United States House of Representatives

Committee on Judiciary

Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, Homeland Security and Investigations

Hearing: Innocence for Sale: Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking

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Human Rights Project for Girls

Suffering, isolated, tired and helpless at the age of 15, the concrete box that represented my cell in Zenoff hall, the girls section -the largest of the juvenile facility in Las Vegas, Nevada, seemed no less invasive than the horror of the streets. As much of a real physical confinement It was, it wasn't all too different than the mental confinement I endured from my pimp. I was interrogated for hours on end, reminded that my opinions didn't matter and locked in, like a dog in a kennel. Unless I was saying the answers to the questions that they wanted to hear, My Voice was irrelevant. Skip ahead a few years later, I endured it again in California, only that time experiencing my 17 birthday within the juvenile walls. Both times I was faced with Charges of Solicitation and/or Prostitution, a crime that as a minor who wasn't of legal age to consent to sex, couldn't seriously be charged to commit. But Yet, There I was, facing them. To my agony, I comprehended this as yet another system that failed me. This was familiar, as I was raised experiencing most of my life in the foster care system, which is where I learned to accept and normalize being used as an object of financial gain by people who were supposed to care for me, got used to various people controlling my life, and lacked opportunities to gain meaningful relationships and attachments. No one cared and No one Payed Much Attention. I was considered a "problem child" with a history of multiple moves and sexual abuse. At the age of 10 years old, after enduring multiple years of sexual, physical,emotional, and verbal abuse within the system, my vulnerabilities made me a target for a devious man, my exploiter, otherwise known as my pimp, who was almost twice my age, to sexually exploit me starting on the streets, the internet, and ultimately anywhere including strip clubs, massage parlors, and local papers. After being repeatedly beaten, tortured and manipulated I became more afraid of him than any other human being on this planet. So, anytime I came in contact with law enforcement I knew I had to protect him to protect myself. Plus, every time I encountered law enforcement I was treated like a criminal.

While in Detention, I was so hurt that I was the one who was locked up. It seemed like they always wanted to detain me and my pimp, both people of color, instead of focusing on the buyers who were adults--and primarily white--no one seemed to care about them! It hurt that even when I was released, I knew this cycle would continue because buyers were always going to get what they wanted and get to walk away. Some of them would even pay more knowing I was an adolescent. I endured years of sexual trauma and humiliation from the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, my exploiter, and the buyers-known as "johns", "tricks", etc. I was retraumatized everyday in detention while having to be watched, fully nude, while I showered. No one assessed me or ever even asked me what got me there, no rehabilitation services were offered. I Just sat locked in a box, while being interrogated and talked down to. Many of the young people I have mentored and advocated on behalf of have dealt with situations like the one I've expressed. Far too many have transitioned between and intersected throughout systems primarily the Child welfare, Mental Health, and Juvenile Justice Systems. One young survivor of Domestic Child Sex Trafficking explained to me in her words " I don't feel good about anytime I came in contact with law enforcement" She echoes "they treated me like a criminal, and used their authority and superiority to look down upon me." "The way they talked about me was degrading, they felt as if they were so much better than me and they didn't even know my situation." She tells me about the first day she was on lockdown: "They wanted me to cut my hair out, the one thing my pimp did let me have." She said "I hate the way the staff treated and talked to me, like I was a penitentiary prisoner, when I was just a teenager." She goes on to say, "I was 16, I should of been checked in by a nurse, counselor, offered some type of wraparound services, instead little to no services were provided to me." Both these stories, my own as well as the young survivor's, express how attention has been spent detaining young victims. We have made necessary advancements nationwide, especially in

criminalizing traffickers and pimps, but there is so much to be done in regards to fighting demand and providing alternative gender specific, and trauma informed services to children rather than detention.

Detention does not equal prevention. If we continue to lock up victims, as we are now, they will not get the services they need. Rather than detention, We should be trying to meaningfully engage the young person in self exploration activities that promote healthy self esteem. Locking up victims does not help or prevent them from being exploited. If for some reason a victim is detained, it should be ensured that they receive trauma-informed therapeutic services, through counseling and other means, while they are in custody or preferably through a community based program. Alternatives to detention for these youth should be instituted. Then later, after-care programs separate from probation should be instituted, that are non-incriminating and strength based to assist with educational,vocational, and self exploration needs. Giving them opportunities to self explore gives them power and healthy self esteem which is necessary in helping survivors rebuild their lives. In addition, organizations and governing bodies serving this population should at minimum have one survivor on staff to help navigate and advise on effective practices. By expanding and providing access to programs like Family Justice Centers, alternative facilities that can house survivor advocates who can be present from the initial point of contact with a victim.

And that is also why bills like the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act are so important. Because it not only provides alternatives to detention and trauma informed services for youth, but finally goes after buyers of child sex.

Importantly, more must be done to focus on the root cause of the issue- that people are buying children for sexual purposes. This is not prostitution -- this is child rape. And those who purchase these children for sex should be viewed and punished as child rapists. Buyers should not get away with it, but

as of now they do everyday. Just as it is expressed that it is not ok to sell children in our country- we need to make clear that it is not ok to buy them either.

It is my hope today, that the federal government can acknowledge its influential role in helping to end the demand for sex with minors by prioritizing and aiding in the investigation and prosecution of buyers-- and to help ensure that survivors are getting more access to the services they desperately need. I would like to Thank the Human Rights Project for Girls, the Committee, and the audience for taking the time to receive my contributions. And thank you to all who work on behalf of our nation's most vulnerable children.