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# EXIT ROUTES

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# EXIT ROUTES

**“We believe that the voices and experiences of sexually exploited children and youth must be heard and be central to the development and implementation of action. We must be empowered to help ourselves.”**

From the Agenda for Action, written by the youth delegates at Out from the Shadows: International Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth, Victoria, Canada, March 1998

## FORWARD

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Few things disturb as much as the sexual exploitation of children, yet in most regions of the world the numbers of children that fall prey to this practice are increasing. According to a UNICEF report (1997) it is estimated that **one million new children enter the global child sex industry annually.**<sup>1</sup>

Though people often associate the sexual exploitation of youth with Asia or Eastern Europe, in the United States alone, **child pornography**, for example, **earns two to three billion dollars annually** (Council of Europe study, 2001).<sup>2</sup> The child sex trade industry is certainly a high-profit, low risk trade, for all transactions occur outside the public eye. The internet has expanded the already insatiable demand for sex with a

minor; and no one really knows the profits earned and the number of children effected. **Latest estimates suggest that in 1998, over a billion US dollars were spent on developing “adult content” which make up over 69% of total Internet sales**<sup>3</sup> (Hughes, 2000).

*“The most disenfranchised among us,” as Anita Roddick (2000) notes, “sell the only commodity available to them,”*  
*[Their bodies] (p.21).*<sup>4</sup>

Child sex trade is driven by the growing demand for children’s bodies and is fuelled by a steady supply of children denied equal rights and opportunities with serious economic, and health risks.

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<sup>1</sup> In “Boy and Girl Victims of Sexual Exploitation in Mexico”, Azaola, e. UNICEF, 2000

<sup>2</sup> “The tragic fact of child sexploitation,” in Bangkok Post, Child Labour News Release, December 1, 2001

<sup>3</sup> “*The Internet and Sex Industries: Partners in Global Sexual Exploitation,*” Donna M. Hughes, Technology and Society Magazine, Spring 2000

<sup>4</sup> “Fallen Angels: The Sex Workers of South Asia,” Frederick, J. & Kelly, T (Editors), Luster Press/Roli Books: India, 2000

While children enter the sex trade for a number of reasons, **poverty is cited as the number one contributing factor.** Studies on sexual exploitation of children undertaken in the United States and Canada, however, have indicated that the large prevalence of middle class youth sex workers in industrial countries seems to suggest that poverty is not the sole contributor (Azaloo, 2000)<sup>5</sup>. They suggest that children's involvement in these activities is a result of number of other factors, including: running away from home, discrimination, substance abuse, ease of access, the social and cultural devaluation of children, community disintegration, child abuse, involvement with the pimp, acceptance and so forth. Other factors listed are the presence of pre-existing adult prostitution markets where youth are concentrated, the presence of unattached and transient males in communities, presence of gangs, and the growing numbers of illegal trafficking of children for sexual purposes (Estes & Weiner, 2001).<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the reasons for the commercialization of children's sexuality in global markets, one thing is certain, that the wholesale abuse of children in the sex trade demands solutions, plans for eradication and genuine commitment from the local, regional, national and international governments.

In fact, the most significant commitment made at the international level to the elimination of sexual exploitation of children is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), passed by the United Nations in 1989, signed by all countries (except for two) and adopted by Canada in 1991. Article 34 of this convention calls for State Parties to take all appropriate measures to prevent the inducement or coercion of a child to engage in unlawful sexual activity, as well as to prevent the exploitative use of children in prostitution, pornography or other unlawful sexual activities. Article 35 of the CRC calls for State Parties to take all measures to prevent the abduction, sale of or traffic in children for any purpose or in any form. Also relevant is the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography.

Other significant international agreements adopted to prevent sexual exploitation of children is the International Labor Organization (ILO) Worst Form of Child Labor Convention 182, the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation or the Prostitution of Others; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the International Convention against Organized Crime and its supplementary Protocols and the International Covenant on Civil and

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<sup>5</sup> "Boys and Girl Victims of Sexual Exploitation in Mexico," Azaola, E, UNICEF, 2000

<sup>6</sup> "The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children In the U.S., Canada, and Mexico," Estes, R & Weiner, N., Monograph, University of Pennsylvania, 2001

Political Rights all of which include several agreements against the sexual exploitation of children.

