

“I couldn’t do those things with those men unless I was high.”

– TORRI, SURVIVOR

Which comes first: trauma, exploitation or addiction?

There’s a popular assumption that women enter the Life to support a drug habit.

For many girls and women in the Life, sexual exploitation and substance use are inextricably bound together with trauma. These life-altering events are not isolated. Each one accelerates the other.

Trauma can be 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. Being in the Life generates physical, emotional and mental trauma too. The result is lasting harm; for example, depression, suicidal thoughts and dissociation.

At higher risk.

Studies show higher rates of mental distress among African Americans, Native Americans and LGBTQ individuals. In fact, Native American girls have the highest suicide rate among girls 15-24. These patterns suggest the presence of systemic discrimination, historical trauma and the failure of existing systems to correct it¹

Drugs and alcohol can become coping mechanisms to numb the pain.

For her exploiter, addiction is a convenient way to keep her under control. Growing drug epidemics—crack in past decades, opioids now—can make drugs more available and their use more common. The vicious cycle of trauma, sexual exploitation and addiction is powerful.



Imagine the trauma experienced by a woman who is raped. Now imagine the trauma for a woman who is essentially sexually assaulted over and over for years. We now know that’s complex trauma. And that’s what survivors of prostitution are trying to overcome.

– NICOLE, ADVOCATE FOR NATIVE WOMEN



84%

84% of women used alcohol, drugs or both during their exploitation.²

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.

TRAUMA AND ADDICTION

STEPS TOWARD CHANGE

The Life simultaneously exploits and fuels cycles of trauma and addiction. How do we break these destructive patterns when systems are strapped for resources?

Link trauma, addiction and exploitation.

Treating one part of the problem won't be as successful as treating the whole problem. While support services and systems operate with constrained resources, they could work more effectively by understanding the complexities of substance use, co-occurring disorders and trauma in sexually exploited women.

Treat holistically.

Treatment that includes housing, therapy and support from advocates and mentors can help break up the links of trauma, exploitation and substance use.

Care with empathy.

Addiction makes it hard for people to make clear choices. Complex trauma compounds this difficulty. Meeting people where they are and offering help without judgment can open the door to connection and healing.

WHO CAN SHIFT THE SYSTEM?

Many service providers are only trained to identify one part of a woman's experience in the Life; for example, her trauma, her addiction or her sexual exploitation. Combining their expertise is a good start to building systems that work better for her.

SUBSTANCE USE COUNSELORS

MENTAL HEALTH PRACTITIONERS

HOMELESS SHELTER WORKERS

LAW ENFORCEMENT

ADULT WELFARE SOCIAL WORKERS

MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS

SURVIVOR MENTORS

“ Drugs and alcohol had become my way of coping and surviving the Life. It would be a great option for survivors to have a treatment facility that gives her space for treatment and healing. If I had both, I may have gotten away from it many years ago.

— ROXANNE, INDIGENOUS SURVIVOR AND ADVOCATE

1. Curtin, S. C., Warner, M., & Hedegaard, H. (2016). Suicide Rates for Females and Males by Race and Ethnicity: United States, 1999 and 2014. Centers for Disease Control: Division of Vital Statistics, & National Center for Health Statistics.

2. Lederer, L. J., & Wetzel, C. A. (2014). The Health Consequences of Sex Trafficking and Their Implications for Identifying Victims in Healthcare Facilities. *Annals of Health Law: The Health Policy and Law Review of Loyola University Chicago School of Law*, 23(1), pp. 61-91.

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I think that addressing chemical dependency alone isn't enough. If you don't deal with the other issues, it will lead the person back to using. All issues must be addressed.

— NOEL, SURVIVOR AND FOUNDER OF SURVIVOR SERVICES ORGANIZATION

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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:**