

# The Porn Industry Is Abusive, and These Women Are Telling It Like It Is

Holly Madison, Rashida Jones' *Hot Girls Wanted*, and Miriam Weeks (aka Belle Knox) shed light on a misunderstood phenomenon.

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“Who has seen Rashida Jones’ new documentary *Hot Girls Wanted*?” Holly Madison asked her followers on Twitter earlier this month. “I think every girl should have to see it before she turns 18.”

Five years ago, Madison might not have been the kind of public voice encouraging people to view a documentary on the dangers and exploitation of girls in amateur porn. In fact, it’s more likely that you knew Madison from a little reality TV show called *The Girls Next Door*, which chronicled life in the Playboy mansion—where Madison lived as Hugh Hefner’s girlfriend.

Madison’s book *Down the Rabbit Hole*, which tells of her years at Playboy, has spent five weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list since its release June 23. It’s a page-turning story of caution and regret. I couldn’t help but notice the similarities I’ve read in stories of women who were exploited in the sex industry.

“Exploited?” A friend gaped when I brought this up in conversation recently. “Holly Madison was living large at the Playboy mansion. She got whatever she wanted and threw huge parties where everyone was at her beck and call. She became a Las Vegas star after that. Who could say that she was exploited? She certainly gained a lot from that arrangement.”

But ask Holly Madison. Ask Tressa, a subject in Rashida Jones’ new documentary, *Hot Girls Wanted*. Ask Miriam Weeks, whose story of trying to pay her Duke tuition bill by moonlighting as porn star Belle Knox went viral last year. Say what you will about these women being willing participants in their sex-based careers. What’s clear from the stories surfacing is that this is an industry with a lot of manipulation and very little regulation.

How do you convince a woman with dreams of a better life that this isn’t a road worth traveling down?

That’s exactly what Madison’s book is trying to do. Sure, Madison became famous from her connections to Playboy. But did you know that she wasn’t paid for the entire first season of *The Girls Next Door*? That once the show was renewed, they pretty much forced her to sign a contract that she couldn’t leave her relationship with Hefner? That she was deceived by Playboy residents into

believing that Hefner's girlfriends were just arm candy for the old man before being pushed into unwanted sexual relations when she was incoherently drunk? That she was offered Quaaludes? Once she was sucked into the "Playboy vortex," as she calls it, her movements were constantly monitored. She was subject to a strict curfew, had limited access to the outside world, and was literally followed by Hefner's men when she had a rare night on her own. As Madison puts it, "Many people assume *Playboy* was my blessing, but most don't know it was also my curse."

These examples from Madison's book are just a few of the similarities her story shares with countless other women who have been involved in the sex industry— unjust distribution of income, tight leashes, deceit and manipulation, and unwanted sexual relations, among others. As it turns out, *Playboy*, which can seem high-end and almost family-friendly on the spectrum of adult offerings (I mean, Marilyn Monroe appeared in it, right?), is in fact not immune to the same risks and abuses prevalent in other seedier corners of the industry.

### **Bait and Switch**

Watching *Hot Girls Wanted*, released earlier this year and now viewable on Netflix, is like watching *Spring Breakers*, except instead of being about girls on spring break, it's about girls in porn, and the film doesn't end with the girls having a triumphant shooting rampage (oh, and it is well done and worth seeing). OK, actually it is nothing like *Spring Breakers*. Except that they're both dark and depressing.

*Hot Girls Wanted* shows the behind-the-scenes life of young women doing amateur porn in Miami, Florida. Most of the women have just turned 18 and found the gig by answering online job listings. One of the women interviewed for the documentary, Tressa, says she found the ad "on Craigslist under TV and radio jobs." According to a male porn actor interviewed in the film, "There's an influx of girls who wanna do porn. A lot of them know it's a trap, but the money's right there in their face; they take it and just hope for the best."

There's also the story of Miriam Weeks. Known in the porn world as Belle Knox, or the "Duke University porn star," Weeks was unexpectedly outed by classmates and has since shared her story in the web series *Becoming Belle Knox*. Weeks explains, "I thought this would be a part-time job, but I was so naive to think I could do that . . . you can't just do a part-time job, you have to constantly be your porn alter ego."

