

Sticks and Stones: The Effects of Relational Identity on CSEC

Yael Rosenstock

CUNY Graduate Center

### Abstract

In “Sticks and Stones: The Effects of Relational Identity on CSEC,” Yael Rosenstock brings to light the battle female commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC) and youth face in trying to leave “the life” (sex work), particularly when those around them and in the rest of society impose judgments about their character and future prospects. Through an extensive literature review, she reveals a gap in the research on CSEC experience with regard to questions of social identity and self-perception.

Rosenstock takes the results of studies used for generalizing to the larger population and adopts them for CSEC in an attempt to bridge the gap. Drawing from works by Eisenberger, N. I., Lieberman, M. D., & Williams, Rosenstock demonstrates how test subjects are affected by rejection, inclusion, and perceived negative comments. Through K. R. Berenson & S. M. Andersen, she discusses the tangible effects childhood abuse has on adult interpersonal relationships while Cotton, Farley & Baron and Cunningham & Cromer help her analyze the effects of rape myth, child sexual abuse myth, and prostitution myth.

Throughout the weaving together of her multiple arguments, Rosenstock also humanizes the otherwise marginalized and stigmatized population of CSEC, questioning myths surrounding their circumstances. She argues that the cues to sexual exploitability outlined by Goetz, Easton, Lewis, & Buss encompass virtually all women as exploitable, illuminating the reality that most of us are vulnerable, and therefore, relatable to CSEC. Rosenstock’s ultimate goal is for the general public to see these young women as fellow human beings, and, in so doing, embrace CSEC’s potential to change and succeed outside of the sex world. Thereby, the girls can have a greater opportunity to believe in themselves.

*Keywords:* CSEC, commercially sexually exploited youth, self-esteem, relational identity

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I do not become who I think I can, I do not become who you think I can, I become who I *think* you think I can. (author unknown)

Rachel Lloyd, the founder of the non-profit Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS), an organization that serves 12-24 year old girls and women who have been domestically trafficked, and also a survivor herself, highlights the issue of perceptions of commercially sexually exploited children/youth (CSEC) in her memoir, *Girls Like Us: Fighting for a World Where Girls are Not for Sale*:

When I tell people the agency that I run serves over three hundred girls a year in the New York City metro area alone who've been trafficked for sexual purposes, they're invariably stunned. When I tell them that the girls and young women we serve are predominantly U.S. citizens, their shock and sympathy turn to utter incomprehension. "How?" "What do you mean?" "From here?" To talk about trafficking conjures images of Thai girls in shackles, Russian girls held at gunpoint by the mob, illegal border crossings, fake passports, and captivity. It seems ludicrous and unthinkable that it's happening in America to American children.

It's often not until you explain that this phenomenon is what is commonly called "teen prostitution" that recognition dawns. "Oh, that... but that's different. Teen prostitutes choose to be doing that; aren't they normally on drugs or something?" In under three minutes, they've gone from sympathetic to confusion to blame. (2011, p.11)

Lloyd asserts that because an image exists of overt violence, kidnapping across country lines, and other forms of force when one thinks of human trafficking, the reality of young girls as victims of their immediate society is not taken seriously. While all women working in sex work are subject to ridicule and judgement, there is an added layer of stigma associated with domestic trafficking in the United States. This additional form of stigma is related to the notion of “choice,” which I will address and challenge later in this paper. It is important to note that with the issues concerning human trafficking currently in the ‘cause limelight,’ culture and attitudes are starting to shift. However, societally embedded beliefs, such as the notion of prostitution as a career choice and not as a product of one’s environment, will be difficult to change. Even those directly affected require constant reminders, “commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking is something that happened TO ME - it is not who I am” (White & Lloyd, 2014, p.30). This affirmation can be found in the *The Survivor’s Guide to Leaving*, a publication by GEMS to support girls and women considering leaving “the life” (sex work), and clearly illuminates the constant battle the girls face within themselves when trying to start over.

This literature review reveals a gap in the research on CSEC experience with regard to questions of social identity and self-perception. CSEC are persons under 18 years old who trade sex for money, food, drugs, somewhere to stay the night, or the expectation of those things, etc., often referred to as “survival sex” (Lloyd & White, 2014, p.23). There is very little empirically based data that discusses the process through which domestic trafficking occurs in the United States and almost no empirical research linking the role poor self-perception plays in preventing girls from successfully leaving “the life” (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014, p. 482). More specifically, there is no information about the influence of the perceptions of others on this population and the role it plays in their recovery.

I posit that one of the many challenges to exiting sex work is the low self-esteem and self-worth girls have, particularly because of the influence the perceptions of others has on their identity formation, both as they enter and as they try to leave “the life”. I will use research on self-esteem and relational identities from psychology, mental health, and social neuroscience journals to justify my arguments as they relate to the general population while calling for further research focused on CSEC. I will also address the lack of subjective first person CSEC accounts found in research but intend for Lloyd’s memoir, *Girls Like Us*, *The Survivor’s Guide to Leaving*, and poems from A Voice in Action Anthology, *Through our Eyes the gates will open*, a collection of poems written by formerly incarcerated young women, to provide a weaving narrative that will strive to fill some of the gap.

