

THE 20 REASONS

Girls Enter and Stay In the Sex Industry

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Untold numbers of young women,ⁱ from communities across Canada, are involved in the sex industry. This includes escorting (sugar dating is a form of escorting), street walking, exotic massage, exotic dancing, pornography and webcam modeling. Every one of these activities strips away “human dignity” and has a “disproportionate impact on women and children”.ⁱⁱ Despite the dangers, and the extreme emotional and physical toll, many young women will remain in the industry for a very long time. It can be truly devastating for family and friends to watch this happen, and it can also be difficult to understand why the girls don’t come home. In the end, most will make it out alive, but none will remain unharmed. The damage inflicted is usually severe and debilitating. This document is meant to give perspective to those seeking to help end the exploitation or aid in the recovery of a daughter, a friend, or a client.


Who is a risk? Sex-positiveⁱⁱⁱ ideology and the pervasiveness of hardcore pornography has dramatically the way today’s youth think about their sexuality. As a result, many young people have adopted a casual view of commercial sex and more kids from functional homes are participating in sex industry activities than ever before. It’s also important to note that the risk of exploitation increases when young people are struggling. Understanding the roots of vulnerability is invaluable, whether for safeguarding young people from exploitation or helping them escape it. Ethnicity, socioeconomic status and neighborhood demographics do have some bearing, but the following 10 risk indicators may be more helpful to individually consider and are applicable to youth from every community:

1. Female adolescent
2. Absent or inattentive father
3. Neglect or parental dysfunction
4. Substance abuse/addictions of a parent or caregiver
5. Abuse: emotional, physical or sexual.
6. Depression or other mental health issues
7. Social difficulties/lack of stable peer relationships
8. Developmental challenges
9. Use of drugs/alcohol by the young person
10. Estrangement from family, including homelessness and foster care











Young men are also commercially sexually exploited, but far less frequently, and their experiences are not the same. Physical differences may make males less vulnerable to the violence that so often occurs, but a male mindset may serve as a greater defense. Studies suggest that the male hormone, testosterone causes “behavior intended to dominate; to enhance one’s status over other people”^{iv}. That corresponds with the reality that the males in the sex industry are much more likely to be numbered among the exploiters, rather than victims.

Many young women entering the sex industry are lured in and exploited by pimps who call it “the game” or “the life”. Others may enter without third party control, but once a young woman is exposed to the sex industry, she faces an exponentially greater risk of becoming a human trafficking victim. While pimps often pose as “boyfriends” or “agents”, most are, in fact, human traffickers.









Traffickers exploit their victims primarily for the profits, and sometimes, to also gain notoriety amongst their peers. In contrast, the reasons girls enter and stay in the sex industry are numerous and more complex. Below is a list of 20 common reasons why girls go into the sex industry and/or don't come home^v. All 20 will not likely apply to any one person, and in the early stages on involvement, perhaps, only three or four points (or reasons) on the list will be a match. Every point on the list is a common tactic used by pimps to lure and/or trap their prey, and each is highlighted with a  (male icon).

More than half of the list also applies to girls who may not be human trafficking victims, but are ensnared, nonetheless. Entering the sex industry may be the result of a last-resort decision in a desperate situation, or a response to its enticement by a young woman during a time of vulnerability. Even for girls without a pimp, exiting can be a great challenge. A  (female icon) is used to indicate which points are also applicable to those who are involved as an "independent".

The 20 Reasons List:

-   1. **Fast Money**: Money can be made very quickly in the sex industry. This can be a lure for young women with pressing financial needs or others who desire a fast track to wealth. Once a girl is entrenched in that lifestyle, low paying jobs may not seem worthwhile. Bringing in large profits can still provide a sense of accomplishment, even when a pimp takes most or all the money.
-   2. **Glamour**: For someone entering the sex industry, fancy clothes, expensive gifts and fast cars create a convincing illusion of a glamorous lifestyle. This can seem to be appealing those from low income homes or as a solution to those already accustomed to a privileged lifestyle.
-   3. **Intrigue**: The sex industry is often fast paced and unpredictable. It may seem exciting, especially to risk takers. A young person in this position is likely to experience frequent adrenalin rushes that can feel good and even become addictive. As drama and danger become part of their normal experience, the opposite may become too boring and uncomfortable.
-   4. **Validation**: Girls who are starved for validation, especially from fathers, may feel an emotional need is being met when receiving attention from clients or approval from a pimp. Although the men of the sex industry are invariably self-serving, those who they abuse may actually feel appreciated. For some, this is a primary reason to remain in the sex industry.
-  5. **Counterfeit Love**: The most common approach utilized by Canadian traffickers involves the illusion of love. In these cases, attention, affection and gifts are all used as rewards and punishments. Those who become trapped in such relationships often view their trafficker as a boyfriend, long before they are able to admit he is their pimp.
-  6. **False Promises**: Traffickers commonly motivate girls with promises that may never be fulfilled. It could be a promise to grant independence to a trafficking victim when a debt (see #16) is paid, or it could be a promise of marriage and raising a family together. Whatever the promise, younger girls and those with developmental challenges are especially vulnerable to such tactics.

