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Shining Light on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: A Toolkit to Build Understanding

Developed by: *Wichita State University Center for Combating Human Trafficking* // In Partnership With: *MANY*

TOPIC: Female Victims of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

Developed by:



In Partnership With: *MANY* 

Wichita State University Center for Combating Human Trafficking (combatinghumantrafficking.org) // MANY (www.manynet.org)

Female Victims of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)

This resource is one of several topics addressed in the [Shining Light on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: A Toolkit to Build Understanding](#). The toolkit is designed to be a resource for multidisciplinary professionals, policy makers, volunteers, faith communities, and others involved in anti-trafficking work. While the information provided on each topic is in no way exhaustive, you will find additional resources to facilitate further study.

Each topic is addressed in three sections. First, the “**what?**”— what we know about the topic which includes a review of what we know from both research and the field. “**So what?**” addresses what this means – the reason this information is important to understand and how it will enhance our response to trafficking. “**Now what?**” considers the implications of this information in practice - how the information can be used to enhance our response to human trafficking. This includes specific implications for mentoring relationships, when applicable.

What?

While commercial sexual exploitation can and does happen to people of every demographic, women and girls are at greatest risk (*Clawson & Dutch, 2008; Logan, Walker & Hunt, 2009; Rafferty, 2013; Smith et al., 2009*). Women who have been sexually or physically abused, have a history of parental or personal substance abuse, have been involved in the child welfare system, are runaway or homeless, and those living in poverty are particularly susceptible to trafficking (*Clawson & Dutch, 2009; Countryman-Roswurm, 2012; Logan et al., 2009; Phillips, 2015; Rafferty, 2013; Smith et al., 2009; Tyler & Johnson, 2006*). Traffickers are able to exploit these turbulent life experiences, often coercing girls with empty promises, insincere acts of love, and a false sense of protection and stability (*Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2013*). Unfortunately, current systems of care often fail to recognize female survivors of trafficking as victims and as a result, further contribute to their exploitation.

- **Often girls who are victims of human trafficking are charged with prostitution or prostitution-related offenses (Rights for Girls, n.d.). Instead of being identified as a victim and connected to services, they are prosecuted as a criminal** (*Clayton, Krugman, & Simon, 2013*).

— Statistics show that as many as 90% of youth who have been charged with prostitution have been sexually or physically abused. Many have run away from home to escape abuse, only to encounter far worse on the streets (*Lloyd, 2005*).

- **Additionally, girls are often arrested on status offenses related to their exploitation such as truancy or running away** (*Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2013*).
- **Such arrests further perpetuate a cycle of abuse. Girls are arrested for their own victimization, locked up where they don't have access to services, and then returned to a community that is unprepared to address their unique vulnerabilities and needs** (*Rights for Girls, n.d.*).
- **Girls who are trafficked often have a history wrought with violence and trauma** (*Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2013*).

— A disproportionate number of youth exploited through commercial sexual exploitation are African American girls (*Rights for Girls, n.d.; Sherman & Black, 2015.*).

— Between fifty and eighty percent of exploited youth have had contact with the child welfare system (*Phillips, 2015*).

— Many have run away from home to escape abuse (*Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2013*).

Mentoring Relationships in Female CSEC Survivors

- **Many female victims/survivors of CSEC have experienced turbulent childhoods and may lack connection to supportive relationships.** Mentoring relationships can help repair some past damage while teaching victims/survivors about healthy relationships and boundaries (*Dubois & Felner, 2016*).

So What?

- **Far too often our systems of justice and care fail to serve victims/survivors of human trafficking.** Rather than being recognized as victims, sexually exploited young women are seen as criminals, delinquents, and willing participants in their own abuse (*Lloyd, 2005*).

— Many judges and juvenile justice professionals believe that detaining girls can help keep them safe. This is a misguided belief. Ultimately, involvement with the juvenile justice system causes further harm to female victims and creates additional trauma (*Sherman & Black, 2015*).

— Additionally, by locking victims up, we fail to provide them appropriate support for the trauma they have experienced (*Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2013*).

- **Female victims of CSEC who become involved in the juvenile justice system are forced to navigate a system that is designed specifically for males** (*Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2013; Sherman & Black, 2015*).