The most productive event that has taken place in recent times on the international front is the World Congress on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, in Stockholm in August 1996, hosted by the Government of Sweden. The World Congress was designed by the international Non-Government Organization (NGO), End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT) and organized with the help of UNICEF. Canada's Foreign Minister at the time, Mr. Lloyd Axworthy, led a Canadian delegation and joined other country officials, experts, and decision makers from over 125 countries in condemning the practice of commercial sexual exploitation of children and formally adopted a Declaration and Plan of Action aimed at eradicating the problem. This Congress made it possible like never before to attract international determination to prevent the sexual exploitation of children and to build awareness as to the size and pervasiveness of the phenomenon. In fact, it was this Congress that made it clear that much more work needed to be done at the national and local levels before the international recommendations could be fully and meaningfully implemented. After the World Congress, back home in Canada, an inter-

departmental committee chaired by Senator Landon Pearson was formed to follow up on the Plan of Action of the Stockholm Congress.

Although the World Congress was a great success in terms of engaging world leaders on this issue, the overall feeling from experiential youth in the sex trade was that participation did not include sufficient first hand experience from youth sex workers and recommendations accordingly, did not reflect the needs of these experiential youth. The lack of opportunity at the World Congress for youth sex workers to contribute to fight against the commercial sexual exploitation was communicated to Senator Person, who in turn insisted that the voices of youth most effected by the sex trade markets need to form the core ground on which international efforts could be forged.

During the fall of 1997 a series of consultations on sexual exploitation of youth was held in nine cities across Canada including a pilot in Victoria, plus focus groups in Halifax, St. John's, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Calgary and Vancouver. Focus groups participants were young people active in, or from, the sex trade between the ages of 14-24. Focus groups were also held in three cities in the United States and ten countries throughout South and Central America and the Caribbean. The data collected from the focus groups clearly

dramatized the daily abuse of vulnerability, betrayal and trust that youth sex workers faced all under the specter of AIDS/HIV.

In March 1998, the Government of Canada provided financial support for “Out from the Shadows”, an International Summit on Sexually Exploited Youth held in Victoria<sup>7</sup> and involving the participation of some 126 countries and 55 sexually exploited youth from the Americas. Two participants from the youth consultations and focus groups were invited to attend the Summit. During the initial three days of the Summit, young men and women met to share experiences and develop a Declaration and Agenda for Action to address the commercial sexual exploitation of young people. During the final two days of the five-day summit, policy makers and representatives of government and non-government organizations joined the youth to listen to their vision for change. The Declaration presents the united voices of sexually exploited youth and the Agenda for Action is fully based on the beliefs that sexually exploited youth have lived.

Save the Children Canada actively participated in this summit and joined other NGOs, experts and elected officials in endorsing a Declaration and Action Plan. The Victoria Declaration and Action Plan complement the Stockholm Agenda for Action.

Since the Victoria Summit, the Canadian government has been actively working with a number of NGOs supporting a variety of local and international initiatives to attack the roots of the sexual exploitation of youth and assist victims of the sex trade to come up with viable, alternative life choices. It is precisely within these initiatives where this work on Exit Routes can be placed. Exit Routes is an initiative taken by Save the Children Canada, funded by the Canadian Government to help achieve some of the commitments made at the Victoria Summit towards finding lasting solutions against the sexual exploitation of youth.

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<sup>7</sup> Hence forth this conference will be referred to as the Victoria Summit



# EXIT ROUTES

## THE BIRTH OF EXIT ROUTES

Exiting has been described by North American youth, who participated at the Victoria Summit, as a complex and difficult process. It requires, they tell us, both a clear personal decision and community support to sustain the exited youth as they grapple with issues of economic survival, acquisition of life skills, addiction, loneliness/isolation and low self esteem that keep them trapped in the sex trade. One of the recommendations from the Summit was that youth needed safe shelters staffed by people with direct personal experience in the sex trade where they can receive immediate psychological, emotional and economic assistance and protection.<sup>8</sup>

Save the Children Canada has taken up this recommendation of the Victoria Summit and has spent the last three years working with a

team of sexually exploited youth and advocates to forge a national network of youth who are or were commercially sexually exploited. This network we have called, Sexually Exploited Youth Speak Out (SEYSO), and its overall goal is to create a network of experiential youth mobilized and skilled to raise awareness about the sexual exploitation of children and to deal with the problem these children face in Canada. Currently, SEYSO is assisting experiential youth in exiting the sex trade and helping them become role models for other youth still trapped. Save the Children Canada is also working with experiential youth and advocates to develop an enabling approach to facilitate the exit of children from the trade. This approach we have called Exit Routes.

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<sup>8</sup> "Out From the Shadows: The sexually Exploited Youth Project, Speaking Out," Save the Children Canada, 1998.