In order to explore how the CSEC’s self is influenced by the opinions and attitudes of others, it is important to be familiar with the factors that influence their circumstances. Throughout this literature review we will look at who is at risk, how CSEC are viewed, and rape myth, child abuse myth, and trafficking myth before we cover in more depth, self-esteem, self-worth and the perceptions of others; the notion of choice, social rejection, why they don’t leave and understanding relapse.

### *The Fuzzy Facts*

No one is sure how many children and youth are commercially sexually exploited on an annual basis worldwide or in the United States. Nationwide estimates range from 100,000 to 300,000 and international estimates are as high as 2 million (Walker, n.d.; Birge, Chon, Dukes, & Littrell, 2013; Smolenski & Selinske, n.d.). Regardless of what the true numbers are, the commercial sexual exploitation of children is a problem that plagues communities all over the

world. There are many routes and pathways that can lead a child into being exploited and once the process begins, it is difficult for youth to interrupt it in order to leave “the life.”

### *Who is at Risk?*

I am beautiful, strong, unique and valuable. I have different talents and gifts inside of me, even if I don't see them yet.”<sup>1</sup> (White & Llyod, 2014, p.30)

Risk factors for entering the sex world and/or becoming CSEC have been extensively researched. Studies have identified “child abuse and foster care involvement as one of the highest risk factors in child sexual exploitation” (NYC Administration for Children’s Services, 2013). A study in 2007 that examined CSEC in New York City interviewed a sample of 2,200 youth and found that 85% had prior child welfare involvement (Gragg, Petta, Bernstein, Eisen, & Quinn, 2007). Commercial sexual exploitation does not require that money change hands; it includes any form of transactional sex, such as sex for housing or food. Generally, youths that are most at risk are those who are homeless and street-involved, in the foster care system, and those living in poverty. Sexual abuse is also a high predictor of future sexual exploitation (Reid & Piquero, 2013). Another largely vulnerable population are “throwaway youth,” which are young people that have been kicked out of their homes or have not been invited back after an absence (Colby, 2011). Youth who identify as LGBTQ and are kicked out of their homes due to their sexuality orientation or gender-identity fall under this category and make up a large portion of “throwaway youth.”

There is an inexhaustible list of risks factors but using a feminist lens to acknowledge the power differential between men and women easily illustrates how many people the vulnerable population encompasses when just considering one factor: gender (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> Affirmation from *The Survivor’s Guide to Leaving*.

Taking gender into account as a risk factor, in addition to age, socioeconomic status (SES), etc., I argue that the pool of vulnerable persons expands to well over half the human population. Goetz, Easton, Lewis, & Buss hypothesized observable cues that indicate to men those women who would be more easily exploited (2012):

1. psychological cues indicating a woman is mentally or emotionally easy to manipulate or is flirtatious or promiscuous, or revealing a risk-taking proclivity
2. incapacitation cues indicating a woman is temporarily or currently in a state in which she could be exploited
3. physical cues indicating a lack of formidability to resist sexual exploitative tactics

Disappointedly, these findings are rather broad in scope. Arguably, every girl and woman, with few exceptions (in addition to young male children, intersex youth, gay men, and transsexual persons), will at some point in her life fall under one of the three broad classes of cues to sexual exploitability.

By examining each category individually, we see that girls and young women fit the above descriptions on multiple levels. Psychological cues such as “low self-esteem and low assertiveness are associated with having experienced sexual coercion” (Goetz, et al., 2012, p.418). Assertiveness is more variable but low-self-esteem often evolves as young girls become adolescents and therefore makes them easy prey to exploitation during that point of their development (Clay & Dittmar, 2005). Additionally, everyday stressors could leave this population even more vulnerable to low-self-esteem, manipulation, and substance abuse, or the next cue, incapacitation. Troubled youth are likely to engage in self-medicating and destructive behavior such as binge-drinking which may lead to incapacitation (Leeuwen, 2004). The last cue focuses on characteristics such as energy levels, walking speed and gait, “being short or small,”

etc., which is common for women when compared to men (Goetz, et al., 2012, p.419). This is particularly true when talking about adolescent females and adult males.

A final risk factor worth mentioning is how society inherently perceives us. Background and support system can greatly influence one's vulnerability to CSEC, however, one's vulnerability to manipulation and brainwashing is less discriminatory, just perceived differently. A middle class girl who stays with an emotionally and mentally abusive boyfriend is a girl with poor judgement but to which many women can relate. A girl who has faced abuse all of her life and falls under the enticing spell of a pimp on the other hand, doesn't warrant sympathy. She is considered the cause of her own pain. The difference between each individual is how society perceives our responses. Similarly to the unsympathetic girl, victims of physical Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) are blamed for staying with their abuser but victims of emotional or mental IPV draw a lot less criticism, possibly because it is common, normalized, and relatable. Regardless of type of abuse or experience, it is important to remember that race and SES play a significant role in determining how sympathetically or empathetically we are viewed as well.

