

# The Sexualization of Girls and Girlhood



CAUSES,  
CONSEQUENCES,  
AND RESISTANCE

EDITED BY EILEEN L. ZURBRIGGEN AND TOMI-ANN ROBERTS

OXFORD

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*Causes, Consequences, and Resistance*

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EDITED BY EILEEN L. ZURBRIGGEN

*and*

TOMI-ANN ROBERTS

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## Prostitution: An Extreme Form of Girls' Sexualization

MELISSA FARLEY

The American Psychological Association's (APA) Report (2007) and most other chapters in this book have focused on cultural forms of the sexualization of girls that only indirectly involve physical or sexual violence and abuse. For example, narrowing the social definition of acceptable female appearance to one that requires starvation can have adverse physical consequences, just as selling girls clothing that defines them as sexually available can increase both their attractiveness to and vulnerability to predators. Understanding the prevalence and consequences of less extreme forms of sexualization is crucially important. Equally important is an awareness of extreme forms of girls' sexualization, such as sexual abuse and prostitution.

Today, the cultural sexualization of girls increasingly overlaps with and merges into prostitution. As Purcell and Zurbriggen (2013) point out, the prevalence of cultural materials that sexualize girls is likely to result in a greater prevalence of beliefs and ideologies that are "friendly to sexist institutions." Prostitution is here understood as a sexist institution, a culturally promoted institution that creates and reflects profound inequality between men and women.

Girls are sexualized when they are sent the message that they "should always be sexually available, always have sex on their minds, be willing to be dominated and even sexually aggressed against" (Merskin, 2004). Although Merskin was describing the cultural sexualization of girls, this statement also describes what is expected of women and girls in prostitution. Much of what has been termed the *sexualization of girls* is the promotion of prostitution-like activities for children (and for adult women). And there is common ground between the pretend and actual prostitution of girls.

It is emotionally challenging to face the reality of sexual violence as an organized criminal enterprise—prostitution—that operates freely in every community,

hidden in plain sight (Herman, 2003). Prostitution of a child (a person under age 18 in most countries) is the sexual abuse of a child who has been sexualized. Despite the fact that money is paid, sexual assault remains the child's (and most women's) experience of prostitution. Thus, sexual exploitation or sexual abuse of children, sexual assaults or rapes of children, and prostitution of children are essentially the same phenomenon from the child's point of view. They result in many of the same psychological sequelae, as will be discussed below.

In this chapter I will summarize the literature on the prostitution of children. A strong association between childhood sexual abuse and subsequent prostitution has been documented. Since 2000, researchers and service providers note that there is an increase in gang-affiliated prostitution, an increased use of the Internet to traffic children, and increasingly younger children in prostitution, especially 13- and 14-year-olds (Boyer, 2008). Prostitution of children may be hidden as child labor or sex work or even sexual freedom. The language of feminist empowerment has sometimes been deliberately employed to confuse sexual objectification and sexual freedom (Walter, 2010).

## Sexual Objectification and the Prostitution of Girls

When racially objectified, people are defined mostly or exclusively by their ethnic characteristics, especially specific physical features. The stage is then set for racist violence because objects have no feelings, no matter what is done to them. Similarly, once a girl is "made into a thing for others' sexual use" as the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (American Psychological Association, 2007) and others have defined sexual objectification, then the stage is set for sexual violence. Men's dominance over women is established and enforced by the dehumanizing process of sexual objectification that is at the psychological foundation of men's violence against women (Leidholdt, 1980).

According to the APA Task Force (2007) sexualization occurs *when a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics*; and *when a person is sexually objectified*—that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or *when sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person*. Girls are sexually objectified when they are defined by their sex, for example underpants that say "Who needs Santa when you've got this," "hottie" or "juicy" sweatpants, or breasts marked by shirts saying "hooters" or t-shirts labeling them as "pornstar" (see Downes, 2006).

Prostitution is an extreme form of sexualization in which sexual objectification is institutionalized and monetized. In prostitution, women and girls are valued for the sexual use of their vaginas, mouths, anuses, and breasts.



“Prostitution is renting an organ for 10 minutes,” explained a man who bought women in prostitution (Farley, 2006).

In prostitution, johns and pimps transform certain women and girls into objects for sexual use. Johns categorize girls according to their appearance on the basis of race/ethnicity, their ages, and according to their poverty or their presumed social and economic status. For example, pimps create for johns the masturbation fantasy of girls and young women who are assumed to be geishas-in-training or high-class escorts. Other johns are aroused by undocumented immigrants who don’t speak English or by drug addicts or by women who have a physical disability. Whatever quality in women johns have sexualized for themselves, such as skin color, poverty, size—whatever/whoever they want to buy for sexual use—pimps find, create, and offer for sale. In prostitution, girls are simply “sex” and nothing else about them matters.

The pimp-manufactured image of the john who is a nice guy and would never “force” anyone to engage in a nonconsenting sex act is belied by research documenting the experiences of young people in prostitution (Boyer, 2008; Curtis, Terry, Dank, Dombrowski, & Khan, 2008; Farley et al., 2003), none of whom was offered a couch for the night or a free meal *without the exchange of permitting sexual assault* for those necessities. There are also many accounts by johns that are variations on the theme, “Well, I did see a few bruises on her leg, and yes, there was a certain look of fear in her eyes but, she didn’t complain and um, I already paid for it so...” (Farley, 2006).

## Childhood Sexual Assault and Prostitution

Brannigan and Gibbs Van Brunschot (1997) described prostitution as a process of *victimization across the life cycle*. Family abuse and neglect initiate the cycle. For example, one woman stated that by the time she was 17,

all I knew was how to be raped, and how to be attacked, and how to be beaten up, and that’s all I knew. So when he put me on the game [pimped her] I was too down in the dumps to do anything. All I knew was abuse. (Phoenix, 1999)

Most studies of prostitution of children document a strong association between childhood sexual abuse and prostitution that usually begins at adolescence (Abramovitch, 2005). Newton-Ruddy and Handelsman (1986) found that 90% of teenagers in prostitution had been sexually abused by caregivers or neighbors. Simons and Whitbeck (1991) considered childhood sexual assault a necessary precipitating factor, although not by itself a sufficient cause of adolescent prostitution.