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This paper will describe the Exit Routes approach, which emerged from engaging child survivors of sexual exploitation as key interveners/actors in stopping this criminal practice. We believe that the success, effectiveness and sustainability of this approach will depend on its operating principles of experiential youth inclusion, participation and collaboration. In this sense, Exit Routes is a youth driven approach, designed to stop the use of children as sexual commodities. It is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the results of a research study and on a peer group project. Exit Routes has a teaching component where experiential youth learn about their rights and responsibilities. It offers opportunities and skills upgrading to enable children and youth who have exited the sex trade to remain out, listen and support others still trapped, and be the public voice educating the larger community to the complex and intricate nature of the sex trade world. Exit Routes is rooted in the assumption that public understanding combined with, participatory collaborative youth action can bring effective and lasting solutions.

## UNDERSTANDING EXITING

In order to identify what youth report as successful interventions in helping them exit the sex trade, Save the Children Canada designed a qualitative research study to

generate data. The study focused on three aspects to the problem of sexual exploitation of youth. The first focused on youth's experiences in the sex trade, and their experiences within their community with regards to sexual exploitation. The second concentrated on the effects that being in the trade has had on their welfare. It looked at their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being, and how being involved in the trade has affected their overall development. The third aspect reflected on the permanent exiting possibilities that were available to young people and their reasons for choosing them. It also examined the potential to exit for those that were still in the sex trade, but who are considering exiting.

The overall aim of the research study was to identify, to the extent possible, the emergent culture of youth in the sex trade. While each experience is unique and entails a host of divergent factors, it was possible at the end of day to trace connecting lines and to show how the varied experiences of experiential youth feed into each other, setting up recurring collective voices. The Victoria Summit proved precisely that experiential youth shared common social worlds, and lived through similar socio-psychic affects, despite the vast differences in citizenship and gender, race, sex and class identities. With the stories of experiential youth in the sex trade starting to intersect their way around world, it has

become increasingly evident that achieving permanent exits for children in the sex trade will eventually depend on them defining their reality, shaping their new identities and naming their history.

## THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research method consisted of semi-structured telephone and face-to-face interviews with experiential youth in the sex trade, who are thinking about exiting, who have exited and/or who are still actively involved in the street trade. The same interviewer spoke to all participants of the study using a consistent set of questions. Each interview took about one and one-half to two hours. The questionnaire was designed to elicit qualitative and quantitative information from the respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to the respondents and consent was obtained from them.

## THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire was designed to collect data through the use of both open and closed-ended questions and was divided into two main sections. Demographic questions were asked at the beginning of the first section to facilitate respondents' comfort in generating answers and to provide a sense of ease to the interview setting. This section also included

questions regarding self/family/community history and connections of these to the sex trade. The first section concludes by exploring exiting. The second section of the questionnaire explores the impact of the sex trade on a child's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being. The questionnaire was tested with a small number of experiential youth before being administered.

## PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

The respondents in the study were selected from a national database of young people who are connected with Save the Children Canada's SEYSO Network. A letter of invitation was sent out to 69 people listed in the database, fifteen respondents accepted our invitation to participate in the study. The respondents all reside in Canada, and identify themselves as having direct experience in the sex trade at some point in their lives. Ten respondents reported having already left the trade, two indicated that they were in the process of exiting, and three had not yet begun to exit. Despite their current age, for the purposes of the research they are described as sexually exploited youth because they were involved in the trade and were regarded as youth as defined by the Government of Canada and the UN. While there are some similarities, the backgrounds of these young people are very diverse.

In terms of their nationality and ethnic background, seven identified as Aboriginal, one as Aboriginal and European, two as Métis, three as Caucasian, one as Somali, and one as Chinese-Columbian. The respondents ranged in age from 14 to 28. The female to male ratio of the respondents was 4:1. In reference to their sexual orientation, nine of the 15 respondents identified themselves as heterosexual, two as homosexual and four as bisexual. However, the majority of the respondents were hesitant to classify themselves in any of the aforementioned categories.

The average level of education completed by the respondents was Grade 11, with their educational level ranging from Grade nine to some post-secondary training. Of the total number of respondents, only four are currently in school. Ten of the 15 respondents wanted to further their education, but five do not. When asked why they have no desire to return to school, they responded that school was not their “thing” anymore. Those intending to return to school want to do so in the hopes that it will provide them with a good, stable, and secure job in the future. All other plans that the respondents had for the future focused around the common theme of working in some capacity with sexually exploited youth.