### **How are CSEC Viewed?**

Acknowledging my victimization doesn't take away my strength and doesn't mean I will be a victim forever. <sup>2</sup> (White & Llyod, 2014, p.30)

#### *By Law*

CSEC have long been criminalized for their exploitation leaving their psychological well-being and needs unmet. Rather than arresting the "Johns" for statutory rape, girls have been arrested by police and convicted on prostitution charges. Only recently have states taken the initiative to enact laws protecting this vulnerable population from harsh and undue treatment by

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<sup>2</sup> Affirmation from *The Survivor's Guide to Leaving*.



offering services to rehabilitate them and help the girls improve their lives. Currently, twenty-two states have passed some type of Safe Harbor legislation. Safe harbor laws provide legal protection, which is either 1) legal immunity based upon the idea that the minor is induced to commit a crime or dismissed charges pending completion of a specialized services program, and/or 2) provision of services to victims of commercial sexual exploitation. The services are expected to include medical and psychological treatment, emergency and long-term housing, education assistance, job training, language assistance, and legal services. Out of the twenty-two, fifteen states provide both legal protection and services while seven provide one or the other (Polaris, n.d.). Being understood as a victim of a crime improves the chance that CSEC will be able to seek help without fearing criminal charges.

In 2008, NY passed the NYS Safe Harbour for Exploited Children Act which protects sexually exploited minors from criminal prosecution charges and guarantees services (*Human Trafficking*, n.d.). The change in law is a substantial success for those who work with CSEC. Previously, when trying to help girls make the transition from seeing themselves as criminals to seeing themselves as victims of a crime, contact with police and law told them otherwise. One article that used criminal heavy language to talk about former CSEC explains that, "...owing to the legal and cultural mandates in the United States, being labeled and treated as criminals was especially salient for the women in this sample" (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011, p.329). The experience of being seen as a criminal influences girls and young women into thinking that is who they are. Understanding the realities of choice is a big lesson in survivor-led training and comes up in more detail later in the paper.

*By Non-profits and Service Providers*

In addition to victim language, non-profit organizations often use “survivor” language. The survivor label is used to influence positive self-image and acceptance of one’s journey. There is a trend now to also use “modern-day slaves,” however, the term does come with criticism. Similarly to the issue of “victim”, but more magnified, is the possibility of contradicting how the girls see themselves. If an organization says they offer services for ‘slaves’ girls may feel that they do not deserve services. The term slave brings up images of shackles which most of the girls would have never experienced. Providers are aware that this term is used to include psychological shackles but most girls are not. We risk isolating girls who shy away from terms that do not feel like they fit or that cause them to feel that they do not belong (Pierce, 2015). We also risk influencing their self-perception through labeling that doesn’t match their already existent perceptions of self.

*By the General Population: Rape Myth, Prostitution Myth, & Child Sexual Abuse Myth*

Violent behaviors against women are associated with culturally supported attitudes that encourage men to feel entitled to sexual access to women, to feel superior to women, or to feel that they have license as sexual aggressors. (Cotton, Farley, & Baron, 2002, p.1790)

Society does not generally look favorably upon victims of domestic sex trafficking and more readily believes myths dismissing trafficking victims than actual stories about victims. Rape myths and prostitution myths are often seen as related because of the transactional view of sex. An example statement from Payne’s rape myth items, “If a woman lets a man pay for an expensive date, realistically she is agreeing to sleep with him” demonstrates that if a person believes the statement, they also believe that a rape could not occur after the expensive dinner

due to an “accepted” but unspoken transactional agreement between the two parties (Cotton, Farley, & Baron, 2002, p. 1791). This premise is considered false by current societal standards that expect full consent by all parties involved in a sexual act. Unfortunately, while the idea of consent is widely known, it is not as widely practiced leading to high rates of sexual assault between acquaintances (Sampson, 2002). Some myths about prostitution include: 1) prostitutes cannot be raped, 2) prostitutes don’t experience harm when assaulted or harassed, 3) they deserve to be raped, and 4) they are the same (Miller & Schwartz, 1995). Myths such as these perpetuate violence. The idea that prostitutes deserve to be raped is particularly damaging to girls who are taught that same myth when introduced into sex work.

A 2002 study at an undergraduate institution looked at several prostitution myths. For the purposes of this literature review, we will look at two of the six items studied. 59% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that “prostitutes are victims of pimps” (Cotton, et al., 2002, p. 1792). Pimps are not present in every sex worker’s life but they are a big part of the overall business. In fact, even in legal brothels in Nevada, women are sometimes “pimped” by their family members who demand income quotas and collect the earnings of the women (Albert, 2002). While one’s mother or husband may not be the image we have of a pimp, someone who requires that you sell yourself and then keeps your earnings does fall into that category. For the second myth, 45% of respondents, almost half, agreed or strongly agreed that “Women are prostitutes because they want to be; it’s their choice” (Cotton, et al., 2002, p. 1792). We will discuss the notion of choice in a few pages, however, it important to keep in mind that these are the types of stereotypes and expectations girls come in contact with when they try to leave behind their past. As they battle with their own self-doubts, the general population makes the battle harder by placing all of the blame on the girls.

Cotton, Farley, and Barton found that within the undergraduate sample studied (n=783), prostitution myth acceptance positively correlated with rape myth acceptance (2002).