Familial sexual abuse functions as a training ground for prostitution. The early victimization puts girls at risk for later abuse (James & Meyerding, 1977). Girls learn behaviors that normalize prostitution. They appear to accept their own sexual objectification and exploitation. The widespread sexualization of girls in the culture further reinforces the perpetrator's message that her role is to be sexually used. The child is taught to make herself available to the family perpetrator. Dworkin (1997) described sexual abuse of children as "boot camp" for prostitution. One young woman told Silbert and Pines (1982a), "I started turning tricks to show my father what he made me."

In the 1980s, Silbert, Pines, and colleagues published a number of studies that documented an extremely high level of childhood abuse and trauma in the lives of women who were prostituted, including 96% who had run away from home and 78% who entered prostitution under the age of age 18 (Silbert & Pines, 1981, 1982a,b, 1983). Seventy-three percent had also suffered rapes outside of prostitution (Silbert & Pines, 1983). In a noteworthy finding, 70% of the prostituted young women said that the childhood sexual abuse influenced their decision to later enter prostitution (Silbert and Pines, 1983).

Sexual abuse during adolescence and being an ethnic minority tended to increase the risk of sexual revictimization (Classen, Paresh, & Aggarwal, 2005). Having been sexually abused in childhood not only increased Black women's risk of sexual violence as adults, it also increased their risk of prostitution according to West, Williams, and Siegel (2000). These researchers also found that African American sexual abuse survivors who were revictimized as adults were three times more likely to have been involved in prostitution than African American women who had not been revictimized as adults.

In a prospective study, Widom and Kuhns (1996) found that physical abuse and sexual abuse were associated with subsequent prostitution and that children who had been sexually abused were 28 times more likely to be arrested for prostitution later in their lives. Bagley and Young (1987) associated childhood sexual abuse both with subsequent psychopathology and with subsequent prostitution, and found that 73% of 45 prostitution survivors had been sexually abused as children, in contrast to 28% of nonprostituted controls. Sixty-two percent of those in prostitution had been physically abused as children.

Two studies investigated childhood sexual abuse and subsequent prostitution among women in the criminal justice system. In a sample of 1,240 jailed women, Foti (1995) found that women who had been sexually victimized in childhood engaged in prostitution more than twice as often as nonabused detainees did. Simmons (2000) interviewed 122 women who were either living in halfway houses or were incarcerated. Those who had been involved in prostitution were significantly more likely to have been sexually abused in childhood than were women who had never engaged in prostitution.

An international study found that 63% of women in prostitution had been sexually abused in childhood by an average of four perpetrators; 59% had been physically brutalized in childhood (Farley et al., 2003; see also Schissel and Fedec, 1999).

## Psychological Consequences of the Sexual Objectification of Girls Through Incest and Prostitution

Incest and prostitution cause similar physical and psychological symptoms in the victim. When a child is incestuously assaulted, the perpetrator's objectification of the child victim and his rationalization and denial are like those of the john in prostitution (Putnam, 1990; Farley, 2003). When girls are subjected to childhood sexual abuse and/or prostitution, the resulting psychological symptoms include a sense of degradation and self-loathing (Bagley & Young, 1987). Like adult women in prostitution, prostituting youth in New York City reported an entrenched self-hatred. Like adults, children hated and feared buyers, and 87% told the researchers that they wanted to escape prostitution (Curtis et al., 2008).

Andrea Dworkin wrote about prostitution's profound impact on the psyche of the prostituted:

When men use women in prostitution, they are expressing a pure hatred for the female body. It is as pure as anything on this earth ever is or ever has been. It is a contempt so deep, so deep, that a whole human life is reduced to a few sexual orifices, and he can do anything he wants (Dworkin, 1997).

It is painful for children and young women to articulate the impact of sexualization, in part because they are in the process of internalizing these objectifying beliefs about themselves. The internalized sexual objectification that occurs with incest is likely to increase girls' vulnerability to sexual violence. Other symptoms resulting from incest, such as dissociation and self-contempt, impair girls' ability to protect themselves from sexual assault (Zurbriggen & Freyd, 2004) or from prostitution. A woman explained the gradual development of a sexually objectified identity in strip club prostitution:

You start changing yourself to fit a fantasy role of what they think a woman should be. In the real world, these women don't exist. They [johns] stare at you with this starving hunger. It sucks you dry; you become this empty shell. They're not really looking at you, you're not you. You're not even there. (Farley, 2003)

The APA Task Force Report (2007) noted that the cultural sexualization of girls was linked to their low self-esteem, depression, and eating disorders, which are also sequelae of childhood sexual abuse and prostitution. West (2009) described the effects of sexualization specifically on African American girls: poor body image unless the girl met specific narrowly defined pornographic criteria, viewing one's sexuality as a commodity, adversarial relationships with men, tolerance of violent sexuality, and sexual risk-taking. Smith and colleagues (2005) summarized behavioral consequences of the sexualization of girls including earlier age of sexual activity, risky sexual behavior, and viewing prostitution as humorous and enjoyable.

Symptoms that are known to result from prostitution include eating disorders, depression, anxiety disorders including posttraumatic stress disorder (Farley et al., 2003), dissociative disorders (Ross, Farley, & Schwartz, 2003), self-mutilation, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts and attempts (Schissel & Fedec, 1999; Ling, Wong, Holroyd, & Gray, 2007), and complex PTSD (Mayfield-Schwarz, 2006). The malignant identity needed in order to survive prostitution is fragmented and dissociated and requires the pathological regulation of emotions (Herman, 1994).

Childhood sexual abuse may result in reenactment of sexual abuse or promiscuity or prostitution (Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993), with different behaviors at different stages of the child's development. For example, sexualized behaviors may first become apparent among sexually abused preschool aged children, then may submerge during the latency years and reemerge during adolescence as promiscuity, prostitution, or sexual aggression.

Traumatic sexualization is the inappropriate conditioning of the child's sexual responsiveness and the socialization of the child into faulty beliefs and assumptions about sexuality that leave her vulnerable to additional sexual exploitation (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986). Traumatic sexualization is an essential component of the grooming process for subsequent prostitution. The sexually abused child may incorporate the perpetrator's perspective into her identity, eventually viewing herself as good for nothing but sex—which is to say she may adopt his view that she is a prostitute (Putnam, 1990). Pimps are heard to say that the women they recruit into prostitution were first trained by their fathers. A pimp explained, "Most of them have been abused sexually by their parents...they been raped so many times they feel they might as well get money for it. Well, it's my job to teach them that it's better to get paid for it than do it for free" (Hansen, 2003).

