways” and the “throw-aways” who are blamed for their own victimization.²

I started the work of SAGE sixteen years ago. Until that point, I had been in and out of jails, mental health hospitals, emergency rooms, and drug treatment programs since the age of twelve. No one ever asked me about my life, about prostitution, about being raped, or about being kidnapped. No one

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1. See World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, <http://www.csecworldcongress.org/en/index.htm> (last visited Apr. 3, 2006). Cherry Kingsley and Fadi Fadel are the directors of the International Centre to Combat Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (ICCCSE), an organization dedicated to ending the commercial sexual exploitation of children. ICCSE's work includes advocacy, coalition building, curriculum development, organizing speaking engagements, and research. For more information about the work of this organization, see ICCSE, <http://www.iccec.ca/home.html> (last visited Apr. 3, 2006).

2. SAGE, <http://www.sagesf.org> (last visited Apr. 3, 2006).

asked me about the metal plate and the screws in my head from the beatings, about my suicide attempts, or about my desperation. No one asked me if I hurt, or why I hurt. No one ever treated me like a person. I was just a whore, a drug addict, and a criminal.

Tragically, my story reflects that of thousands of child victims of sexual exploitation in the United States. For most, the exploitation does not begin the first time they are prostituted; 75-95% of prostituted individuals were sexually abused as children.³ Although involvement in prostitution is correlated to childhood sexual abuse, the connection is generally ignored. In a pilot study of 130 individuals prostituted on the streets of San Francisco, 57% of those studied reported that they had been sexually abused as children, 32% reported that rape was their first sexual experience, 16% reported that their first sexual experience was with an adult friend of the family, 26% reported that their first sexual experience was with a relative, and 27% stated that their first sexual experience was with a person five or more years their senior.⁴

My story began in New York when I was just five years old. Older men in the neighborhood park would give me money to view pornography and do to them what was shown in the pornography. From ages five through thirteen, I was used as a “sexual plaything” by a group of older boys. I became addicted to heroin by the time I was a teenager.

Despite a severe heroin addiction and an ongoing series of abusive relationships, by age twenty-five I had managed to complete some college, move to San Francisco, and gain employment as a cardiopulmonary technician. After an abusive boyfriend repeatedly violated a domestic violence restraining order I had out on him, I fled my apartment. With nowhere else to go, I wandered the streets of San Francisco. I had little remaining sense of self-worth as a result of the years of abuse and untreated trauma. Frantic to feed my drug habit and numb my immense emotional pain, I was easy prey for further exploitation. Desperate and feeling as though I had no other options in life remaining, I agreed when a man approached me and offered to pay me for sex. From that point forward, I was prostituting myself up to fifteen times a night. I would sleep wherever I could—alleys, doorways, parks, on public transportation, or at the homes of some of my “tricks.”⁵

My turning point began after I was brutally attacked by three men. I got in a car with two “johns” not knowing that a third man was hiding in the car. They drove me to a cemetery where they beat me and tried to gang-rape me. I fought back with every bit of strength I had. After they left me for dead, I went to a

3. DONNA M. HUGHES ET AL., *THE FACTBOOK ON GLOBAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION* (1999), available at http://www.catwinternational.org/factbook/usa2_prost.php.

4. Melissa Farley et al., *Prostitution, Violence Against Women, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, 8 *FEMINISM & PSYCHOL.* 405 (1998), available at <http://www.prostitutionresearch.com/fempysl.html>.

5. Customers of prostituted individuals are commonly referred to as “tricks” or “johns.”

local police station to report the incident and quickly broke down, screaming and crying hysterically. The police sent me to a psychiatric ward where I was locked up and sedated for eight days. A few months later, I went to see a doctor who wrote me a prescription for methadone to help me quit my heroin addiction. I later discovered that the methadone prescription was illegal. I could not go to a methadone clinic for help without a legal prescription. I ended up back on the streets, desperate and feeling as though I only had four choices left in life: kill myself, kill somebody else, get killed, or die from getting HIV.

After this realization, I decided I needed to do something—anything—to save my life. I went to a police station at three o'clock in the morning to turn myself in on a petty theft warrant. The police turned me away, but I demanded that they arrest me. When I appeared in court a few days later, I had to beg the judge to keep me in jail because she wanted to release me to a work program on the street. I was given a two-month sentence. After a twenty-five-year heroin addiction, I gave up the drug cold turkey while incarcerated.