Additionally, child sexual abuse myths have been identified by researchers and can be linked to a disbelief of trafficking when one considers that most trafficking victims are former child sexual abuse victims. Researchers Cunningham and Cromer reason that child sexual abuse myths, “deny the prevalence or impact of abuse, deny the perpetrator’s responsibility, and reinforces misconceptions about perpetrators and the nature of abuse” (2014, p.3). It would make sense that if a population has difficulty believing that a woman is not at fault for her own rape and that child sexual abuse doesn’t really occur, that they would also have difficulty believing that prostitutes are not victims or exploitable. This belief is then internalized by girls who doubt they deserve a better life and are sometimes convinced that they don’t by reinforced misconceptions.

### **Self-esteem, self-worth, perceptions of others**

“Whether you got into the life at 12 or 20, whether you had a pimp or not, whether you were called a ‘prostitute’ and a whole bunch of other disrespectful names. **The feelings of shame and hurt are the same**” (Llyod & White, 2014, p.21).

#### *The Need to Connect & Protect: The Romeo Effect*

13 and getting love from the man I call my father,	Scared, confused, needed some guidance,
I've tried to push him out of ME but why bother	Afraid to go home, because of the violence.
He's been raping me for as long as I can ponder,	I accept this offer 'cos it seemed better than before,
no dignity, no pride. SHIT, no soul left inside.	no feelings, just numbness, no thinking no more.
I have no more fight 'cos my body's tired	
	Beaten for meeting this guy's satisfaction,
A man in a suit offers me LOVE and affection,	Afraid to go home because of my dad's reaction.
Too bad I was desperate and needed resurrection.	I was made into an object for another's purpose
He told me mybodywas made of gold.	only,
That if I let guys do what my father did	Nobody ever asked me 'was I happy?'
The money would unfold	or 'why was I lonely?'

Lieberman is a proponent of social neuroscience whose theories about social connections, while not based upon CSEC populations, are relevant because of their generalizability. He deconstructs Maslow's hierarchy of needs arguing that "being socially connected and cared for is paramount" because an infant's survival is directly dependent upon that care (2013, p.43). We all need water, food, and shelter, etc. but, at least as infants, are incapable of fulfilling those needs ourselves and therefore rely upon connections with a caregiver. Humans are generally very good at connecting to their caregiver and those to whom we give our care. However, "the price for our species' success at connecting to a caregiver is a lifelong need to be liked and loved..." (Lieberman, 2013, p.48). So what happens when our basic survival needs for social connection is not met by the parents and caregivers entrusted with our well-being? We are left vulnerable to manipulation, particularly by those we believe to be meeting the connection needs our families have neglected to fulfill.

Rachel Lloyd describes one of the most common ways young American women enter the life, "Romeo Pimps" (Lloyd, 2011). The second stanza of the above poem illustrates this method and reiterates Lieberman's social connection theory. Romeos are attractive men that prey on the need of young girls to be appreciated, found attractive, loved, and taken care of as they hoped they would be by their families; the need to connect as described by Lieberman. Romeo pimps feed both on making the girls feel wanted as women, by calling them mature, beautiful, buying them jewelry, taking them on dates, etc., and by acting as the often absentee father the girls wish existed. Through a practiced and perfected scheme, the men forge a relationship with the girl where she feels safe and loved and then introduce the idea of sex work (Lloyd, 2011). Even after time away from a pimp, the emotional connection forged can cause thoughts of doubt about having left to enter a girl's mind. Melanie describes how she felt a few months after leaving, "I

started to tell myself that we'd had some good times and that he wasn't all that bad... Maybe I should just call him to say, 'hey' and to see if he missed me" (White & Lloyd, 2014, p. 92). For a lot of girls, their pimp was one of the first people to demonstrate care or affection and the memory of that can sometimes override one's memories of the abuse suffered.

Girls often feel indebted to the man who took them off the street and demonstrated affection towards them. The combination of feeling indebted along with their misplaced affection towards their "daddy"<sup>3</sup> often leaves girls entangled in a trap that is very difficult to escape. A study comparing adolescent versus adult entry into sex work found that girls under 18 started, not to sustain a drug addiction as do many of their older counterparts but, because they were fleeing an abusive situation, trying to claim control over their lives, had economic motivation, were exposed through friends or family, or saw the life as glamorous (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011). The young age, too often history of abuse, exposure to sex work as glamorous, and poor financial circumstances faced by so many of these youth lead to their inevitable vulnerability to the Romeo pimp. Additionally, these men are very perceptive of the cues of which Goetz describes and are able to discern which girls are worth pursuing and which would require more effort to exploit.

#### *Protecting You Instead of Me*

When I was in the life, I felt like he really loved me and that I was doing everything so that we could have a future together. Now that I'm out, and I'm looking back thinking about all the s\*\*\* he did to me. How could I have let myself get played like that? I feel so stupid. (White & Lloyd, 2014, p.83)

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<sup>3</sup> "Daddy" and "boyfriend" are terms pimps use to identify themselves and which the girls internalize. It is no mistake that they call themselves daddy, a figure girls often feel is missing in their own lives. Some pimps create a faux family life in which they are the father in order to create an increased bond (Lloyd, 2011).