The constricted sense of self of the sexually abused child and the coercive refusal of the perpetrator to respect the child's physical boundaries may result in subsequent difficulties in asserting boundaries, in impaired self-protection, and a greater likelihood of being further sexually victimized, including prostitution (Briere, 1992). The powerlessness of having been sexually assaulted as a child



may be related to the frequent discussions of control and power by women who are prostituting. The emotional and physical helplessness of the sexually abused child may be reenacted in the prostitution transaction with vigilant attention to the tiniest shard of control. Payment of money for an unwanted sex act in prostitution may make the girl or woman feel more in control when compared to the same experience with no payment of money. For example, a woman stated that at age 17 she felt safer and more in control turning tricks on the street than she did at home with her stepfather raping her (Farley, 2003).

The dissociation that appears to be a critical survival mechanism for prostitution (Ross et al., 2003) was itself originally a survival response to childhood sexual assault as survivors explain:

It was easy for me to turn a trick because I could just take myself out—like with my dad. It was like I took myself out of the situation and just focused on something else and it was like I wasn't even there.  
(Dalla, 2006)

Although the chronically sexually abused child's dissociative capacity may facilitate physical and emotional survival, it undermines the child's capacity to form attachments with nonabusive caregivers, for example, in foster care (Carr, 2009). Kindness or nurturing can become triggers for dissociation. The sexually abused, homeless, or prostituted child's manipulateness is another adaptive response to an interpersonal environment that is chaotic and dangerous. The resulting mistrust and manipulation can result in caregivers' frustration or hostility, further disrupting the child's attachments (DiPaolo, 1999).

## Homelessness Is Associated with Prostitution of Children

Children's homelessness is preceded by running away or being thrown out of homes. Most youth who are homeless have suffered previous chronic sexual, emotional, and/or physical abuse and neglect (Gwadz, Nish, Leonard, & Strauss, 2007; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997a,b; MacLean, Embry, and Cauce, 1999; Stewart, Steigman, Cauce, Cochran, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2004). One girl told her probation officer that she was treated very well because her pimp allowed her to have Subway sandwiches when she was hungry (Friedman, 2005). Female homeless youth experience significantly higher levels of sexual trauma than do male homeless youth both before and after their homelessness (Gwadz, 2007; Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001). Molnar, Shade, Kral, Booth, and Watters (1998) studied 775 12- to 19-year-olds who

were homeless. Forty-eight percent of the young women had attempted suicide an average of six times, with 70% reporting childhood sexual abuse and 35% reporting childhood physical abuse.

Running away from home is a primary risk factor for youth prostitution (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Seng, 1989). Running away is significantly associated with prostitution as a factor separate from childhood sexual abuse (Nadon, Koverola, & Schludermann, 1998; Potterrat, Phillips, Rothenberg, & Darrow, 1985). The links between the sexual abuse of girls in their homes, running away, homelessness, out-of-home-placements such as foster care, and recruitment to prostitution (which may be performed by other exploited youth) are still underresearched, according to Cooper (2009). In addition to homelessness and running away, additional mediating factors have been proposed to explain the links between sexual abuse and prostitution. Brannigan and Gibbs Van Brunschot (1997) suggested that the link between sexual trauma and prostitution is mediated by attachment failure, parental conflict, substance abuse, and physical and verbal abuse. These children's psychological distress is then further exacerbated by disrupted or inadequate attachments in foster care (Carr, 2009).

As with adult women, homelessness in children is a significant risk factor for prostitution. After only 36–48 hours of homelessness, young people are likely to be solicited for sex in exchange for money, food, or shelter (Clayton, 1996). Their risk for ongoing sexual exploitation is increased by the lack of an adequate social safety net. Pimps exploit the vulnerability of runaway or thrown-out children. In Vancouver, 46% of homeless girls had received offers of “assistance to help them work in prostitution.” A 13-year-old who had run away from home was given housing by a pimp, but only in exchange for prostituting (Farley, 2003).

An international study of prostitution documented a 75% rate of previous homelessness among prostituted women (Farley et al., 2003). A study of prostituted youth also found a 75% rate of homelessness (Yates, MacKenzie, Pennbridge, & Swofford, 1991). Ninety-six percent of the adults interviewed by Silbert and Pines (1983) had been runaway children and therefore were likely homeless before entering prostitution. Of women who began prostituting between the ages of 12 and 15, 72% had run away from home as children. Half of these women had grown up in a home with other family members who were prostituting (Raphael & Shapiro, 2002).

It is uncomfortable for children to acknowledge their own prostitution. Children name prostitution “survival sex.” A survey of 500 homeless youths in Indianapolis reported that, at first, only 14% acknowledged that they were prostituting (Lucas & Hackett, 1995). When the Indiana adolescents were subsequently asked nonjudgmental questions about specific behaviors, 32% said that they had sex to get money; 21% said they had sex for a place to stay

overnight; 12% exchanged sex for food; 10% exchanged sex for drugs; and 6% exchanged sex for clothes. It is unclear how much or little these categories overlapped but, at a minimum, 32% of these homeless youths prostituted since prostitution includes the exchange of sex for cash, drugs, food, or shelter.

There is a growing need to address vulnerability to prostitution in immigrant families where traditional practices from the home country may clash with U.S. culture. In New York, the largest increase in runaway children in 2001 was from immigrant communities (Spangenberg, 2001). More than half of 50 prostituting Asian girls aged 11 to 16 said that they had run away from home because of family conflict (Louie, Luu, & Tong, 1991).

### Adolescence Is the Most Frequently Documented Age of Entry into Prostitution

Early adolescence is the most frequently reported age of entry into prostitution. The average age of entry into prostitution was age 12–13, according to a study conducted by international organization End Child Prostitution and Trafficking (ECPAT) (Spangenberg, 2001). Of 200 adult women in prostitution, 78% began prostituting as minors, with 68% entering prostitution when they were younger than 16 (Silbert, 1982a). Eighty-nine percent of adult women in prostitution began prostituting when they were younger than 16 (Nadon et al., 1998). Among 45 women in legal Nevada brothels, 23% had begun prostituting as children (Farley, 2007).