In jail, I met an outreach worker who was also a survivor of prostitution. She suggested that I try street outreach work after I was released from jail. I knew that was what I wanted to do. I became employed in an HIV outreach and education position that was funded through the Center for Disease Control. I also enrolled in San Francisco State University and graduated in 1992 magna cum laude with a degree in Health Education. I became coordinator for the San Francisco Department of Public Health's HIV testing program for prostituted women, and later I became the project director for Women, Violence, and Methadone, a research project funded through the National Institute for Drug Abuse.

I eventually quit my secure job to begin what has become my life's work. There were no services available to help women and girls like me get off the streets. I wanted to change that. I wanted to help women and girls obtain the services they need to feel safe, to recover, and to heal. I wanted to show women and girls like myself how to lead a self-determined, independent life, free from violence, abuse, and exploitation.

In 1995, I created SAGE to change the lives of the individual victims and to challenge the societal attitudes that foster ignorance and acceptance of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking of women and girls while condemning the victims as criminals or "toss-aways."⁶ At the heart of SAGE is our survivor-centered perspective. Woven through our survivor-focused services are the personal experiences of our extraordinarily dedicated staff members, many of whom have a history of violence and exploitation. Because our programs are designed and delivered by survivors, we effectively provide support and engender trust without re-traumatizing even the most fragile of

6. SAGE, <http://www.sagesf.org> (last visited Apr. 3, 2006).

clients. Each week we serve and seek to heal over 350 women and girls. Whether our clients want to exit the sex industry or not, SAGE services reach out to meet them where they are, offering education, wellness, empowerment, safety, and support.

Women and girls like myself, if left untreated, are continuously cycled through medical, mental, and social services, as well as the criminal justice system. This is an approach that results in extremely high rates of recidivism, perpetuating sexual exploitation and violence with enormous costs to society and its institutions.⁷ In San Francisco alone, the cost for the arrest and handling of prostitution cases exceeds \$4,125,000 each year.⁸ SAGE is a dynamic departure from the previous practice of revolving-door arrests that offer little or no services. San Francisco Sheriff Michael Hennessey has recognized the importance of SAGE to the San Francisco community:

[SAGE's] approach reduces crime, makes for a safer community, and is good for the women and girls themselves. Without SAGE, hundreds of women and girls would still be on the streets, in and out of our jails, separated from their families and children, suffering from sexual and physical abuse, and worse. Since SAGE began, we have seen many prostitutes permanently leave the criminal justice system and build new lives free from crime and victimization. We know SAGE saves the City millions of dollars every year, but more importantly, they're saving lives.⁹

At SAGE, we shed light on a subject that thrives in darkness, secrecy, silence, and shame. One prostitution survivor told us:

I wonder why I keep going to therapists and telling them I can't sleep, and I have nightmares. They pass right over the fact that I was a prostitute and I was beaten with 2x4 boards. I had my fingers and toes broken by a pimp, and I was raped more than thirty times. Why do they ignore that?¹⁰

Everyday, young women and girls are recruited from our schools, streets, and shopping malls by violent or smooth-talking pimps and trafficked throughout the United States and around the world.¹¹ Today, because trafficking in women and girls is as profitable as trafficking in drugs,¹² all you

7. An estimated eighty percent of individuals arrested for prostitution are repeatedly re-arrested. Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Awards Recipients, First Offenders Prostitution Program, <http://www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu/Ash/firstoffprost.htm> (last visited Apr. 3, 2006).

8. *Id.*

9. SAGE, Business Plan Submitted to Catholic Healthcare West 13 (July 25, 2000) (on file with author).

10. Interview with prostitution survivor, SAGE, in San Francisco, Cal. (n.d.).

11. RICHARD J. ESTES & NEIL ALAN WEINER, THE COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES, CANADA, AND MEXICO 58-60 (2001), available at <http://files.findlaw.com/news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/sextrade/upennsec90701.pdf>.

12. Salvation Army, Human Trafficking: Modern-Day Slavery in America, <http://www.salvationarmy-usaeast.org/Trafficking.pdf> (last visited Apr. 3, 2006).

have to be is a girl or young woman to be targeted. From my experience and work in this field, I have found that most of the young girls recruited or coerced into prostitution are done so by abusive pimps who initially act as boyfriends or lovers. The most common guises are the “smooth-talking player” and the “guerilla pimp.”