In a collectivist, ensemble, or connected self-schema, “relations with other people, especially valued and important others, are crucial elements, and thus others are represented as part of the self, or included within the self” (Josephs, Markus & Tafarodi, 1992, p.391). Josephs, Markus, and Tafarodi argue that women are more likely to have the aforementioned self-schema. This type of schema could lead women to internalize values that others place upon them in a deeper and more ingrained way than do men, leaving them vulnerable to someone’s molding them. In the film *Very Young Girls*, Shaneiqua recounts what happened when she ran away to be a kid; “he just started raping me anally and I just started crying and I honestly felt like that was my fault. I shouldn’t have wanted to be a kid, I shouldn’t have wanted to go outside, I shouldn’t have disobeyed him. I felt like at that point in time, this was his body...whatever he feel like should go inside of it...if he felt like he wanted to cut my foot off... that was how I felt” (Schisgall & Alvarez, 2007). Through violence, rape, name-calling, and so called ‘warranted punishment,’ pimps break down girls and make them believe that they don’t deserve better. While for most it may seem obvious that abuse is not justifiable, there is an affirmation at GEMS, “I deserve to live a life free of exploitation, danger, abuse and pain,” which is used to counteract the damage inflicted by pimps (White & Lloyd, 2014, p. 30). One often hears it is easier to believe the bad than the good and it holds true for this population as well. While the sentiment is misplaced, valuing one’s pimp’s opinion is common because of the careful bond they have developed with each girl.

Lieberman expounds that humans are unique in that we are strongly social creatures whose “self” is highly influenced by our social world. Almost as an aside, he mentions that our “malleable sense of self...often leads us to help others more than ourselves” (Lieberman, 2013, p.

9). Historically, we know this to be true between wives sacrificing their dreams for their husbands, parents sacrificing themselves for their children, and even soldiers willing to sacrifice their lives for their country, a less specifically identifiable other. These sacrifices, though they may be self-damaging, are prevalent in the lives of adults who are rational and have experienced relatively little trauma. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume the phenomenon occurs among traumatized adolescent females as well which may explain why a girl would defend her pimp when arrested, even if he has abandoned her (Lloyd, 2011). One can also infer that Josephs, Markus, and Tafari's schema for how self-esteem works in women can lead women to be more protective of those in their close circles because they see those people as a piece of themselves, even if those people are exploiters (1992). From the experience of brainwashing that adolescent girls face when brought into "the life", it follows that these young girls would fulfill otherwise obscene requests from the men they love; requests to sell themselves to protect, better, support etc. the pimps who exploit them.

The connection to IPV resurfaces at the idea of a victim protecting her exploiter, similar to hostages who show signs of Stockholm syndrome. Stockholm syndrome generally requires that the persons involved are strangers and that the hostage demonstrate clear fear and resentment towards law enforcement (Van Hasselt, Fabrique, Flood, Romano, Dalfonzo, & Vecchi, 2005). This doesn't quite fit because, similar to victims of IPV, many of the girls get to know their eventual exploiters during a "honeymoon" period in which there are no signs of abuse. Exploiters create an environment in which the girls feels loved, pampered, and adored until it is time to ask, "would you do anything for me?" and after convincing, raping, or beating, the answer becomes yes (Schisgall & Alvarez, 2007). While there has been a lot of distrust and animosity towards law enforcement, it has generally been because of the lack of protection,



historically, afforded by the law. It is possible that attitudes are changing with the NYS Safe Harbour for Exploited Children Act but research would have to be conducted to determine if that is true.

### *Choice*

Although some might argue that prostitution/becoming a sex worker is a career choice, when contending with multiple sources of disadvantage, minority women and girls are often marginalized within the illegal economies operating in disadvantaged communities, and their involvement in them is generally exploitation. (Reid, 2014, p. 338).

Economics, or more specifically, survival, is an easy and almost tangible explanation for making poor choices. Homeless youth, whether their status is due to family financial circumstance, having been kicked out, being orphaned or having fled a hostile environment, all need to learn quickly how to survive on the street. In the introduction I mentioned the added layer of stigma associated with domestic trafficking due to the notion of choice. While many girls take responsibility for the decisions they made that led them to “the life,” workers at GEMS emphasize, “Although I may have made some choices based on my circumstances, I did not choose to be abused, violated, sold or treated as less than human” (White & Lloyd, 2014, p.30). Girls often have the choice between one bad option and another which begs the question of why our society is built in a way that leaves certain populations so vulnerable and option-less. *The Survivor’s Guide to Leaving* addresses the expected self-blame that is inevitable and responds:

We were vulnerable, whether it was our family background, growing up with abuse, being runaway or homeless, being desperate for shelter or money, or just being young and having adults around us who made us feel like if we did this they’d be there for us.

We may have made certain decisions...[but] Those decisions were based on a lack of other options at the time, or believing that this was the life we deserved.

(White & Lloyd, 2014, p. 27)

GEMS clearly argues that decisions made out of desperation should not be considered choice.

Not only because of the lack of viable options and the reality of manipulation, but also because of the girls' ages, the idea of choice becomes moot. Laws exist protecting minors from drinking, driving, etc., and most importantly here, having sex. These laws are in place because our government doesn't believe a minor has the maturity necessary to make certain decisions. It would make sense that if a minor cannot choose to consent to sex with an adult, they could also not choose to have sex with an adult for money. The presence of legal tender should not automatically make someone who would otherwise be considered ill-prepared to make important decisions then responsible for decisions made due to negative circumstances. However, until recently, underage girls were arrested and prosecuted under prostitution charges, reinforcing the false belief that they were adults who were capable of making those decisions (Schisgall & Alvarez, 2007).