These U.S. findings are consistent with reports from other countries. Cusick (2002) found that a majority of British women in prostitution had begun prostitution as minors. Across nine countries 47% of 854 people in prostitution began prostituting as children (Farley et al., 2003).

### No Reliable Data on the Number of Children Engaged in Prostitution

At this time, there are no studies that provide an accurate estimate of the numbers of children in prostitution in the United States or elsewhere. There has been great variation in figures reported regarding the prevalence of prostitution of children. Rather than cite numbers that vary by the hundreds of thousands, I refer readers to two discussions of the problems encountered in estimating the number of children in prostitution. Ennew and colleagues (1996) provided an annotated bibliography of the difficulties in measuring the prevalence of the prostitution of children. For example, estimates were made at conferences that

were later cited as more credible than the educated guesses that they actually were. Urging those in the field to refrain from offering estimates, Stransky and Finkelhor (2008) provided a Fact Sheet on Juvenile Prostitution, noting that all numbers *and estimates* were suspect. They concluded, "The reality is that we do not currently know how many juveniles are involved in prostitution. Scientifically credible estimates do not exist." Obviously, there is a need for research on the prevalence of prostitution of children.

We do however know *where* children are trafficked into prostitution. As with adults, children today are primarily sold via Internet websites that advertise escort prostitution, erotic encounters, or dates. Children are prostituted in strip clubs, massage parlors, live web cam prostitution, phone sex, and in other locations where adult prostitution takes place. On the ground, it is impossible to differentiate the prostitution of adults from that of children. In most cities, children are sold in certain zones familiar to those who buy them (Boyer, 2008; Spangenberg, 2001).

### Racism is an Integral Part of Sexual Objectification and Systems of Prostitution

Marginalization because of race/ethnicity or poverty increases the likelihood that a girl will be prostituted. Young women of color, especially Latinas and African Americans, are overrepresented among prostitution-involved trafficked youth compared to their numbers in the overall U.S. population. Priebe and Suhr (2005) described the demographics of populations at risk for trafficking for prostitution in Atlanta and found that the majority of children in prostitution were African American girls whose average age was 14. Those at greatest risk were not immigrants or refugees, although, unfortunately, when trafficking is addressed, internationally trafficked children may be more likely to be viewed as victims are than African American girls who have been stereotyped as "hardened" or "overly sexualized" and worthy of incarceration (Kittling, 2006).

In the 1990s, African American girls in San Francisco were frequently arrested and incarcerated (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, 2007). African American youth were approximately three times as likely as white European American youth to be detained upon arrest. A decade later, Latino youth were approximately six times more likely than white European American youth to be detained upon arrest (Macallair and Males, 2003). In 2007, San Francisco's Center for Juvenile and Criminal Justice noted a "shocking overuse of detention for Latino youth."

African American homeless young adults were significantly more likely to be prostituted than white European Americans (Tyler, 2009). Noting that African American homeless youth use significantly fewer services than white



European Americans, Tyler speculated that a lack of accessible and culturally relevant services was a factor. There is an urgent need for trauma-informed services, especially for young women of color.

Although the sexual objectification of girls occurs in many forms of music, not exclusively in hip-hop (APA, 2007), it is especially toxic in hip-hop's misogynist and racist lyrics, where women are "ho's" and "bitches" deserving of men's contempt and violence (Armstrong, 2001). African American girls have been especially harmed by rap culture, which glorifies pimping and stereotypes girls as hypersexual, sexually irresponsible, and uninterested in intimate relationships (Davis, 2004). A study of 1,461 12- to 17-year-olds found that degrading lyrics (but not sexual lyrics that were not degrading) were associated with a range of increased adolescent sexual behaviors. The study's authors described prostitution-like roles for girls as degraded "ho's" and roles for boys that were pimp-like or john-like in popular teen music (Martino et al., 2006).

Where there is cultural tolerance of the exploitation of women and people of color, then the most extreme poverty results in girls' greatest risk for prostitution and other sexual violence. The destructive legacy of colonialism creates cultural and familial disruption, resulting in extremely high rates of domestic violence and abuse of children. Hecht (1998) analyzed the situation of prostituting street children in Brazil partly as resulting from that country's history of slavery and colonialism. Although rarely analyzed as such, colonialism is one of the causal factors in the prostitution of indigenous girls and women (Farley, Lynne, & Cotton, 2005). Schissel and Fedec (1999) found that Aboriginal youth in Canadian prostitution were subjected to more violence than were non-Aboriginal youth. The Aboriginal youth were more likely to run away from home, and they had experienced significantly more of the risk factors in childhood for prostitution than non-Aboriginal youth: neglect, physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse.

## Prostitution of Girls Is Characterized by Pimp Control

Service providers and survivors of prostitution agree that almost all children in prostitution are under the control of pimps, usually a series of pimps since they are bought, traded, and sold if they are in prostitution for longer than a very brief time. Studying prostitution of children in California, Carr (2009) found that most had been coerced into prostitution by pimps posing as boy-friends, by friends or classmates, by older women, and by men who were strangers to them. In another study, a young woman explained,

It was in December and it was really cold. I couldn't stand to be on the street. And this guy saw me, and he was like, "Are you homeless?"

I said, "Yes." And he asked me, "I'm willing to take you in; what are you willing to do for me?" And at the moment, I couldn't answer the question, but I knew what he meant. So I just I went along with it. He took me to his house. He fed me, gave me clothes to change in and everything. And at the end of the night, it was pretty much that I had to do something sexual to him to stay. And I had to give him oral sex. (Curtis et al., 2008, p. 49)

A 15-year-old girl in New York explained how she was recruited by a pimp:

I was in a group home. And he was like, you know, the little leeches that linger around. And I was sittin' on my steps and I was cryin' ... And the things that he was sayin' to me, it sounded good. So, it was like, "Hmm, you know, maybe I can do this." But once I started seein' certain things and certain actions, it was like, I might as well have stayed in the hell I was in, because now, I'm doin' things that I really don't wanna do.' (Curtis et al., 2008, p. 47)

Children may be recruited by their friends, as this child explained:

I got kicked out at 14, and I had nowhere to go. And when I found one a my friends, at first, she referred me to be at a strip club. It's called Oasis, in the Bronx. So I stripped for a couple a months and I didn't like the pay. I tried to look for a job, but I was too young. So, then she referred me to...do this. And I don't consider myself a prostitute, but an escort. My friends told me their clients...and then their clients...and it just goes up from there. (Curtis et al., 2008, p. 50)

Pimps recruit vulnerable young women who need affection, food, and shelter through a process that is an extremely controlled courtship like the love-bombing recruitment used by cults. Her need for an attachment requires that the girl develop an intimate relationship with someone who is fundamentally untrustworthy, unpredictable, and dangerous (Herman, 1994).

