

“Growing up with it, I assumed it was normal.”

– BOBETTE, SURVIVOR

A birth into inequality, failed social systems, childhood sexual abuse and untreated trauma can prime girls for future exploitation.

In too many lives, violence happens early.

For many girls and women in the Life, systems didn't protect them from violence at an early age, or help them heal as they grew.

Kids who are sexually abused face extreme trauma.

When young girls are hurt and sexualized by adults they may learn secrecy, shame, that sex measures self worth, their boundaries don't matter, no one can be trusted and the world is not safe.

When early trauma is compounded by systemic discrimination, whole communities are placed at risk for sexual exploitation.

Our social systems set up some to succeed and others to struggle, depending on race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, citizenship status and ethnicity. Affected girls are ensured not to receive adequate services.

For many girls and women in the Life, trauma is a pre-existing condition.

Research shows that the majority of those in the sex trade suffered abuse, violence and neglect in their early years. When left unseen and untreated, this trauma can leave girls and women vulnerable to exploiters.

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It's unrealistic to think that the things that happen as a child do not follow us throughout life. It shapes how we view the world and every relationship we have.

– JERI, INDIGENOUS SURVIVOR AND SERVICE PROVIDER

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Three out of four girls in the juvenile justice system disclosed past sexual abuse.¹



The Life Story

MOMENTS OF CHANGE.

Sharing the voices of survivors of sexual exploitation. Revealing the opportunities we all have to create a better world for girls and women.

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

STEPS TOWARD CHANGE

How can children with trauma be better supported and avoid experiencing the impact of system failure?

Intervene early.

Early recognition and swift action can reduce long-term psychological harm and the potential of future exploitation. Systems can recognize when a child has been struggling from the start and is at heightened risk for exploitation.

Reestablish trust.

Trusted caregivers, child advocacy centers and youth services organizations can make sure children feel believed, loved and supported. This can help the child regain their sense of personal power, develop healthy boundaries and learn to trust again.

Provide trauma-informed care.

Sexual abuse of a child can devastate the entire family, potentially compounding the trauma. Evidence-based therapy that is both trauma-informed and family-oriented can help to heal both the child and her family.

System collaboration.

A family in crisis may intersect with multiple systems including law enforcement, child protective services and juvenile justice. Social service systems can use universal screening tools to identify when children are vulnerable to sexual exploitation or already experiencing it.

WHO CAN SHIFT THE SYSTEM?

A child with many adverse childhood experiences needs the support of both adults and systems. Professionals can intervene early to reduce the impacts of childhood trauma while working to transform systems altogether.

CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES
(CPS)

LAW ENFORCEMENT

CHILD CARE PROVIDERS,
TEACHERS, COACHES

CHILD ADVOCACY CENTERS

FOSTER FAMILIES

THERAPISTS AND HEALTHCARE
PROVIDERS

FAMILY, YOUTH AND SOCIAL
JUSTICE FUNDERS



Trauma trickles down. Parents often experienced the same trauma as their children whether it's familial, institutional or racial.

— STACY, CHILDREN'S PSYCHOLOGY CLINIC



1. Smith, D. K., Leve, L. D., & Chamberlain, P. (2006). Adolescent Girls' Offending and Health-Risking Sexual Behavior: The predictive role of trauma. *Child Maltreatment*, 11(4), pp. 346–353. doi: 10.1177/1077559506291950.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The Life Story: Moments of Change shines a light on the realities of women in the sex trade, elevates their voices and experiences and highlights opportunity for change. This material is meant to inform and inspire those who work across the intersections of education, housing, public health, mental health and addiction services, economic and racial justice, and many other areas. **Learn more at:**