



Ending Exploitation: The Foundational Issues of CSEC

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SPEAKERS

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AUDREY 00:06

Welcome to the My Life My Choice Podcast. I'm Audrey Morrissey. In this series of programs, we're going to fill you in on the issue of commercial sexual exploitation of children, and what our organization is doing about it. And just a caution to listeners: this podcast includes frank talk about sexual exploitation and domestic violence.

We just celebrated our 20th anniversary year at My Life My Choice. I started the survivor mentoring program back in 2004. Mentors work with our young people who have been exploited or are especially vulnerable to exploitation. I was the first survivor of commercial sexual exploitation to mentor adolescent girls in Massachusetts. Now, I'm the Co-Executive Director of the organization and we have more than a dozen survivor mentors on staff who are providing connection and stability to hundreds of youth across eastern Massachusetts.

Joining me on the podcast is Nikki Valila. Nikki is the Director of Training and Partnerships at My Life My Choice. She leads a nationally recognized team that trains more than 3000 youth-serving professionals annually. We're also joined by Tonya Morris.

TONYA 01:26

Yeah, I'm Tonya Morris, I'm the Training and Survivor Leadership Manager. I've been with My Life My Choice a little over six years now. And we see a lot of kids that come in who's very vulnerable, and they're exploited. A lot of times it happens like in schools, ninth graders start in schools and 12th graders, and the exploiter is the one who is putting these kids out there, selling them. And the buyer, the men who are buying the sex, the kids.

AUDREY 01:57

The youth, they have feelings for this exploiter. And they're not calling him an exploiter, they're saying this is my boyfriend, and this is my man.

TONYA 02:06

They don't see these men as someone that can harm them, they see these men as their boyfriends and someone that they're in love with. So, it makes it more harder for them to walk away. And it's just not a choice that these kids have. Just walk away just that easily.

AUDREY 02:24

Nikki asked us to put ourselves in the shoes of a young, vulnerable girl.

NIKKI 02:29

Imagine yourself, the love of your life, this person you've met, you're attracted to, you love being around this person, having consensual sex with this person, everything is great. You're a few dates in or maybe it's serious, and that person then turns to you and says, "Well, to stay in this relationship, you're gonna have sex 10 to 20 times a day." 10 to 20 times a day with a stranger. Right? And so, using a term like promiscuous to describe the behaviors of these children, it's not only stigmatizing it's incorrect.

AUDREY 03:01

Yeah, it's not true. And from a survivor's perspective, and, you know, I'm also a survivor of the commercial sex industry. You know, and I talked a good game when I was in the life, right? I could tell you all day long money, the things and material right, but you never heard me say, ever: "I'm in the life because I love having sex with strangers."

Listen, I know when I look back, even when I thought I had it going on before I even knew I had been exploited, you know, thought I was a volunteer. And I bragged and I talked about money. If an adult ever said to me at that time, well tell me how it feels to have to sleep with strangers. At that point, I probably would have collapsed in their arms and tears. I wouldn't have had anything slick to say. You know what I'm saying? Like I dare someone think of a child in that way who has been exploited, who was nine times out of 10 is being sold by an adult and being bought by an adult? Right? Who has the power here? Is this the child telling adults "you know, I love having sex with strangers come do me." No, that's not how that works. The term is commercially sexually exploited child. There was a time people use terms like teen prostitute. There is no such thing. And Tonya, you can speak to this, I never as a kid, before I was exploited, laid in bed and said I can't wait to be 13. When I'm a teenager I want to be a teen prostitute.

TONYA 04:39

Yeah, You're absolutely right Audrey. Labeling the kid as a teen prostitute is when you, me being a survivor myself, when you put language out there like that it can be offensive. Right?

Imagine we're talking about kids, kids that's same programs kids that's gone schools and neighborhoods. And they're being labeled as a prostitute. It is very offensive, and it can bring up a lot of trauma back into kids as well.

AUDREY 05:05

Here at My Life My Choice, the average age of exploitation for the youth referred to us is 14 years old. They're vulnerable for a lot of reasons; poor self-esteem, not a lot of friends; maybe they're bigger or smaller than their peers; they may have learning disabilities; they may live in a violent home; lots of things. Though there are many differences in each young person's story, their vulnerabilities are often quite similar. Most are girls of color from low-income families. Tonya calls the youth she works with her kiddos. She remembers one of them a girl from a Latinx family. Most everyone in the family was involved in sex trafficking, some were exploiters, some survivors.

TONYA 05:54

She was 14 going on hitting 15 years old. And we talked about being vulnerable and not having an opportunity to be seen and to shine as the kid that she can be. She was brought up in a home where her grandmother was in a gang. Her mom was in a gang. Her sister were in a gang. She's in the gang, aunts, uncles. So, this kid never really had the proper teaching on how to one be a kid and how to navigate through life.

I remember I took her to apply for like DTA assistance or security. And she didn't even know the zip code or where she lives. She said, "What's my zip code?" This is a kiddo who's been in and out of different programs. She'll be in one program; she'll go missing from care. Because her mom's in the gang and affiliated with a gang, she will keep her like secluded away so DCF and the police couldn't find her.