Smooth-talking players target runaways, young women, girls exhibiting acting-out behavior associated with trauma, and girls that come from abusive backgrounds who have low self-esteem and confidence. Smooth-talking players begin by befriending the girls and young women, and then calculate a romantic connection.¹³ The strategy of befriending and love is designed to fit the vulnerabilities of its potential victims, conning them into dependency, fear, and submission before “turning them out” into the sex trade.¹⁴ SAGE clients report that smooth-talking players’ recruitment process includes attention and affection, pet names, flashy new clothes, and jewelry. The “affection” is followed by manipulative lines such as: “baby, if you really loved me . . . ;” “you only need to do it for a little while, until I get on my feet;” “for us;” or “until you get enough money for me to buy some stash, then I’ll take care of us.” Shortly after the first “date,”¹⁵ the verbal, physical, and sexual abuse begins. The pimp demands that he receive all the money. He puts a quota on her, increases it over time, and breaks her by calling her a “whore, nothing but a whore.” He tells her that no one else would have her. He begins to beat her into submission, raping her, increasing her financial quota, and only giving her “affection” after she has submitted to his demands. Many young women with whom SAGE works report being sold for \$500 to \$1,000 a night. When asked how much they can access if they wanted to leave, the answer is never more than \$20. They are watched closely for any indication of concealing money. If a pimp suspects a girl is hiding money, she is vaginally and anally searched, beaten, burned, raped, and publicly humiliated. The tactics of power and control used by pimps to recruit and keep women and girls trapped in prostitution closely parallel those used by batterers to ensure the compliance of their wives or intimate partners.¹⁶

Described in recent reports by SAGE clients, guerilla pimping refers to an emerging means of “recruitment.” These pimps and traffickers systematically and methodically break down their “prey,” socially isolating them away from family and friends. Their victims become embedded in a social system typified by living in transient hotels close to the “whore strolls,” traveling from city to

13. Norma Hotaling & Leslie Levitas-Martin, *Increased Demand Resulting in the Flourishing Recruitment and Trafficking of Women and Girls: Related Child Sexual Abuse and Violence Against Women*, 13 HASTINGS WOMEN’S L.J. 117, 120 (2002).

14. Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery: Understanding the International Dimensions of Women’s Oppression*, 3 HUM. RTS. Q. 44 (1981).

15. The time a prostituted individual is with a customer is called a “date.”

16. Evelina Giobbe, *An Analysis of Individual, Institutional, and Cultural Pimping*, 1 MICH. J. GENDER & L. 33, 45-46 (1993).

city, and socializing with other transient persons also involved in prostitution. These pimps use severe and immediate violence to force their victims to participate in the sex industry. A common theme reported by SAGE clients about guerilla pimping is that a woman or girl is physically picked up, thrown into a trunk, and transported to cities throughout the United States. SAGE has rescued individuals who did not know what city they were in or even what cities they had been trafficked through while forced to work in the sex trade, which includes prostitution, strip clubs, escort services, and websites such as Craigslist¹⁷ and sites created by the pimps themselves. They were sold on the back pages of alternative newspapers and sex trade magazines. They had been transported in trunks of cars and isolated in out-of-the-way motels and single-room occupancy hotels throughout the country while being brutalized, raped, tortured, and repeatedly sold to those who demand them. Harsher methods reported by SAGE clients involve beating, raping, sodomizing, drugging, and starving a woman or girl before “turning her out” on the streets or other sex industry arenas.

Pimps will often create a sense of ownership by giving their victims new identities and supplying fake identification, such as identification cards, driver’s licenses, social security cards, and birth certificates. With a young woman or girl’s former identity gone, she then belongs to the pimp.

Silbert and Pines conducted a study of two hundred individuals exploited through prostitution and documented an emotional condition they called psychological paralysis.¹⁸ The subjects experienced psychological paralysis as a result of their excessive and senseless victimization. Silbert and Pines contend that psychological paralysis causes victims to feel unable to escape prostitution, even when offered other opportunities.¹⁹ As they lose any sense of control over their lives, they come to accept feeling trapped and victimized.²⁰ This helps to explain why eighty-eight percent of the prostituted individuals in a 1994 study I conducted with Melissa Farley reported that they wanted to get out of prostitution but were unable to do so even when offered the choice.²¹ These women and girls lose precious days, months, and years of their lives, missing out on the normal development and acquisition of life skills afforded to young women who are going to school, building non-abusive social support systems,

17. Craigslist is a website that provides space for users to post online classified ads, which are geographically organized by city and subdivided into categories. The personals sections, especially the casual encounters category, of nearly every major city include numerous offers for sex. Craigslist, <http://www.craigslist.com/cas/> (last visited Apr. 3, 2006).

18. Mimi H. Silbert & Ayala M. Pines, *Victimization of Street Prostitutes*, 7 VICTIMOLOGY: INT’L J. 122, 129-32 (1982).

19. *Id.* at 129-30.