Not all representations of prostitution advocate that sex workers are victims. An ethnography about the Mustang Ranch, a legal brothel in Nevada, reveals a myriad of circumstances and experiences of agency and lack thereof. Among the most liberated women, despite the stigma associated with enjoying one's work among sex workers in the Mustang Ranch, there are several who confess that they find sex work fulfilling and value the contributions they make to society through such work (Albert, 2002). While a compelling case for legalizing prostitution more broadly, a quick search of the website reveals that most of the women at this brothel are white and they appear to be above 18 years old. The fact that these

women are white, not minors, and work in a legal and regulated environment indicates that this is not a comparable group to the NYC mostly black teenage CSEC population. Additionally, the ethnography reveals several cases of coerced work, pimping, and unfair conditions even within the world of legal prostitution and despite the relative privilege of the women employed.

Another study, a qualitative research study using Photovoice, suggested that many of their subjects choose their path and don't consider themselves victims (Capous-Desyllas, 2010). I often am concerned about how much influence researchers have on the opinions and statements of those they research. Most girls and women don't consider themselves victims, slaves, exploited, etc. because no one dragged them into a dungeon and no one threw them into a van. While most of them have been raped and beaten at various points to ensure their submission, they see that as consequences of decisions they've made rather than part of the circumstances that led to their exploitation. So who is right? Are these women the victims that service providers paint them as or are they the self-expressed ho's they identify as? I don't have the answer to that but Eliza from GEMS shares her story, "it wouldn't be until years down the line that I was able to begin deeply processing and able to be honest with myself about what had happened to me. I had been exploited. I was a victim of commercial sexual exploitation and domestic trafficking no doubt about that" (Lloyd & White 110). Her language is predisposed by those who surround her, a loving, compassionate group of providers who worked and influenced Eliza to strive for and achieve a better life. As we've already discussed, self is heavily influenced by others. Therefore, I suppose the question of which representation of self is more accurate, the original 'ho' label or the victim of commercial sexual exploitation, is really irrelevant. The outcome for the women, whether they are happier after all in the life they've always known or in the life they struggle to lead and eventually achieve may be the determining factor.

Returning to the Photovoice research, some of the women in the study advocate for the right to work without stigma (Capous-Desyllas, 2010). I agree with that mission but my population doesn't have the privilege to worry about stigma until after they've tried leaving because of the dangerousness of their situations in sex work. For the women in the Photovoice study, stigma was a main issue rather than abuse or rape. Some of the women in this study had also started college which makes them a more educated group than the NYC minors (Capous-Desyllas, 2010). Despite the agency of the Photovoice women and while the populations are not comparable, some of the "clustering of themes" of their experiences are similar: sense of people not caring, worthlessness, feeling unimportant, unworthy; humiliation, undesirable, destructive self, feelings of survivor guilt (Capous-Desyllas, 2010). Despite the relative privilege enjoyed by the women in Capous-Desyllas' study, they face many of challenges of the girls in NYC when entering, living, and leaving sex work.

#### *Social rejection & Familial Abandonment*

I am not defined by my experiences or my past. I am more than what has happened to me.<sup>4</sup>  
(White & Lloyd, 2014, p.30)

Lieberman reasons that bullying is particularly hurtful, not because of an individual's words but because we believe the individual speaks for the many. He considers bullying to probably be the "most pervasive form of social rejection we have" at a societal level (2013, p. 69). When we are bullied, particularly in the presence of others, it is particularly damaging because we interpret the absence of support by bystanders as a sign of rejection by the whole group. How is this relevant to CSEC? 70-90% of CSEC were sexually abused during their childhood, which, when done with the knowledge of others, could create the same sense of mass

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<sup>4</sup> Affirmation from *The Survivor's Guide to Leaving* by Sheila White with Rachel Llyod

rejection. When a family member aware of the abuse doesn't act on behalf of the child, this means that not only is a supposed protector or caregiver abusing the child, another caregiver is allowing the abuse to occur. A child could interpret this as a social rejection, that she is abandoned by society because her well-being isn't important.

When the abuse happens behind closed doors and without witnesses, children may feel alone and abandoned. The following excerpt from a poem, *The Nightmare of Abuse*, speaks to the idea of feeling alone: "You thought you were dreaming and you woke up feeling scared,/But the feelings were real and you realized he was in your bed,/You wonder if anyone heard, heard you scream and shout,/But you realize you're alone and no one will help you out..."

(Anonymous, 2012). While there are possible adults such as teachers and social workers that could help, a child may feel forgotten by these potential caregivers and succumb to a sense of hopelessness. Sometimes, after they have tried leaving "the life," parents don't welcome girls back because they blame the girls for making bad decisions which leads to a new wave of abandonment (White & Lloyd, 2014).