The violent control used by pimps causes feelings of terror, helplessness, and dependence in prostituted girls. Silbert and Pines (1983) described a PTSD-like "psychological paralysis" among prostituted youth and a syndrome they described as *learned helplessness*. A trafficking victim in the United Kingdom explained, "Sometimes I don't see the point in doing anything. It seems useless. When someone has controlled you and made decisions for you for so long, you can't do that for yourself anymore" (Zimmerman et al., 2006).

Prostituted children live under conditions of domestic terrorism. The techniques of control used by batterers with wives, girlfriends, and children

parallel those used by pimps (Stark & Hodgson, 2003). Pimps, like other batterers, make certain that the women are too terrified and too psychologically and physically beaten down to contemplate escape, using social isolation, economic control, minimization and denial of violence, threats, intimidation, and emotional, sexual, and physical violence (Giobbe, 1992, 1993).

Unless human behavior under conditions of captivity is understood, the emotional bond between prostituted girls and pimps is difficult to comprehend. Emotional bonding to an abuser under conditions of captivity has been described as *Stockholm syndrome* (Graham, 1994). Attitudes and behaviors that are part of this syndrome include intense gratefulness for small favors when the captor holds life and death power over the captive, denial of the extent of violence and harm that the captor has inflicted or is obviously capable of inflicting, hypervigilance with respect to the pimp's needs and identification with the pimp's perspective on the world (an example of this was Patty Hearst's identification with her captors' ideology), perception of those trying to assist in escape as enemies and perception of captors as friends, and extreme difficulty leaving one's captor/pimp even after physical release has occurred. Paradoxically, girls in prostitution may feel that they owe their lives to pimps (Graham, 1994).

Herman (2003) noted that the sex industry can be understood as "a primary vector for socialization in the practices of coercive control, and the pimp might be among the world's most common instructors in the arts of torture." Coercive subjugation by pimps always contains the threat of violence, which is periodically inflicted under conditions that maximize its effects: unpredictability, and with a high intensity that overwhelms the senses and deliberately activates the victim's specific fears, aversions, and anxieties. Whenever the violence is *not* inflicted on her, the woman in prostitution is immensely grateful. This coerced gratitude is an essential element of the prostitute-pimp dynamic (Schwartz, 2000).

### Pimps' Use of Mind Control Against Children in Prostitution

An abused and frightened 15-year-old girl does not have the skills to outmaneuver a 26-year-old pimp who's offering love, money, and shelter (Boyer, 2008). Fortunately, new information is now available to better understand how pimps use mental coercion to control prostituted children.

Pimps gradually remove a child's previous set of values and replace it with the pimp's own worldview. The girl's attachments to others are carefully undermined and ultimately destroyed, leaving the pimp as the only

available source of support, protection, or validation. Parents and family members may be presented to the girl as the enemy. Society is held in contempt. Subversion of the social order becomes one of many forms of “pulling-one-over” by which the pimp feeds his inflated, narcissistic sense of himself. The pimp’s way of thinking is slowly and systematically downloaded into the psyche of the girl in prostitution. As in cults, the pimp and his community ultimately replace any previously existing social system (Schwartz, Williams, & Farley, 2007).

Mind control is facilitated by social isolation and sensory deprivation, which can include being locked up for long periods of time in windowless rooms to keep victims disoriented about time and place, deprived of sunlight, and more vulnerable to the pimp’s influence. The social isolation may be so profoundly stressful and disorganizing that the victim will acquiesce to any form of contact, even rape. This coerced choice is then used by the pimp to confuse the girl about her own motivations and to cement his subjugation of her (Schwartz et al., 2007).

Pimps deliberately traumatize prostituted girls in order to establish control over them. They also use starvation, sleep deprivation, protein deprivation, conditioned physiologic hyperarousal, unexpected sexual violence, and learned helplessness (Schwartz et al., 2007). Pimps induce exhaustion and physical debilitation in order to establish control or inflict punishment. They assume psychological, biological, social, and economic control over the lives of the women they sell to johns through chronic terror, captivity, and isolation from others who might offer support and validation. The pimp’s total control over young women in prostitution includes what she wears, when and where she can sleep, and what and how much she can eat, whether she can use a toilet or access menstrual supplies, if and how much emergency medical care she receives, even how much air and light she is allowed to have.

Capricious rules degrade, confuse, and reinforce complicity, as in the case of a girl whose pimp required her to lay down in a particular spot on the floor whenever he commanded “Down!” (Schwartz et al., 2007). Pimps threaten to kill girls and their families. Girls are forced to witness extreme violence against others, including death. Pornography is used for blackmail and as “proof” of the victim’s complicity in her own sexual abuse by establishing her identity as a prostitute. Any move toward autonomy on her part, any attempt to exert more control over her body or even to use her own critical thinking, is viewed as insubordination by the pimp, a viewpoint that is gradually internalized by the young woman herself (Herman, 1994; Schwartz, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2007).

Girls are permitted no dignity in prostitution. Degradation is at the core of the incapacitating shame and mind control used by pimps. Verbal sadism is psychologically disorganizing and emotionally debilitating, while at the same



time it enhances girls' dependence on pimps. A 14-year-old girl wrote about a pimp's use of these techniques.

We just got in the car and drove to Chicago leaving everything behind. It was dark when we got there. He brought me to this kind of apartment warehouse with a lot of young girls there—black, white, everything. I asked who they were and he said, “these are my girls.” He sat me down and told me, either I am with him this way or not at all. Then Tommy began treating me badly. He locked me in a room and left me without food or water. All he left me was some coke [cocaine]. He said this was my punishment, but I didn't know for what. All I heard were the trains going by. I thought about jumping out, but it was so high. Then after maybe 3 days he came back and got me. All the way home, we would stop and go with truckers and then go back in his motel room.