20. *Id.* at 129-32.

21. Norma Hotaling et al., *Been There Done That: SAGE, a Peer Leadership Model Among Prostitution Survivors*, 2 J. TRAUMA PRAC. 255, 261 (2003).

working after-school jobs, opening checking accounts, renting apartments, and even buying their own clothes.

With the average age of entry into prostitution being thirteen, the issue is not only one of violence, but also of sexual abuse and rape of children.²² Traditionally, our social response to child sexual abuse through prostitution has been either complete denial or, if the sexual abuse is acknowledged, blame and criminalization of the child. Our legal system has a long history of shaming children and adolescents who are the targets of adult sexual violence. For most of our social and legal history, being sexually assaulted or violated meant that the victim, whether child or adult, acquired the status of “whore”—someone who is, supposedly, without credibility, rights, or respect.

As a society, we have begun to shift our views of children, adult women, and sexual violence. Policy makers, law enforcement officials, and the general public are beginning to come to the understanding that rape is truly a crime—not solely in the legal sense—against the human rights of the victim and against all human beings who want to live in a safe and healthy society.

Our shifting beliefs have been mirrored in practice: It is a crime for an adult to have sex with a child; it is a crime to have sex without consent. The perpetrators of these crimes can legally be arrested, prosecuted, and incarcerated. The victims of these crimes are legally entitled to justice, compensation, and protection. We have begun to challenge the idea that a person’s appearance, dress, and social status define whether or not she or he can truly be recognized as a victim, and also the idea that some people are “deserving” victims. Legislators, policymakers, and the general public are beginning to experience an increased awareness of the brutality and horrors faced by women and children as a result of commercial sexual exploitation. Through the media and targeted information dissemination, people have come to understand the connection between trafficking, prostitution, commercial sexual exploitation of children, sexual slavery, and the demand for purchased sex. This understanding is being used to create new and more effective policies and legislation.

In recent years, California has been the leader in the creation and implementation of model policies and legislation. After twelve years of listening to demands that the prostitution of children be defined as child rape and sexual abuse, the California legislature passed into law Assembly Bill 3042—Child Protection, Enhancement Penalties for Children Exploited Through Prostitution—which became effective on January 1, 2005.²³ This legislation enhances sentencing for adults convicted of engaging in sexual acts with minors, which represents a systemic shift in how we approach the sexual

22. Silbert & Pines, *supra* note 18, at 125-32.

23. Act of Sept. 24, 2004, ch. 769, § 1, 2004 Cal. Legis. Serv. 769 (West) (codified at CAL. PENAL CODE § 675 (West 2006)).

exploitation of children and has important practical implications.²⁴ Now, when a police report lists that a child has been prostituted, victim advocates can immediately access a broad range of state-funded support for that child from the Victims of Crime Compensation Fund.²⁵ California also recently passed into law the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which represents comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation designed to protect victims, prosecute traffickers, and prevent human trafficking in California.²⁶

Despite these advances, when it comes to prostitution throughout the rest of the country, it is as if there has been no change in either ideology or practice. As long as someone is labeled a “prostitute”—whether child or adult—we still seem to be saying, through action or inaction, that it is permissible to dehumanize, mistreat, and endanger that person.

As a community, we must reject the myth that if a girl is on the street wearing lipstick and a miniskirt, she is advertising her consent to sexual abuse, and that by so consenting she herself has committed a crime. When a child sexual abuser says, “but she said she was eighteen,” we must not accept this as a defense. This message must be accompanied by both a strong public education campaign and rehabilitation options; otherwise, these men will simply seek new victims or take their abusive behaviors home.

As a community, we must create systemic change in order to successfully address commercial sexual exploitation and the demand for it. We must clearly define the issue and educate the public to better recognize child sexual abuse, both in and out of prostitution. We must not presume that anyone labeled a “prostitute” is responsible for a system in which we allow people to buy human bodies. We need to direct sustained attention to all the social causes of prostitution, including but not limited to: gaping problems in our social response to child abuse within families and communities; extreme poverty; outdated legal doctrines and practices; gender inequality; racial stratification; and the horrifying societal tolerance for the notion that prostituted individuals are without value or legal and moral rights. As society begins to understand the realities of commercial sexual exploitation, it will no longer be socially permissible to purchase a human being for sexual servitude.

Legislative, investigative, and prosecutorial practices need to be reformed. We must enforce existing child sexual abuse and statutory rape laws,²⁷ as well

24. *Id.*

25. For more information, see Victim Compensation and Government Claims Board, <http://www.boc.ca.gov/Victims.htm#Crimes> (last visited Apr. 3, 2006).