### **Why don't they leave?**

When I made the decision to leave, it was something I really had to think about. My whole life was revolved around him at that point, my belongings, finances, and everything, down to eating and having a place to stay. I knew my family wouldn't help me because they had disowned me by that point. – Cynthia (White & Lloyd, 2014, p. 74)

### *Hard to Adapt*

Some girls have difficulty adapting to what they call the "square" life. The "square" world is the world that exists outside of sex work, and therefore, outside everything to which they are familiar. Abuse, particularly during childhood and adolescence, can have a lasting effect upon one's future self. The "Childhood Physical and Emotional Abuse by a Parent" study

focused on women who had faced physical and emotional abuse as children and concluded that “previously abused people bring negative interpretations to novel interpersonal situations more than do most and that this contributes to maladaptive social behavior” (Berenson & Andersen, 2006, p. 1509-10). As sexual abuse is a particularly heinous and severe form of abuse, it is not uncommon for it to be accompanied or preceded by emotional and physical abuse. Therefore, this conclusion can be expanded to include the CSEC population and I expect that the effects of the three compounded forms of abuse would lead to more severe effects than those discussed in the above study. Because the abuse causes maladaptive social behavior, it becomes difficult for girls to easily incorporate themselves into a world that has a different social structure than their own.

### **Safety and Money**

When we left it was winter time. We had no clothes, no shoes...No nothing... My daughter was in a onesie in the snow. I had to take my shirt off. I had a bra on, take my shirt off and wrap it around my daughter. She was 6 months old. They did not want to help us. Even though we had scars and everything, they refused to help us, so I had to go through the whole process of begging people, and it hurt because I'm not used to asking people to help me. – Natalie (White & Lloyd, 2014, p.65)

Safety and means are obvious concerns when trying to leave. Kristina describes her story, “I was scared because I felt like there was no escape. My pimp knew where my family lived, where my little brother went to school...not only that, he had my ID, my birth certificate, my social security card. So if I did leave, I had nothing to work with to get my life back (Lloyd & White, 2014, p. 46). Pimps keep track of the women they use and it is difficult to save or hide money. They are often abusive so if money is found, a girl could be beaten, or even killed if the

pimp thinks it could serve as a warning to the other girls in his house (Lloyd 2011). *The Survivor's Guide to Leaving* cautions against hiding money and instead recommends trying to gather some clothing by saying you are doing laundry. Often, however, even a bag of extra clothes is something too dangerous to try to take and the girls have to leave with just the clothing on their back (White & Lloyd, 2014).

Sometimes, even if a girl leaves without taking anything, because the pimp knows a lot about her life before meeting him, he can find her. In Shaneiqua's case, she eventually grasped that what she had thought was a loving boyfriend was in fact a pimp and realized she didn't want that life so she tried to go home. Her pimp figured out her plan, intervened and then broke Shaneiqua's spirit by raping her (Schisgall & Alvarez, 2007). The threat of violence, while not always a maneuver for getting girls to enter the life, is a real possibility if the girls try to leave after coming to terms with the graveness of their situation. Navigating this dangerous situation is complicated even further because so many of these girls feel alone. They originally fled their families for safety reasons or have been disowned because of their involvement in sex work and they find themselves completely without options.

### *Perception of Self*

Perception of self, and the various ways in which it is effected, particularly as it is influenced by others, is a large factor. Survivor led methods are an incredibly important part of GEMS and other organizations that assist with exiting "the life." Pamela talks about when she first arrived at GEMS, "I had a barricade up around myself...I was very much afraid of how everyone would perceive me, so I walked around as though I was so much different from everyone there, when the truth was that I was very much like almost every girl there" (Lloyd & White, 80). This is particularly true at GEMS because many of the staff are women who have

gone through the leadership program at GEMS, had internships there and then sought full-time positions. She continues, “the truth was that many of us were dealing with the same issues on the inside” (Lloyd & White, 80). Those issues include fear of rejection, a diminished sense of self-worth, and many other factors that influence our self-perceptions.

The paralyzing fear that you don’t deserve a better life serves as one more obstacle to leaving. In an fMRI *Cyberball* study, a person is given the impression that he/she/zhe are one of three test subjects having their brains scanned while each participant throw a balls in the cyber game. The reality is that there is one test subject at a time and the rest of the events are automated. Eventually the computer excludes the subject from the game of catch. Despite not knowing the other “subjects” and the game being trivial, subjects felt a sense of rejection which was measured both through an interview and through signs of social distress demonstrated by activation of the dACC section of the brain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2004). As humans, we avoid feeling rejected. Girls fear that the people they meet will somehow know about their past and judge and reject them for it. That fear of rejection, which is so easily triggered by seemingly trivial things when executed by strangers, could be severely disempowering to a girl who expects that all those who meet her will judge her entire life history.

To circumvent the possibility of a girl overcoming her fear of societal rejection to strive for something better, a “boyfriend” (read: pimp) makes sure to crush the self-esteem of the girl regularly and in a way that increases her dependency upon him (Schisgall & Alvarez, 2007; Lloyd, 2011). Tactics that include telling a girl that she has no future away from him, she won’t be good at anything besides sex, or that she won’t find anyone else to love her can seriously affect the psyche of a young women with a history of abuse. Even when we don’t want to believe someone, their words become part of the way we see ourselves, entwined with our identity,



especially when we've internalized that person as a piece of ourselves (Josephs, et al., 1992).