7.  Brainwashing: A trafficker will often use systematic manipulation and verbal abuse to cause his victim attach to him, while rejecting family, and distrusting police and other potential sources of support. Typically, a pimp will repeatedly tell his girls they are inadequate of without him. Depending on the pimp's abilities and the victim's vulnerabilities, a dramatic change in mindset can occur within matter of weeks or months.
8.  Isolation: A trafficker usually restricts contact between his victim and their family members, friends or others who might advocate for them. He may also move her from place to place to keep her detached and to prevent her from making new connections with others. This enforced isolation makes it easier for the trafficker to control his victim.
9.   Drugs and Alcohol: Use of drugs/alcohol was previously mentioned a risk factor because it puts young people in risky situations, diminishes inhibitions and compromises their ability to protect themselves. Once in the sex industry, self-medication often becomes a means of coping. A trafficker may use drugs to increase a girl's capacity for abuse (to be less resistant to client's demands and/or to work longer hours) or to strengthen his control over her through dependency. As addictions form, there evolves an added need to make "fast money".
10.  Blame: Traffickers constantly shift blame onto their victims. As a result, girls often blame themselves for what they have been involved in, regardless of the level of their level of consent.
11.   Shame: Young women may feel great shame and guilt about their involvement in the sex industry and are likely to believe that they are of less value than others. Traffickers leverage these emotions to strip away all confidence and self-respect from their victims.
12.   Violence/Torture: Violence occurs frequently in the sex industry. It may involve physically overpowering a victim or causing pain and fear through some other form of abuse. When perpetrated by a client, the occurrence, though temporary, will likely have a long-lasting impact. Traffickers often use violence to gain submission and strengthen control over their victims. Violence can also cause debilitating trauma that creates a barrier to exiting the sex industry.
13.   Emotional Abuse: While emotional abuse might seem less violent than physical abuse, it can have an even deeper impact by eroding and ultimately breaking down the will of a victim. While this is more of a factor for trafficked girls, emotional abuse is inherent in the sex industry and it may also stifle the confidence and self-determination of those without pimps. In its most extreme forms, emotional abuse can also cause debilitating trauma that creates a barrier to exiting.
14.  Threats: Traffickers threaten their victims in various ways and range from physical violence to sharing pornographic images of a victim. When the threats to directly harm the victim become ineffective, a trafficker may go further, even threatening to harm or exploit her family members.
15.  Trauma Bonds: Victims often develop a sense of dependency on, and a deep loyalty to, their abusers. This phenomenon is enhanced when pimps systematically alternate extreme abuse with affection, praise, food or other rewards. Pimps sometimes refer to this as "dogging" a victim. Psychologists identify the resulting condition as "trauma bonds" or "Stockholm Syndrome".

-  16. Debt Bondage: A trafficker may demand repayment of supposed debts relating to living expenses, drugs/alcohol, clothing/gifts or any number of things. A pimp may also cause or prevent payment on actual debts that a victim owes to creditors. He may rack up her credit cards, have her sign for the loan on his luxury car or prevent her from paying off a student debt. Additionally, “leaving fees” are often levied for a victim who wants to sever ties with her trafficker.
-  17. Controlled Movements: In the Canadian context, it’s uncommon for a human trafficking victim to be kept in a locked room or escorted everywhere. It is common, however, for a trafficker to monitor the movements of his victim through the use electronic devices, or having another victim report her activities. Victims may feel bound as they come to believe “he knows everything I do”.
-   18. Normalization: Over time, the subculture of the sex industry will likely seem quite normal to those who are involved in it. The acceptance of disturbing and abnormal activities doesn’t simply mean her opinion has changed but that in her core values have shifted. When a daughter comes home, parents often remark that she’s no longer the same person. Even girls and women in the sex industry who aren’t necessarily trafficked are likely to be subjected to dehumanizing experiences and coercive persuasion that can cause dramatic changes in the way they think and behave. For those who have become accustomed to the sex industry, it may seem easier to stay in it rather than face the painful processes of readjusting to the “square world”.
-   19. Fear of Rejection: After becoming involved in the sex industry, many young women feel they are not “like other girls”, and that when people look at them, “they will know” what kind of person they are. As a result, they believe that their reputation will always precede them and that rejection by family, friends and/or employers will be a major obstacle to rebuilding their lives.
-   20. Lack of Options: Young women wishing to leave the sex industry often believe that they are incapable or undeserving of other options. They may not feel they can return to the home environments they left, it’s unlikely they have trusted friends who they can turn to for help, and they may be unaware of community resources and that are equipped to assist them in their transition out of the sex industry.

Girls who enter the sex industry sometimes bear a measure of culpability in their own demise. But before we disown them, it’s important to look at the full picture and examine the possible reasons for their behaviour. When we understand why a young woman entered the sex industry, and what keeps her in it, we can formulate a more helpful response. With the appropriate support, the possibility of exiting the industry and recovering from its harms becomes much more realistic. While the past cannot be undone, there is always hope for future achievements. There is great joy in seeing a once exploited person experience healing and going on to embrace life as a survivor.

ⁱ Adolescent girls are most at risk for entry into the sex industry. With that in mind, we use the terms “girls” and “young women” throughout this document. This information is also very applicable to adult women but may be less pertinent to preadolescent children.

ⁱⁱ Taken from the preamble to Canada’s prostitution legislation, Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ “[Sex positivity creates] a conduit for more open discussion, and a trend that’s given a platform to sex educators, sex workers and sex-positive influencers. Younger generations, too, are more familiar with sex-positive concepts thanks to this expanding dialogue.” Jessica Klein, BBC Worklife, “What Does Sex Positivity Mean?” BBC.com August 18, 2021.

^{iv} Testosterone dominance in men, Allan Mazur & Alan Booth, Behavioural and Brain Sciences, Vol 21, Issue 3, June 1998, pp. 353-363.

^v These findings are not the result of an academic study but are derived from interviews with more than 60 active and formerly trafficked and independent prostitutes and exotic dancers in Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia, and in consultation with outreach or aftercare agencies including Sextrade 101 (Toronto), Servants Anonymous (now ‘Reset’, Calgary), Rising Angels (Brampton), and Parents Hope (a program of Lifeworthy-SIM).