## KEY FINDINGS

- (i) Factors contributing to entering the sex trade**
- (ii) The lives of the experiential youth represent unique stories about survival. Each of them saw no other option than to enter the trade, some at a very young age. The respondents entered the sex trade between the ages of 11 and 21, the average age being 15. The length of time they spent in the trade varied from one year to ten years, the average length being 4.8 years. Half of the respondents had families that were involved in the sex trade, making this path pre-determined for the young person.**

The respondents identified their need for money and a place to live as the main factors that drove them to the sex trade. According to the youth, they “fell into” the sex trade because they needed to survive, and the trade afforded them the only opportunity to make a decent living. Seventy-five percent of the respondents reported that they were addicted to drugs and had to work in the trade to support their habit. They also described their strong need for a sense of belonging and acceptance after years of physical, sexual, and

emotional abuse. For many, the sex trade felt like the only place available that provided this kind of environment.

Before their entry into the sex trade, the youth in this study reported negative relationships with parents; all participants reported having parents. They stated that their parents were either physically, mentally, and emotionally abusive, did not encourage them, nor did they pay adequate attention to them. A third of the parents were reported to have had drug or alcohol addictions. As one respondent described it,

*“when my parents got a divorce, ...[parent] went back on drugging, always drinking, spent money on drinking, no money for groceries, no money for me, had to work for food, spending money,” (Female 14).*

When these young people were in the trade, **only three out of the 15 respondents had parents that not only knew about their involvement in the trade, but also tried to get them out.**

While in the sex trade, the young people worked the streets, in massage parlors, as escorts, spotters, phone sex operators, and engaged in rough trade. The respondents named the effects on their sense of self and on their relationships with others as the two impacts of being in the trade. The effects on the self include low self-esteem, anger issues, depression, instability, shame, and growing up

too fast. Issues with relationships include a lack of trust, being uncomfortable with sexual relations and personal space, feeling isolated, and always being on guard when other people are around. On a positive note, the young people overwhelmingly identified a willingness to help others in the sex trade lead a better life.

### **(iii) Factors contributing to exiting the sex trade**

The main focus of this section was to identify what experiential young people need in order to successfully exit the sex trade. This section explored how one can effectively leave the trade and begin a new life off the street.

The young people identified having a place to live, a stable job, money, healthy ways to transfer off the streets and strong personal supports as factors contributing to exiting the sex trade. The need for personal support was identified by all of the youth. Many youth also described the need to be loved, and to have a sense of importance and belonging. As one respondent noted,

*“I need someone to love me. I was hungry for love and attention. Not sexual love, but someone to hold me and love me, and say encouraging things. I didn’t have that.” (Female, 21)*

The youth believe counseling is required to raise one’s self esteem, to help with drug and alcohol addictions and to address abuse

suffered in and out of the trade.

The youth expressed strong views about the kind of counselor they would like to work with. For many, the support that they need in order to stay off of the street has to come from someone who has experienced what they themselves have experienced. As some participants of the study put it,

*“People like me to help me. There are agencies out there, but they couldn’t help me get clean. They needed experience to feel my pain, my scars. The centers just continued to fail.”* (Female, 28)

*“At least one person to support you, to not be judgmental, to be there for you if you screw up. Someone to talk to, to sort out feelings. One person to say, ‘I believe in you’. Someone to encourage you and say, ‘You are a good person.’”* (Female, 21)

*“Positive people around me, people that had been there, who had done it, and who knew about it. I don’t want to listen to people who just read books.”* (Female, 20)

Most respondents indicated that peer support forms an essential component of their healing which is reported to facilitate exiting.

*“Peer support from people that have been there, know you, and talk like you. It doesn’t take a long time to trust experiential.”* (Female, 28)

*“We need a healing center for anybody exiting, that is run by survivors.”* (Female, 25)

Even those youth who have not yet exited the trade report achieving benefits from undertaking peer education and awareness,

*“It empowered me to speak out, to have a voice, to feel like I wasn’t just a hooker, but that I actually was somebody.”* (Female, 28)

*“I feel much stronger. Now I can talk about it, and they will talk to me if I need help.”* (Female, 19)

*“It made me feel better that I can help somebody, helps me to heal when I can talk about stuff, I can go and talk and not be ashamed about it, I don’t have to answer everybody’s questions, like a counselor.”* (Female, 25)

*“It’s empowering to be able to do something like this because of my background. You can only be part of it if you’ve done the work, you feel like a VIP.”* (Female, 23)

While in the trade, some young people described consciously forging a path in order to exit while others seemed to stumble upon an opportunity to exit. **Those that made a decision to leave the trade often did so after coming to the conclusion that “the life” was not worth leading any more.**

For example, one said she was sick of all the abuse being in the trade involved, one did not want to die in the trade, and one did not want to go to jail anymore. They decided to leave the trade by reaching out for support from others - community groups, family, and boyfriends.

also recognized the need to learn how to take care of themselves. As two young women stated:

*“I realized I had to love myself more. I had to be away from the streets, from my friends, from my mother. But I still feel a need to be out there because my friends are still suffering. I needed to get out myself first.”*  
(Female, 21)

*“I got donations of clothing and make-up, furniture, and money. Talking to people, support from my family, and having people tell me they believed in me.”* (Female, 25)

Some of the youth who exited did so as a result of unforeseen circumstances. One overdosed and another became pregnant. All the youth knew they had to leave the trade in order to change their lives, and their circumstances provided the motivation to do so.