All these stories share, to varying degrees, common elements that should disturb us. These were women in dire financial need who felt they had limited options. Once they were "in it," their options became even *more* limited. In many cases the women say they were given a much different picture than reality. They felt pressured to go along with sexual encounters even when they felt uncomfortable;

under the control of skilled manipulators, things often happened faster than they could process in time to say no.

Madison was broke and had just been kicked out of her apartment when she was offered the option of staying at the Playboy mansion. The girls in *Hot Girls Wanted* were 18 years old with little to no other job history. Weeks felt the financial pinch to provide for her college expenses. Do we see a theme? When it comes to women joining the sex industry, most are approached by predators who aim for women who are young, naive, and in financial straits. In *Becoming Belle Knox*, Weeks reveals her bleak perspective that led to her porn career: “Life is debts, and life is bills, and life is making adult decisions.”

Unfortunately for many women, despite their entering the industry out of financial need, they don’t make as much as they imagined. “There [are] a lot of expenses with doing porn,” Weeks said after counting her earnings from a promotional display at a porn convention and mentally calculating her total income after expenses. “Being a porn star was very expensive,” Tressa echoes in *Hot Girls Wanted*. “Rent, nails, makeup, food, flights, and then 10 percent for Riley. I only made \$25,000 in four months. And after I got out I had \$2,000 in my bank account.”

That’s mind-boggling when you consider just how much money is in the business of porn. According to research conducted by Debby Herbenick and Bryant Paul of The Kinsey Institute for *Hot Girls Wanted*, “More people visit porn sites each month than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined. More and more of what people watch is ‘pro-am’ porn—videos featuring paid amateurs. . . . A vast amount of online pornography can be seen for free, but many pro-am websites featuring brand new girls charge subscription fees. The top three are worth an estimated \$50 million.” The porn industry overall makes more than \$13 billion in profit every year. For context, that’s more than Hollywood, which makes around \$8 billion. That’s also more than Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo, Apple, and Netflix combined.

Despite women being the main commodity, a male ringleader usually makes the most bank by controlling the women. In *Hot Girls Wanted* it was Riley, a combo landlord and booking agent who recruited the girls on Craigslist. “I drive my girls to and from shoots, and I make . . . good money,” he says in the film. In the case of Madison and the other girls at the Playboy mansion, the ringleader was the famous Hugh Hefner. Weeks was more of a free agent. She says in *Becoming Belle Knox* that she’s “so used to being always on the lookout for scammers or people who are going to try to pimp [her] out or traffic [her].” Comments like this are a testament to just how at-large pimping and trafficking are in the sex industry. And how skilled manipulation is often used to lure women into it.

While Madison made enemies in the Playboy mansion for her refusal to participate in prostitution for outside escort services, she found out that many

women associated with Playboy were lured in. “Girls were routinely convinced that these men were willing to pay a premium for simply the pleasure of their company and not necessarily for sex—but from what I understand, that was almost never the case,” she writes in *Down the Rabbit Hole*.

In addition to drawing in those in financial need and taking a cut from their earnings, working in the sex industry offers neither good job security (generally their job lasts only as long as their youthful looks) nor options for employment after they leave. As Madison found out, “Being attached to *Playboy* can make people not want to have anything to do with you, even in quirky, crazy Hollywood. There were many times the hateful backlash made me wish I stayed the broke, awkward, 21-year-old waitress I’d been before Hef came into my life.”

## **Stuck Between a Rock and a Hard Place**

Another glaring issue brought to light by these women’s stories is the prevalence of abuse and rape in the sex industry.

*Rough.* That’s the word that seems to come to mind first when girls in amateur porn describe a scene they didn’t like. “It was a really, really, really rough scene,” Weeks said about her first dip into porn. “I wasn’t prepared for how rough it was.”