The constant reminder that change is impossible, though an untrue threat, can prevent someone from trying if they fear failure. That threat, combined with the lack of means and the unsafe conditions make it almost unthinkable to attempt escape; yet, there are girls that do.

### *Understanding relapse*

The square life was like another planet to me so it was like how am I gonna do this this is what I'm used to and overall it just a bunch of mixed emotions. I left more than once I would leave and something would seem to pull me back or it seemed like one step forward, four steps back and that would lead me back to the thought of going back but every time I went back, it would get worse, **mentally and physically**. - Kristina (Lloyd & White, 2014, p. 46)

A very frustrating aspect of working with traumatized persons is that their actions don't always make sense to outsiders. IPV victims are often judged for returning to their abusive partners and so are sex workers. The same reasons that it is hard to leave (issues with social adaptation, no money, lack of support and self-confidence, etc.) also bring girls back who have partially made it out. Even in bad situations, it is difficult to leave in order to start something new and foreign. Change is often difficult, even when positive. Eliza admits, "The square world made me want to go back to what was familiar, my pimp and pullin tricks. I knew I was good at that at least..." (Lloyd & White, 2014, p. 110). Eliza illuminates several reasons the desire to return is strong. 1) She feels inadequate because she doesn't know what else she is good at doing besides sex work. Her sense of inadequacy stems from low self-image and possibly from being inept at that time to smoothly join a new social circle. Girls are taught to code switch, or alternate between different forms of a language, so they can work in locations that prefer the use of

“standard” English. However, until then, they may feel out of place. 2) Eliza misses the familiar environment of her old life. Even with the abuse and pain, she at least knows what to expect from “the life” whereas in the square world everything is new. 3) It’s possible she also misses her pimp and his other girls. The transition out can be lonely and it is not uncommon to miss having “family dinners,” shopping, and the company of her “co-wives” (Lloyd, 2011).

### *Does What I Think You Think About Me Change Me?*

By considering the ways in which self-esteem and self-worth influence the decisions of CSEC, we shed light on the battle these young people face in trying to leave “the life,” particularly when family, friends, and the rest of society impose their judgments about their character and future prospects. It takes little to create a sense of entrapment and unlike media suggests, it does not require chains and guns. CSEC face an uphill battle in trying to convince both the rest of the world, and more importantly, themselves, that they deserve something more than they have. The studies using the general population that I have cited have confirmed that individuals internalize the perceptions of others and that it can affect us greatly. If someone who would be generally considered “normal” and privileged is susceptible and vulnerable, a child brought up without a supportive caregiver and environment would usually be more affected by the perceptions of others because of their added layer of vulnerability. Therefore, changing the public perception of CSEC could positively influence success outcomes for leaving the life by increasing sensitivity and decreasing negative perceptions that could be internalized.

### **What is being done, what can be done, and future research**

“I am a survivor.”<sup>5</sup> (White & Lloyd, 2014, p.30)

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<sup>5</sup> Affirmation from *The Survivor’s Guide to Leaving* by Sheila White with Rachel Lloyd, 2014, p.30

Survivors know the importance of supporting the emotional and psychological needs of women exiting the sex trade. Through *The Survivor's Guide to Leaving*, there are motivational tidbits that speak to the unspoken fears of young women. Many feel they are unworthy of help or a better life. The book validates girls, "You deserve so much/more than being in the life. The game isn't the only thing/ we will ever be good at!" (Lloyd & White, 2014, p. 75). With just a couple of lines it addresses the self-blame, lets girls know there is more to hope for, addresses their fears, tells them that after years in sex work, they are capable of learning new skills and becoming someone new; and most importantly, they are not alone. The "we" in "we will ever be," though subtle, is important because it tells the girls that others are there to share in the process, the ups and downs, and that there is understanding support available.

There are many steps towards leaving and unfortunately, not everyone will be able to make it out. GEMS stresses the importance of meeting girls "where they're at" and understanding that even those who will eventually succeed in leaving will have moments of relapse and doubt before completing their journey (Lloyd 2012). GEMS uses a survivor-led leadership training method and education initiatives to empower young women and promote self-efficacy, self-determination, and a positive sense of self, which are key components of Positive Youth Development (PYD) interventions (Harris & Cheney, 2015).

PYD interventions are used by youth centered programs but should be further developed in schools. PYD interventions promote bonding, development of self-efficacy & self-determination, belief in the future, clear and positive identity, and promotion of social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and moral competency (Shek, Sun, & Merrick 2012). As these qualities are generally lacking within the CSEC community, it would be beneficial to incorporate their development beginning in elementary school to prevent girls from entering the sex world.

Research evaluating a piloted program that focuses on these goals should be considered for NYC primary schools, especially those in lower SES neighborhoods to combat known risk factors.

Young parents, whether or not they are involved in “the life,” should also receive specific education targeting ways to incorporate the PYD components into their parenting so that the risk of their children being exploited declines.

Continuous research should be conducted to understand the developing and hopefully changing attitudes towards CSEC as this issue becomes more publicly popular. To encourage empathy, schools could also incorporate curriculums that discuss risk factors associated with trafficking. As empathy increases, the likelihood of CSEC being able to smoothly integrate into the “square” world also increases because the barrier of being misunderstood is removed.

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