26. California Trafficking Victims Protection Act, ch. 240, 2005 Cal. Legis. Serv. 240 (West) (codified at CAL. CIV. CODE § 52.5 (West 2006); CAL. EVID. CODE § 1038 (West 2006); CAL. GOV'T CODE § 13956 (West 2006); CAL. PENAL CODE §§ 186.2, 273.7, 1202.4, 14023, 236.1-2, 13990 (West 2006)).

27. See, e.g., Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, Pub. L. No. 106-386, 114 Stat. 1464 (2000); Protection of Children from Sexual Predators Act of 1998, Pub. L. No. 105-314, 112 Stat. 2974 (1998).

as re-define “child prostitution” within its correct legislative framework: child safety. Adults who sexually abuse children through prostitution must be actively prosecuted and, upon conviction, made to face the consequences prescribed by existing child protection laws, including registration as sex offenders. Resources for victims need to be directed toward rehabilitation efforts outside of the criminal justice system. Once services and resources are available, access should not be contingent upon testifying against an abuser, pimp, or trafficker. Withholding services from these individuals only continues the abuse by denying them a place to escape or heal.

We must create a real escape for commercially sexually exploited individuals through appropriate social services and recovery centers. We need to create “safe houses” for commercially sexually exploited children. In San Francisco, we recently opened the SAGE House and Edgewood Academy,²⁸ which is currently home to six girls, ages twelve to seventeen. Treatment emphasizes safety, mental health counseling to ameliorate the effects of trauma, education, substance abuse counseling, and social skills programming to help commercially sexually exploited girls create lives off the streets and beyond the control of traffickers, pimps, johns, and other perpetrators. Within the six-bed family-like environment, residents partner with staff who mentor and guide their transition from victims to survivors, from a world of isolation, violence, and fear to lives of hope and opportunity.

Survivor-run programs that address the social, political, and economic contexts of clients’ lives are the most effective.²⁹ Fortunately, there already exists a network of survivor-centered service providers. The Survivor Services Education and Empowerment Network (SSEEN) is a newly founded network of experts who have each worked for decades designing and implementing highly effective and innovative trauma, mental health, and substance abuse recovery services for commercially sexually exploited individuals. The members of SSEEN include SAGE in San Francisco; Breaking Free in St. Paul, Minnesota; Catholic Charities DIGNITY Programs in Phoenix, Arizona; and VERONICA’S Voice in Kansas City, Kansas.³⁰ This unprecedented collaboration of survivor-operated service providers was formed in order to establish a strong foundation for a national movement of survivors who can combat commercial sexual exploitation by drawing on their own experiences to

28. A licensed foster care facility group home. For more information on licensing and certification, see State of California Department of Social Services Community Care Licensing Division, <http://cclid.ca.gov/> (last visited Apr. 3, 2006).

29. Hotaling et al., *supra* note 21, at 256, 261.

30. Contact information for SSEEN organizations: Norma Hotaling, Executive Director of SAGE, 1385 Mission St., Suite 300, San Francisco, CA 94103, <http://www.sagesf.org>. Vednita Carter, Executive Director of Breaking Free, 770 University Ave. West, St. Paul, MN 55105, <http://www.breakingfree.net>. Kathleen Mitchell, Services Coordinator of Catholic Charities DIGNITY Programs, 1825 W. Northern, #3029, Phoenix, AZ 85021; <http://www.catholicsocialserviceaz.org/dignity.aspx>. Kristy Childs, Executive Director of VERONICA’S Voice, PO Box 172472, Kansas City, KS 66117-1472, <http://www.veronicasvoice.org>.

inform their work. SSEEN will continue to build on the work of these individual organizations by contributing to the design and implementation of policies and procedures for effective treatment. SSEEN will also advocate for legislation that compassionately addresses the needs of victims of commercial sexual exploitation and targets the real perpetrators: pimps, traffickers, and the demand side of the sex industry.

The crime we need to confront and immediately redress is the betrayal and scape-goating of these most vulnerable members of our society. We need to ask ourselves how we can begin the process of socializing men and boys to prevent them from believing that it is acceptable to purchase women and girls. It is my job, duty, and purpose in life to prevent sexual slavery and end the demand for prostitution, while also working to provide women and girls like myself and so many of the staff at SAGE with hope, freedom, and the opportunity to lead safe, healthy, and fulfilling lives. All people deserve dignity, respect, and freedom from exploitation.