Weeks is referring to her first porn set, where she was physically beaten and choked as the cameras rolled. It’s an experience that amateur porn actresses face on a regular basis—signing on for one thing (a porn scene as it was described to you, for a certain amount of money), but then being forced to do something else while the cameras roll. It’s not uncommon for women to get physically beaten or forced to do a sexual act they weren’t informed of beforehand. Before Weeks’ scene where she is recorded on camera getting “ass-kicked,” Weeks had been told, “It’s not that bad; they’ll be very nice to you.” Despite her initial *no*, she ultimately agreed; \$1200 was “fast, easy money” after all—or, at least, it was fast.

It turns out that formerly agreed-upon terms change very frequently on porn sets—once the actresses have already flown to the location, are in compromised positions, and feel they don’t have the option to decline.

That wasn’t the only scene in which Weeks had an unwanted sexual encounter. As she further describes in *Becoming Belle Knox*, her agent intentionally didn’t give her details about a porn shoot until she had committed to it. By the time she was informed the man was 50 years old, she felt her hands were tied, and she couldn’t say no. She would get fined and never hired from the company again. She went through with it “for professionalism,” she says. Despite feeling “like crying during the entire scene” and afterward feeling “really upset,” Weeks concluded that “even if your boundaries are disrespected, you should do the scene anyway.”

Employing “force, fraud, or coercion” in commercial sex acts is what is known as the crime of sex trafficking. Weeks may not have a sole person pimping her, but what she’s subjected to is dangerously close to sex trafficking, if not definitively so.

Weeks’ experience mirrored some of those recorded in the *Hot Girls Wanted* documentary. “Today was just so horrible,” Tressa said after doing a bondage scene. “That last part I hated so much,” a woman named Rachel says after a scene that was particularly painful. For Rachel’s scene, the director told the actors, “You kinda never get that yes,” suggesting that the forbidden nature of the sex act would make it more titillating for viewers. Turns out, in many cases, what’s true for the porn-fantasy script is true in reality. You kinda never get that yes.

At least 40 percent of porn depicts violence against women, according to *Hot Girls Wanted*. Among such trends are forced blow jobs to the point of making girls vomit (called “facial abuse” in porn lingo). “I was scared,” Rachel told a roommate after a rough scene. “I didn’t know that I could tell him no, or the fact that we had already recorded fifteen minutes that I could f\*\*\*ing leave . . . then what? Then I understand that that’s how rape victims feel.”

“It’s really not that hard to take advantage of an 18-year-old [who’s] f\*\*\*ing on camera,” Tressa says, reflecting on her time in porn. “I mean, most girls when I was in the industry would say yes to anything; if it had a dollar sign, sign me up.”

According to Herbenick and Paul’s research for *Hot Girls Wanted*, “In 2014, abuse porn websites averaged over 60 million combined hits per month—more hits than nfl.com, nba.com, hotwire.com, cbs.com, fortune.com, disney.com, and nbcnews.com.” Other researchers found that 88.2 percent of top-rated porn scenes contain aggressive acts; in 70 percent of occurrences, a man is the aggressor, and 94 percent of the time the violence is directed toward a woman. As it happens, the forced smiles of women in the sex industry are just a fantasy. Far from enjoying the sexcapades, women are often just trying to grin and bear it. “It wasn’t even arousing . . . a lot of porn is like that,” Rachel says after one of her rougher scenes. “It’s all about the guy getting off.”

Although there was less violence, the same was true in the Playboy mansion. “I have never had a more disconnected experience,” Madison says of her first sexual encounter in the mansion. “There was zero intimacy involved.” That was the first of what became a routine experience twice a week. According to Madison’s book, the girlfriends would be expected to have a night out and then partake in Hefner’s bedroom schedule, which included the girls mimicking porn-like behavior with porn in the background, Hefner going from girl to girl without asking consent, and then climaxing by himself, again watching porn. Madison

says that first time “weighed heavily” on her and was just the first on a long list of mistreatments she experienced at the mansion.

## **The Long Way Around**

It may confuse some readers to understand why women don't run kicking and screaming from scenarios like these. To be fair, many do. But still many others, once they experience something like this, experience a mess of emotions that includes a fear of facing their violation and a desire to feel in control—to own it, in other words. Mix this with a heavy dose of psychological manipulation from someone who's likely an experienced predator, and you've got a girl who might not have an easy exit strategy.