— Juvenile justice systems fail to respond appropriately to the trauma experienced by victims/survivors of CSEC, rarely offering appropriate support services (*Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2013*).

— Once arrested, female victims of CSEC are more susceptible to abuse by staff and other juvenile offenders inside the system (*Rights for Girls, n.d.*).

— Females are likely to be punished more harshly than boys for status offenses (truancy, running away, etc.) (*Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2013*).

Mentoring Relationships in Female CSEC Survivors

- **Because females are relational by nature, relationships can be particularly impactful to a female's development and behavior** (*Sherman & Black, 2015*).
- **Girls that are involved in mentoring relationships have greater potential for engaging in personally and socially meaningful activities, resulting in enhanced self-esteem** (*Liang, Lund, Mousseau & Spencer, 2016*).

— Mentoring relationships have been shown to improve emotional and behavioral functioning of at-risk youth (*Erdem, DuBois, Larose, Dewit & Lipman, 2016*).

Now What?

General Practice Implications

Individuals

- **Tailor services to meet the unique needs of the victim/survivor you are serving. Be cognizant of past trauma and gender-specific needs while allowing the victim/survivor to direct their own recovery plan.**

— Provide victims/survivors with access to long term prosperity and support services such as job training, educational opportunities, safe housing (from emergency to long term), and mental health services and substance abuse treatment.

— Additionally, support victims/survivors in developing life skills such as problem solving, communication, decision making, conflict resolution, managing interpersonal relationships, empathy, and coping with emotions and stress (*Rafferty, 2013*).

Now What? (cont.)

Service Providers

- **To reduce arrest and detention of female victims of trafficking, ensure that law enforcement is equipped to respond to girls at risk** (Sherman & Balck, 2015). Law enforcement should be trained to recognize signs of victimization and properly respond to girls who have experienced trauma (Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2013).
- **Improve screening and assessment at all levels of juvenile justice involvement to help divert girls from detention to more suitable services** (Sherman & Balck, 2015).
- **Acknowledge survivors as experts on their own lives.** Utilize survivor-centered methods to validate the experience of the survivor, promote trust and safety, and allow survivors to direct their own healing process (Hom & Woods, 2013).

Community

- **Advocate for the implementation of gender responsive services in all juvenile justice facilities.**
- **Advocate for policies that ensure underage girls are not arrested for prostitution but, rather, are connected to treatment services** (Rights for Girls, n.d.).
- **Advocate for educational access for all girls.** Research shows that providing girls with education, especially secondary and higher, can serve as a protective factor against gender-based violence. Additionally, education has been found to be an important preventive factor for children at risk for trafficking (Rafferty, 2013).

Mentoring Practice Implications

Individuals

- **Strive to engage girls in meaningful conversation.** Girls get the most out of mentoring relationships when they feel comfortable talking to their mentors (Darling, Bogat, Cavell, Murphy & Sanchez, 2006).
- **Be patient!** A history of trauma may impede closeness and satisfaction in the early stages of the mentoring relationship. It may take time for mentees, especially females, to forge trusting ties (Dubois & Fulner, 2016; Rhodes, 2008).

Service Providers

- **Combining group mentoring with one-on-one mentoring can provide girls with opportunities to make multiple connections.** Numerous connections may help keep girls satisfied and involved with programming. (Deutsch, Wiggins, Henneberger & Lawrence 2013).
- **Female-to-female mentoring relationships offer a greater level of friendship, counseling, and personal support than other gender combinations** (Darling, et al., 2006; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000).
- **Consider recruiting survivors of trafficking to serve as mentors.** They can likely offer support and empathy in ways that others cannot (Dubois & Felner, 2016).

— It is important to ensure that survivor mentors are well trained and in a healthy place in their own recovery before engaging in a mentoring relationship (Dubois & Felner, 2016).

"While commercial sexual exploitation can and does happen to people of every demographic, women and girls are at greatest risk."

- [Rights 4 Girls](#)
- [OJJDP: Girls in the Juvenile Justice System](#)
- [OJJDP: Girls at Risk](#)
- [Mentoring for Youth with a Background of Involvement in Commercial Sexual Activity](#)
- [Gender Injustice: System-Level Juvenile Justice Reform for Girls](#)



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