And once when you talk about the gang community and her being in this gang, she was not allowed to date outside of the gang. She had a baby by one of the gang members and she started to date outside, and he put a gun to her head. Her sister showed up to pick up her baby from the father who was also in the gang. While she was holding her baby, the guy sliced her toe. She lived through it but sliced her toe. And DCF stepped in to take the baby away from her. And this kid has never had a chance to even know how to grow and to learn because she's missed so much of learning. Being on drugs. She has an eighth-grade education, eighth grade, eighth grade, and she's 21 going on 22 years old. And society looks at her as not being at a level to where she should be. And she's been always told that she's never going to amount to anything. Her mom and her grandma doesn't even allow her to come to the house unless she's coming with something to get high off. And they all sit around and get high. So where does this help come in to help this kid? It's all violence, gangs, drug abuse, exploitation. What about a kid like this?

AUDREY 08:40

Let's talk about these kids about where many of them live and about the systemic inequalities that impact their lives. Adolescent girls in every community are at risk of being commercially sexually exploited. They come from economically comfortable neighborhoods; they come from communities that struggle financially. This vulnerability is most frequent at the social crossroads of racism, sexism, and classism. Exploiters target adolescent girls with a history of pain, pain coming from abusive family members, from those they thought were their friends, or from the very systems meant to serve them. And what about other kids? They don't all come from gang life from the inner city, not by a longshot. I don't want people to walk away from this podcast thinking not my children.

I think of when a little white girl that I met who had been exploited at age 14. And she was in a neighborhood where an abandoned house would cost 2 million, an abandoned one, never mind right. And I remember talking with her and I remember her saying, "you know, I'd be home every night for dinner." And I say to myself, "Girl, please, so impossible."

About a month or so later, her mom had come to pick her up from this from summer jobs at My Life My Choice and, I just started talking with mom, and somehow it came up. And her mother said she was. She said, not only that, she said "nine times out of 10 when I call her cell phone, she would answer." So, her mother didn't even have a clue.

Like in so many things in this society, white skin is more valuable than brown or black. So, this cute little white girl made her exploiter, a lot of money. He didn't need to have her out working till all hours.

For her exploiter, she was very profitable. He can sell her during the day, and could have her come home for dinner every night. And the whole time she was being sold. And living in the home. She met some older guy at school. You know, she was like in the ninth grade. And this kid was like a senior on his way out, you know, what I'm saying and, recruited her. It started off my boyfriend smoking some weed, you know, and because this young person was in this safe home, right? Kind of strict home wasn't really out and about. And that's what we have to be mindful of to how strict we are with our kids. Because sometimes being too strict, will cause them to stray towards the ones who are having fun. And then that was my story. I wanted to be; I thought my mother was strict. You know, she's mean, she doesn't let me do anything. And so that kind of stuff excited me. So, I'm sure the same thing happened for her.

AUDREY 12:09

Many people have an outdated picture of how the commercial sexual exploitation of children works. It's not Jodie Foster in the movie Taxi Driver. It's not girls in skimpy skirts on street corners waiting for cars to drive up. These days, the exploiters pimp their children on the internet. The buyers shop for them, like they were a box of cereal or a new toaster. The buyer and the exploiter agreed to a location at hotels, lots of times, and not just some seedy dump on

Skid Row. We're talking name brand places, even the ones with lots of stars in their travel guide ratings, places you and your family stay at.

NIKKI 12:53

I mean, you keep hearing us talk about girls, girls, girls, and I think a lot of the referrals that come to us, may be individuals that identify as female, but what we know about the commercial sex industry is by no means does it discriminate. So, we're talking about all kids here. We're talking about kids from very upper middle-class backgrounds down to kids who are living in congregate care, foster care, and things of that nature. It's not about where you come from, or what you have, rather it's about vulnerabilities.

We don't talk enough about other populations, LGBTQIA kids and how most of them that are being commercially sexually exploited didn't choose it either. You know, it started with homelessness being outed, kicked out of their homes, because someone didn't agree with how they looked or dressed are identified. And this idea that they're choosing to have survival sex; imagine that the only option is to have sex with a stranger to have something to eat at night. Not choice, the only option to have a place to sleep tonight is to sleep with this person that's offering you that couch. Is that an option?

TONYA 13:57

I had a kiddo that that told me that she had to sleep with a man just to just to get a cheeseburger. Can you imagine that? A kid she's 15 years old. She was out in the streets. She's been exploited. And it's something of value, whether it's food, money, a roof over your head, it doesn't matter what it is, is that value of that child and this kid had to sleep with someone just to get a cheeseburger.