The day before Thanksgiving, Thomas told me his brother died and threw me in the car like it was my fault. *He brought me to a guy's house and told me I was a bad girl and don't deserve to live.* He threw me in the room and tried to assault me. But I didn't want him to touch me. I yelled, “Get away!” He knocked me unconscious and I blacked out. *I woke up to Tommy whispering in my ear: I'm a bad girl; I have no purpose in life; I'm just a sex toy. He just kept whispering these things over and over.* Then he passed out on top of me, after having sex with me. I stayed so still, just lying there, and waited for hours. (Friedman, 2005, p. 11, author's italics)

These techniques are interspersed with special favors, promises of relief, and sometimes affection, all of which create a powerful trauma bond. The psychological and neurobiological reactions generated by alternating terrorism with gratuitous and unpredictable rewards deepens traumatic bonding and reinforces the girl's twisted attachment (Schwartz et al., 2007). The complex psychobiology of trauma, attachment, and survival (brilliantly manipulated by the pimp) leaves the girl ensnared by her own adaptation responses. Outsiders see them as partners rather than dominator and subordinate. This misinterpretation of their relationship further cements her bond to the pimp (Schwartz et al., 2007).

Pimps facilitate the creation of dissociated parts of the self who happily prostitute. In extreme cases, sensory deprivation and torture result in highly compartmentalized “prostitute personalities” in chronically traumatized and dissociative women and children. A young woman who was filmed in sadomasochistic prostitution reported that the cameramen/pimps taught her to use hypnotic techniques to dissociate specific parts of her body for pain control. The pimps/

pornographers convinced vulnerable girls that they were “bondage sluts,” who demonstrated their strength based on their tolerance for violent abuse.

## Online Sexualization, Sexual Exploitation, and Prostitution

Pimps use the same tactics online that they use elsewhere: enticement, persuasion, grooming, coercion, denial and minimization of harm, social isolation, intimidation, and violent threats (Klien, 2008). Targeting vulnerable or homeless girls, pimps recruit and instruct them in the use of a cell phone and a publicly available computer where the girls are advertised for sexual use.

Children are sold on prostitution websites such as *redbook.com*, *eros.com*, or *Craigslist*. *Craigslist* originated as an online community bulletin board but has released 25,000 new advertisements every 10 days for “erotic services” which is code for prostitution (Farley, 2006). In Sacramento, a crossroads for organized criminals who traffic girls in the western United States, hundreds of ads for prostitution a day were posted on *Craigslist* (Branson, 2006).

Children are not specifically advertised as “children” or “girls,” although this is clearly implied in much prostitution advertising. In August 2009, for example, *Craigslist* advertised “cute little Barbie doll” and “INEXPERIENCED, Beautiful, Petite Ballerina-Asian college student” who is described as “I look young but I’m over 18” on adult services (*Craigslist*, 2009a,b,c). Web searches for hot young girls (2009) produced “first time teeny anal training” and “hot young teen plays with her pussy on bed” (*Hottest Teen Videos*, 2009a,b). In a 2009 web search for “incest videos,” more than 18 computer screens were produced. It is unclear whether the images are of adults who appear childlike or if they are filmed sexual abuse of children who are being trafficked online (*Incest Videos*, 2009).

In 2008, a 15-year-old ran away from her home in western Wisconsin and was then pimped out on *Craigslist*, where 15 different advertisements offered her for sale to Milwaukee johns (Diedrich, 2008). In another case a 16-year-old girl was pimped by a man who beat, raped, and photographed her. He posted the photos on *Craigslist* and was eventually arrested (Diedrich, 2008). In 2008, federal agents arrested two Detroit pimps who had placed 2,800 ads for prostitution on *Craigslist*, *MySpace*, and other social networking sites. The pimps were charged with sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of children. The children were transported by organized crime networks across the United States, and their prostitution was photographed and sold as pornography (Snell & Hicks, 2008). An Illinois sheriff has sued *Craigslist* for trafficking (*Coalition Against Trafficking in Women*, 2009).

In 2007, there were 29,000 registered sex offenders on *MySpace.com* (Robertson, 2007). According to his *MySpace* profile, a 41-year-old man was

single, a Sagittarius, a nonsmoker and nondrinker. A database of registered sex offenders offered a different profile of the man. He had convictions for forced sodomy, oral sex, and lewd and lascivious acts with a person under the age of 14. A 22-year-old man created a MySpace college student persona, professing a love for poetry, nature, and coffee house bands, while failing to mention that he was a convicted child molester (Shreve, 2006).

Girls' vulnerability is increased by risky online interactions, such as talking about sex to strangers (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2004, 2008; Muir, 2005). A review of Internet-initiated sex crimes against minors revealed that 75% of girls between 13 and 15 years of age met adult sex offenders in Internet chat rooms; 64% of offenders communicated online with the victims for 6 months or more; and 77% of the communications were in multiple ways (telephone, mail, pictures, gifts, or money). Fifty percent of the victims felt close to the offender or were in love with the offender (Wolak et al., 2004).

Of the 83 children identified by a U.K. children's advocacy group as having been subjected to Internet or cell phone exploitation, 47% were also prostituted. Eleven children were sold on the Internet, one was sold on a live pay-per-view website, and 27 children were coerced into having pornography made of them. The children gave the following reasons why they either did not tell or why they denied that they had been sexually exploited: first, the photos made it appear that they agreed to the sexual abuse; second, they may have been smiling in the images, as they were directed to do; third, they may have been coerced to recruit other victims (e.g., schoolmates who were invited for sleepovers at the insistence of the sex offender) and therefore felt that they were themselves "responsible bystanders" since friends were sexually abused and often victims of pornography production; fourth, the children were encouraged to be proactive in their own self-exploitation (masturbation) or with other children (mutual sexual abuse), with or without the offender in the images; and finally, children were shown their own images and threatened with the perpetrator's telling nonoffending parents that the child cooperated and did not stop the abuse (Palmer, 2004). These are the same reasons that adult women in prostitution give for blaming themselves for their prostitution.

