

# THE 20 REASONS:

## Why Girls Enter and Stay in the Sex Industry

Revised 2025



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Untold numbers of young women,<sup>i</sup> from communities across Canada, are involved in the sex industry. This includes escorting (often a misnomer for prostitution), sugar dating (a form of escorting that typically includes sexual services), street walking (street-level prostitution), exotic massage (typically focused on sexual services), exotic dancing (often connected to prostitution), pornography and webcam sexual modeling. Every one of these activities strips away “human dignity” and has a “disproportionate impact on women and children”.<sup>ii</sup> Despite the dangers, and an extreme mental and physical toll, many young women will remain in the industry for a very long time. It can be 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.

Today’s young people are especially vulnerable to sex industry involvement. Sex-positive<sup>iii</sup> ideology and the pervasiveness of hardcore pornography has dramatically influenced 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 it than ever before. It’s also important to note that the risk of exploitation may increase when young people are struggling. Understanding the roots of vulnerability is important, whether for safeguarding young people from exploitation or helping them escape it. Ethnicity, socioeconomic status and neighborhood demographics can have some bearing, but the following 10 risk indicators are applicable to youth from every community and may be more helpful to individually consider:

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”<sup>iv</sup>. 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<sup>v</sup>. All 20 will not likely apply to any one person, and in the early stages of involvement, perhaps, only three or four points (or reasons) on the list will be a match. All 20 points on this list describe a tactic used by pimps to lure and/or ensnare their prey, and each is highlighted with a male icon (♂).

More than half of the list also applies to girls who are not under the third-party control of a trafficker. 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 each point that is applicable to those who are freelancing in the industry.

## 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:** Young women entering the sex industry sometimes wear designer clothing, receive expensive gifts and ride in fast cars. Though they may later claim the glamour was merely a façade, in the moment, it can be enchanting. For those from low-income households and those who are accustomed to a privileged lifestyle, glamour, or the appearance of it, is enticing. (♀♂)
3. **Intrigue:** The sex industry is 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 have been deprived of 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 use may feel validated. For some, this is a primary reason to remain. (♀♂)
5. **Counterfeit Love:** The most common approach utilized by Canadian sex traffickers involves the illusion of love. In these cases, attention, affection and gifts are all used as rewards. Those who become ensnared 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 verbal and non-verbal manipulation to shape his victim's views. Typically, a pimp will coax his victim to reject family and distrust police or other potential sources of support. He will also cause her to doubt herself by repeatedly saying she is inadequate without him. Depending on the pimp's persuasiveness and his victim's resilience, a dramatic change in mindset may quickly occur.
- ♂ 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 forced isolation makes it easier for the trafficker to control his victim.
- ♀♂ 9. Drugs and Alcohol: Use of drugs and/or alcohol was listed as one of the above risk factors because it is likely to diminish inhibitions and compromise one's ability to protect herself. Once in the sex industry, self-medication often becomes a means of coping. A trafficker may also use drugs or alcohol to increase a girl's capacity for abuse. Sedatives may cause his victim to be less resistant to client's demands and stimulants may elevate her mood and enable her to serve more clients. Use of substances may also strengthen his control over her through dependency.
- ♂ 10. Absorbing Blame: Traffickers typically shift blame onto their victims. As a result, girls often blame themselves for what they have been involved in, regardless of their level of consent.
- ♀♂ 11. Feeling 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: Physical violence occurs frequently in the sex industry. If it is perpetrated by a client, such abuse, though temporary, will likely have a long-lasting impact. In contrast, ongoing violence by a trafficker is meant to strengthen his control over a victim. Regardless, the resulting trauma can be debilitating and create a barrier to exiting the sex industry.
- ♀♂ 13. Mental Abuse: The damage from mental abuse can be more difficult to measure compared to injuries from physical abuse, and we must be careful not to minimize its potential harm. While this is more of a factor for trafficked girls, mental abuse is broadly experienced in the sex industry. Resulting trauma and loss of self-determination may create 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 often occurs 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 arbitrarily demand repayment of fraudulent debts relating to living expenses, drugs/alcohol, clothing, gifts or any number of things. He may also create such debts by racking up her credit cards or forcing her to sign the loan on his luxury car. He may also prevent his victim from making actual loan payments. Additionally, "leaving fees" are often levied against a victim who wants to sever ties with her trafficker.

- ♂ 17. Controlled Movements: In the Canadian context, it is unusual for a human trafficking victim to be kept in a locked room or constantly guarded. It is common, however, for a trafficker to monitor the movements of his victim using electronic devices, or having another victim report her activities. Victims may become conditioned to believe there is no chance of escape.
- ♀♂ 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 deviant activities may indicate not only that her opinion has changed, but that her core values have shifted. When a daughter comes home, parents often remark that she's no longer the same person. Even the girls and women in the sex industry, who are not trafficked, are likely to be subjected to dehumanizing experiences that can cause dramatic changes in attitudes and behavior. Once she is accustomed to that environment, it may seem easier to stay in it rather than face the painful processes of recovery.
- ♀♂ 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: Once exited, a young woman may believe she is incapable or undeserving of economic and social opportunities outside of the sex industry. She may not feel confident returning to the community where she grew up or trusting old friends for support. She may also be unaware of community resources that are equipped to assist her in her transition out of the sex industry.

Girls who enter the sex industry often bear a measure of culpability for their own demise, but it's important to look at the full picture; examining the possible reasons for the choices they made, their present behaviour, and the challenges they will face in recovery. When we understand why a young woman may have entered the sex industry, and what may have kept 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.

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<sup>i</sup> 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.

<sup>ii</sup> Taken from the preamble to Canada's prostitution legislation, Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, 2014.

<sup>iii</sup> "[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.

<sup>iv</sup> Testosterone dominance in men, Allan Mazur & Alan Booth, Behavioural and Brain Sciences, Vol 21, Issue 3, June 1998, pp. 353-363.

<sup>v</sup> These findings are not the result of an academic study but are derived from interviews with more than 120 girls and women from the sex industry (active and exited) in Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia, and in consultation with outreach or restorative care agencies including Sextrade 101 (Toronto), Servants Anonymous (now 'Reset', Calgary), Rising Angels (Brampton) and SafeHope Home (Durham Region).