“While I had come into the mansion looking for a temporary safe harbor and a possible stepping-stone to a Hollywood career,” Madison says, “I had fallen down a rabbit hole of nasty girls, a degrading love life, eroded self-esteem, and total fear of judgment from the outside world. . . . I just couldn't admit to myself that I had made a terrible choice moving into the mansion in the first place. It was cognitive dissonance at its finest.”

Madison further explained, “It took years for me to realize just how manipulated and used I had been. I could never admit that to myself at the time because to do so would have been to acknowledge how dark and scary a situation I was in . . . and how very little in control I was.”

After reading Madison's book, one can't help but cringe to hear Weeks say, as she does in *Becoming Belle Knox* with a nervous laugh, “I have my identity, I know what I need, and I know what I want, sometimes . . . with porn everything is on my terms, I can say no whenever I want to, I am in control.” Viewers hear this moments before she promotes herself at a convention booth. “This movie is coming out; I get gangbanged; they put a collar and a leash on me; it's really hot. I like rough stuff.” *Rough*, indeed.

## **A Line in the Sand**

Are Holly and Tressa and Rachel and Miriam total victims though? Well, yes and no.

*Did* they know what they were getting into? Yes, to the extent that they knew this was racy; this was risky. They may have even gone to a lot of effort to make themselves look desirable for the industry. But the *no* is a big *no*. No, because they didn't know the extent to which they'd be abused, whether verbally or physically. No, because in many ways they were deceived and conned along the way. No, because they didn't have full knowledge of the costs.

Did they make bad choices? Sure. (As Madison puts it, “I hope that sharing my mistakes can prevent someone else from making similar ones or give someone the courage to leave a bad situation.”) Can they bounce back? Sure, some are incredibly resilient. But was what happened wrong? Yes. It is wrong for others to gain profit and pleasure off the profound mistreatment of women.

We already have a national crisis of sexual assault and abuse not being reported; it’s only worse for women who’ve signed up for it and feel they don’t have any recourse. Women who are abused in the sex industry and do seek legal help are often slandered or discredited; they have few advocates in the public square besides a small community of other women who have also left the industry.

All the same, the public view of the sex industry, whether porn or *Playboy*, is that it is something the women freely choose and get justly compensated for. The myth that there’s such a thing as a high-end, no-abuse zone within the sex industry endures. Madison thought that was the Playboy Mansion. Weeks thought that was the California shoot she flew to on a three-day weekend. The young women in Jones’ documentary thought it was the gig in Miami. Turns out that what they had expected was very different from reality; all they had been exposed to was the media’s portrayal as it’s marketed to the public. Which is, of course, just fantasy.

But it’s a tempting fantasy, even for those in it. Many try to suggest, even if just a little bit, that sex work isn’t always bad. There are some humane cases of sex industry work; there are even feminist ways you can portray porn. No one wants to say *all* porn is bad, lest they sound like a moral extremist or a prude. Even Rashida Jones, who produced *Hot Girls Wanted*, has said, “I have no problem with porn. . . . I think it’s great that we have the freedom to explore our sexual fantasies and that there are tools to do that. The problem [for] me is that there’s no regulation in the industry.”

But what if these trends we see, from Belle Knox to *Playboy* to Miami, all point to something—that the sex industry, which exploits large swaths of women, is innately harmful? That it has always relied on the same thing to make money—dehumanizing vulnerable women for profit. To deny this is to endanger future girls. Perpetuating the fake story line for one more girl to buy in to—to think that, yet again, their brush with the sex industry will be different—is something very dangerous.

Toward the end of *Hot Girls Wanted*, one of the more seasoned porn actresses hears about Duke’s new amateur star, Belle Knox, including her abusive scene for a porn site she, too, knows well. “Facial abuse is, like, *extra* degrading,” she exclaims. “Not everybody can come back from that. I can tell by the way that she talks about it. . . . I mean, she doesn’t talk about it. She was one of those girls who didn’t know what she was getting herself into.”

The more we perpetuate the myth of healthy, happy porn careers, the more we make believe that it's possible to have Marilyn Monroe's highs without her lows. And, sadly, the more women will wander down the rabbit hole, thinking they're the exception, not the rule.