## Mainstreaming Prostitution-like Behaviors

Boundaries between normal adolescent sexual exploration and prostitution-like activity have disappeared on many social networking sites. Sites that are popular with girls, such as MySpace, Facebook, Flickr, Stickam, and Yahoo, host adult pornography, child pornography, and solicitation for prostitution. MySpace, for example, lists thinly veiled prostitution advertising such as "Find a Booty

Call” (Criddle, 2008). Stickam, another socially risky website used by teenagers, encourages the posting of live web cam sexual behaviors (Stone, 2007). *Espin-the-bottle* is advertised as a sexualized “flirting and dating” site for people aged 13–57. The site posts children’s responses to sexualized quizzes and accepts advertising from companies that promote ways to help children hide their Internet use from parents (Criddle, 2008). Championing sexual objectification, MissBimbo.com encourages girls to compete to become the “hottest, coolest, most famous bimbo in the whole world.”

In 2010, girls’ sexualization blends seamlessly with prostitution. Prostitution-like behaviors are part of what it means to be female today. Young women are taught the sexuality of prostitution and pornography (Barry, 1995) and embrace it as their own. They ignore their own sexual feelings (or lack of them) and learn that their role is to service boyfriends who have also learned about sex via pornography.

School-based sex education programs focus on the biology of reproduction, often neglecting sexual behaviors, romance, and intimate relationships (Flood, 2007). Pornography, on the other hand, provides templates for sexual relationships. In 2001, 70% of 15- to 17-year-olds viewed online pornography (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001). A 2007 Australian survey found that 97% of girls and 100% of boys had viewed pornography before age 15 (Sauers, 2007). Children may be enticed into photographing themselves and transmitting it online (Nyman, 2006). Flirting by sending nude photos of oneself via cell-phones (Jayson, 2008) is commonplace, but the photos can easily be passed on and are sometimes posted on the Internet.

Imitating pornography, children enact the sex of prostitution by attempting sex that is casual and nonrelational, learning a sexuality that eroticizes powerlessness. Pornography is mediated prostitution (Catharine A. MacKinnon, personal communication, 2009). Child pornography is indistinguishable from the prostitution/sexual assault of children. Some consider pornography that contains images of the abuse and the prostitution of children to be digital crime scenes (Cooper, 2009).

Learning to present a hypersexualized, prostitution-like version of themselves to the world, girls may unwittingly participate in their own sexual exploitation. Levy described the “imaginary licentiousness” that very young girls enact in order to appear grown up. One girl explained, “Sexually, we didn’t really do anything, but you wanted to *look* like you did” (Levy, 2005, p. 150).

Girls are sent the message that they should be available for sex and skilled at it. *Adorable* magazine sent teen subscribers a sex guide entitled *99 Naughty Tricks*. *Seventeen* and *CosmoGirl* magazines offer sex advice, often without mentioning a relationship as the context in which the sex occurs. Casually fellating boys at parties is normative for girls (Azam, 2009). One girl repeated the pimp’s argument for prostitution, noting that if she was already fellating two

or three boys every weekend at parties for free, she might as well do the same with five or six boys and get paid for it (Hanon, 2009).

Prostitution is normalized for children by “soft” or seemingly amateur pornography like *Girls Gone Wild* and by videos that mainstream prostitution and prostitution-like activities. For *Girls Gone Wild* footage, producer Joe Francis films at clubs where teenagers are partying. After girls are intoxicated, he persuades and entices them into being filmed. Francis pleaded no contest to child abuse and prostitution charges stemming from his pornography production activities (Parrish, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

Children have been encouraged to pursue jobs in the sex industry. Middle school students at a 2005 career day in California were told that stripping and exotic dancing were excellent careers for girls. A smiling job counselor told students that if they had breast enlargement surgery, they could earn excellent salaries as strippers. “For every two inches up there it’s another \$50, 000,” he enthusiastically told the girls (Kim, 2005). An Abercrombie & Fitch marketing catalog promoted stripping as an empowering summer job for students (Smith et al., 2005).

### Conclusion: Needs of Prostituted Girls and Needs of Girls at Risk for Prostitution-like Sexualization

“Someplace safe,” she said. “Someplace to be a girl. Someplace where I won’t have to have sex with men anymore.” (Maternowska, 2009) This 16-year-old Swazi girl’s answer is as relevant to prostitution of children in the United States as it is to prostitution of children in Swaziland. She needs secure housing in a facility staffed with people who understand her needs not only for physical safety but also for safety from predators who are often caregivers and boyfriends. Before she was sold in prostitution, she was almost certainly sexually assaulted in her family and community, which compounded the harm of the violence in prostitution. She needs long-term residential safety and treatment in order to permit slow and steady healing from childhood trauma and neglect, from the brainwashing of pimps, and from the violent degradation perpetrated on her by johns.

The hold that pimps and the street culture have over prostituted youth is too powerful to be displaced by traditional social services or brief interventions (Boyer, 2008). Health service providers are not yet adequately trained to work with girls whose involvement in prostitution is more Stockholmed and cult-like than is traditionally understood.

Weisberg, in 1985, noted that prostituting adolescents needed crisis housing, medical care, employment, and school counseling. Twenty years later, Friedman (2005) and Boyer (2008) describe the same urgent needs. Prostituting youth

are underserved and often unrecognized, even in youth service agencies. They are frequently arrested for nonprostitution offenses, and their prostitution may not be known in the criminal justice system, even though the children are routinely provided with false identification and coached by pimps to lie about their ages.

Children in U.S. prostitution are confronted with a fragmented response from two separate systems, the criminal justice system and the child protective system (Schaffner, 1998). The child protective system's focus on family reunification may be dangerous to children who are sexually abused, prostituted, or pimped by family members. Many services are available to prostituting girls only in juvenile detention programs. This sends a mixed message to girls ("we'll help you deal with the traumatic consequences of paid rape but only after we arrest and incarcerate you"). Finkelhor, Cross, and Cantor (2005) stress the importance of working to better integrate the juvenile justice system's various parts, for example child maltreatment investigations, termination of parental rights, out-of-home placements, court hearings, victim compensation, decisions to prosecute, children's testimony, buyers' and pimps' testimonies, and prosecutions of perpetrators.