I had another girl that was so hungry, she had to sleep with a guy just for bologna sandwich. And then she was justifying why he only gave her one bologna sandwich. Because she was like, "Well, he was poor himself so I kind of understood that." So, it is the things that these kids have to go through. And when we do these trainings, like that's the beauty of My Life My Choice, right? Just to shed light and open the eyes to people who doesn't know the history of exploitation of young of children. And when you say that, it's everybody's problem. Because when we do the training, I try to shed the light, let them know it can be your child. It can also be your niece, your nephew. It can be someone, your neighbors, your child can be sitting in school because now we just don't have many grown men exploiting these young girls, these exploiters, groom these kids to exploit other kids. So, you can be these kids can be sitting in school with another child. "Oh, come with me, I'll get your nails done. Come with me, I'll get your hair done," and then grooming someone, they may friend within school and this you just never know.

AUDREY 15:29

And so, I want to be clear that at My Life My Choice, we've been getting more referrals for victims who are white girls, 30% or more. So, it's not just a black and brown issue.

TONYA 15:41

We have all cultures, but the thing is, like with anything else, when it comes to health care, education, girls of color have to work twice as hard than a Caucasian girl with blond hair and blue eyes.

AUDREY 15:55

Exactly, exactly, Tonya, absolutely. And for less money.

TONYA 15:59

But because of their color.

AUDREY

The value of whiteness.

TONYA

It is the is the value of being Caucasian with blonde hair and blue eyes. And when you think about a girl of color and most buyers being a white man, medium age 50 \$140,000 income, they're looking at this person in power has money. So instantly, they feel inferior when they were being bought by men in power like this.

AUDREY 16:34

A lot of people not familiar with the world of commercial sexual exploitation have what we call an "old school image" of what the typical exploiter is like. An image that is decades out of date. Nothing like the Sneaker Pimps we see today. Tonya explains,

TONYA 16:54

There's no way an old school pimp can remotely get close to our kids today, where they wear purple suits that have big hats with the feathers hanging out. A kiddo could see a guy that look like that, take a picture of them, put them on social media, right and say lol.

Now we have something called sneaker pimps. Where these guys are dressing to impress these young girls; baseball caps, jeans, sneakers, sneakers that these kids like to wear. And this is

how they're exploiting these kids. They are getting these kids, and they're setting up these days for these kids and exploiting them.

NIKKI 17:30

Back and not to age these two, back in their day was on the streets, right? And today, traffickers, you know, you don't have to walk and be seen. They can sit behind a computer, a phone, a device and be talking to people in many different states and don't risk the same level of risk of being caught. And so, we really have to try to step out of that stereotype that exploiters are only male, because we know that they can be any gender. And like, as Tonya said, we're using the term pimp intentionally right now, but as providers, we really stepped away from that term, because the term pimping itself is highly glamorized. And so instead, let's refer to people that cause harm that exploit people as traffickers, exploiters, and things of that nature. But as Tony mentioned, back in the day, they were trying to stand out right, there was a sense to like how you were dressed, and now today, the goal is to blend in.

TONYA 18:20

And that's the thing when we think about exploiters, right? Exploiting can be a father, it can be a mother, a teacher, it can be a friend, it's someone you consider it as your friend, anyone can exploit a child.

AUDREY 18:49

This disproportionality centers around the impact of structural and systemic racism in our communities that renders these youth of color more likely to be experiencing poverty, experiencing and involvement in the child welfare system and experiencing violence; all the factors that greatly increase the risk of sexual exploitation.

AUDREY 19:17

And now, who is on the demand side of this evil supply chain? This is where stereotypes are a bit more accurate. Middle aged white men; a lot are from the suburbs, but they also live in our cities, and they also live in the countryside.

We know anyone can be a buyer, we clear about that, but it's predominantly men who buy. I was in the life for a long time, and I have to I want to share this. The two times, the two times that I was approached by a female that kind of took the lead, there was a male with her. Do you understand? So, it was about him putting her up to right? It was for his benefit. I'm sure those two women who approached me it wasn't on their own to be like, "oh, I want to, I want to buy something right?" It was still the power of that, that male, right to satisfy that male. People like to think of a buyer another myth, creepy guy in a trench coat. That's how you really

like most people want to tell themselves, that's who a buyer is. There are not enough creepy guys and trench coats to make this a multibillion-dollar industry.

Thank you for listening to the My Life My Choice podcasts. I'm Audrey Morrissey. Talk to you next time.

LISA 20:52

I'm Lisa Goldblatt Grace, I helped found My Life My Choice. And I'm Co-Executive Director with Audrey Morrissey. Our Survivor Mentor Program is the heartbeat of everything we do. It's guided and led by the experience of survivors. It's authentic. It's one to one, and it's based on research. We mentor young survivors and help them build the intangible skills they need to be successful, healthy adults. These include self worth, positive self image, the ability to trust and the tools to know how and where to seek help when they need it. Survivor mentoring creates a powerful relationship. It brings together a young person impacted by exploitation or youth suspected of being exploited with a trained adult survivor of the commercial sex industry. In 2022, we celebrated our 20th anniversary year. Over the past two decades, we've served hundreds of survivors. The work continues, and you can help. We need volunteers, donors and advocates to help fuel the fight against exploitation. My Life My Choice welcomes partners and allies at all levels and communities throughout the country. Visit us online at mylifemychoice.org This podcast was produced by Steven Smith. The theme music is by Gary Meister. Thanks for listening.