To adjudicate prostitution is to criminalize girls' physical, emotional, and psychological strategies, as Chesney-Lind and Sheldon (2004) pointed out. Tragically, many states still arrest, interrogate, prosecute, and incarcerate children in prostitution (Brittle, 2008; Javidan, 2003), which increases traumatic stress (Brown, 2006). In many cases, children under age 18 have been arrested for prostitution as many as 15 or more times.

The prostitution of children is a federal crime since the U.S. definition of trafficking now includes the prostitution of any person under age 18 (William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, 2008). No transportation is required in order to meet the legal requirement of trafficking. The federal law is at odds with local jurisdictions which often continue to arrest and treat minors in prostitution as criminals (Debra Boyer, personal communication, 2009). Beginning in 2010, a number of states have passed "safe harbor laws" that define prostituted children as sexually exploited rather than as criminals. Increased federal resources are slated to assist girls who have been prostituted. It would make logical sense for *noncommercial* sexual assault of a child to also be categorized as a federal crime.<sup>3</sup>

Friedman (2005) summarized the needs of prostituted children: (a) establish and fund safe houses and transitional living facilities for sexually exploited children, (b) develop and fund training programs for all youth workers and social service agencies about early intervention and the physical and emotional needs of sexually exploited children, (c) increase partnerships with and funding for successful agencies now serving the population of sexually exploited children, (d) establish model programs in several cities formalizing existing

linkages between child protective and youth service agencies and criminal justice agencies, and (e) develop recommendations and guidelines for services to prostituted children for health organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association, the American Public Health Association and the Society for Adolescent Medicine.

It is not in children's interests to make false distinctions such as the degree to which a child seems to comply with or resist prostitution, or whether the child is 16 and therefore has more "agency" than a 12-year-old. A child advocate told the author that she was disheartened to learn that some viewed "real" child victims as only those younger than 14, since 16- and 17-year-olds were considered to have more choice in their prostitution.

Poulin (2009) summarized evidence for the association between the existence of a thriving sex industry and increases in what he termed the pedophilization of sex industries. Abolishing the prostitution of children requires that we abolish the prostitution of everyone since the prostitution of children is inextricably connected with the prostitution of adults.

The mantra "prostitution's always been with us, you'll never get rid of it" is a soothing message from perpetrators that urges us to look away from prostitution. When the status of women is equal with men, the status of girls improves and prostitution is decreased or abolished. Albanese (2007) suggested that the prostitution of children would be decreased by enhancing the role of women in cultures where they are stereotyped as sex objects. Attending school for example has been shown to decrease girls' involvement in prostitution (Schissel & Fedec, 1999).

When adults fail to challenge the cultural norms that mainstream prostitution, we are in effect placing the responsibility for prevention of prostitution on children themselves (Boyer, 2008). Grand Theft Auto (GTA), one of the most popular video games in the world for 12- to 18-year-old boys, mainstreams violence, rape, and increasingly, prostitution. Several versions of the game exist, all involving use of a prostitute. In some versions, players can buy a prostitute, beat her up, run her over, or kill her to earn game points. Players earn additional points by owning a strip club or a pornography production studio. In 2008, GTA publishers Take Two Interactive and Rockstar Games enshrined a trafficker as GTA protagonist (Rockstar Games, 2008). When adults tolerate graphic depictions of lethally sexist cultural practices, we are limiting and endangering girls' lives.

Children today need media literacy education so they can counteract toxic messages about their sexuality. They can learn to assess the sexually exploitive messages that are lodged in technologies from video games to cell phone applications to Internet pornography. Technical and media consciousness-raising are essential, first for parents themselves and later for parents to teach children. Media literacy resource material must include resources on sex stereotyping

and also specific education on the damaging effects of the media's sexualization of children, with recommendations for ways to discuss these issues with children of different ages.<sup>2</sup> Smith et al. (2005) and the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (2009) proposed that adults challenge corporations that promote the sexualization of children. Other educators have provided models for teaching children to deconstruct common myths about sexuality and love (Galician & Merskin, 2007).

These resources can decrease the toxic media sexualization of girls, encouraging them to grow up with a sexuality that is not imposed on them by pimp- and pornography-dominated cultures. Girls need a culture that defines girlhood as something other than being groomed for prostitution, something other than a culture that teaches them to embrace their own sexual objectification. They need a culture that does not ignore the vulnerability of girls who are poor or who are marginalized because of their race/ethnicity. Girls—and all of us—need to know that there are men in the world who view women as equal to men and who refuse to buy women, girls, or any human for sex.

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## Notes

1. See Ariel Levy (2005, pp. 7–17) for an extended description of a Joe Francis shoot. See also Associated Press (2008) "Florida: 'Wild' Girls Founder is Set Free" (Associated Press, 2008); CNN.com (2008) "Spitzer escort's 'Girls Gone Wild' videos surface Via Associated Press," and TMZ.com (2008) "Ashley Dupre Gone 'Wild'—Legal or Jailbait?" Ashley Youmans (known as Ashley Dupre) was filmed at age 17 by Joe Francis. After Eliot Spitzer's arrest for prostitution (Farley & Ramos, 2008), Ashley Youmans was described in most media as a "high-priced escort" and her prostitution by Spitzer and others was glamorized. In real life, she ran away from what she described as an abusive home at the age of 17. For some period of time after running away from home Ms. Youmans was homeless and she became addicted to drugs. "I have been alone," she wrote on her MySpace page. "I have abused drugs. I have been broke and homeless. But, I survived, on my own." After being prostituted and filmed by Francis, Ms. Youmans encountered more pimps. She was recruited into escort prostitution by convicted New York pimp Jason Itzler. Later, Ms. Youmans prostituted for pimps at Emperor's Club VIP, a prostitution ring that sometimes moved women from the United States to Europe on what they called "travel dates" rather than human trafficking. The Emperor's Club presented itself as an elite escort service. Aside from charging more, it worked like any other prostitution business.



2. Resources include Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood <http://www.commercial-exploitation.org/>; Media Awareness Network <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/index.cfm> provides extensive resources for educating children about pornography and sexual advertising; MediaWatch <http://www.mediawatch.com> offers a feminist analysis of sexism and violence in the media.
3. Incest and rape can be either commercial or noncommercial sexual assault.

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