*“Seeing the people around me. I was scared all the time. I was tired of being raped and seeing my friends die. I wanted a better life for my child.”*  
(Female, 25)

The suffering that the youth experienced while in the trade, posed for many, **the biggest barrier to overcome**. The **damage caused by the sexual, physical and, emotional abuse they encountered stays with them even when they leave the trade**.

*“The sexual abuse. There wasn’t a day that would go by that I wouldn’t think about it, about the people that hurt me. I am full of shame.”*  
(Female, 21)

### **(iii) Factors ensuring permanent exit from the sex trade**

After overcoming the barriers to exiting the sex trade, there is yet another wall sexually exploited youth must face. Just to be out of the trade is not enough. The youth reported that they required **support from the community** in the form of awareness, employment options, educational access and appropriate programs and services.

While in the trade, only a third of the respondents in this study knew of any programs that their community offered. Those that knew of these programs

*“didn’t use them because they were useless,”*  
(Female, 20).

Others reported that,

*“they gave out food and condoms, but didn’t know where you could go for treatment,”*  
(Female 21);

and still others indicated that they could not talk to their counselors because they

*“didn’t want to hear anything about the trade as it was illegal”*  
(Female, 26).

Many of the youth believe that the community does not understand their issues and treats them like they are not welcome as part of society. Some youth felt that their communities completely deny that young people are being exploited in the trade. One youth identified a need for

*“ways to reach out to the community, to let them know more about men and women in the trade, to take away misunderstandings.”*  
(Female, 23)

(The above quotes are from females)

Most youth reported that staying out of the trade required a place to live. These youth expressed a need for shelters and safe houses to help them stay on their feet until they are financially secure enough to provide themselves with the basic necessities of life. They also need access to safe, affordable housing. Many respondents reported that they needed off-street incomes. They also expressed a need to have their communities provide work opportunities to them. All respondents indicated a need for job training. Many report coming off of the streets without any job skills or knowledge of how to get a job. As one youth stated, the community needs to offer

*“bridging programs, things to teach how to write resumés, and how to conduct yourself in a different environment,”* (Female, 26)

Aside from access to training, many youth reported wanting opportunities to further their education and indicated that it will determine their success in continuing to stay off the streets. Some expressed a wish to upgrade their education through programs such as the General Equivalency Diploma (GED).

On the whole, however, respondents identified having a **stable, relatively well-paying job as the primary factor contributing to them staying out of the sex trade.**

Community openness and understanding to the realities that these youth face was indicated as the second most important factor. On a more personal level, youth identified the need for healing their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual beings and to be among peers who have exited the sex trade as central requirements to beginning a new life off the streets.

## CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

There are **two key conclusions** to be drawn from this research.

(i) The first major conclusion that could be drawn from this study is that **sexually exploited youth entered the sex trade in Canada as a means of survival** – a last resort to lives lived where the lack of money, place to live and community support, coupled with drug addictions, parental neglect and

affected socio-psychic selves pushed them onto the street and into the rough trade of illicit and illegal sex. Youth sex work is not a voluntary profession – a matter of entering due to wrongdoing or free will. In most cases, a connection could be found between children and their parents in the sex trade, which highlights the historical and internalizing nature of this oppression. However, while sexually exploited youth are victims of socio-economic injustices, they have proven to be remarkably resilient and eager to leave the sex trade with assistance and guidance. They also expressed a desire to help others to do the same.

While the study reports on Canadian children being exploited, throughout the world, children in the same trade can be heard saying that entering the sex trade emerged out of a lack of choice and getting out and staying out seems almost impossible. **Ultimately this study has shown that sexually exploited children are asking for dignity, protection and a right to work in occupations that do not violate their sense of self.** Since the Stockholm World Congress 1996, a number of NGOs and governments have asked the question as to what is to be done to eradicate the problem which, most of us recognize, as a gross human rights violation. Most of us have ideas, but very few of us have come up with strategic solutions. And while we search for solutions, the annual numbers of children joining the sex trade is increasing. Perhaps

the difficulty in arriving at solutions, as John Frederick (2000) has suggested is “greatly due to a semantic simplification; like using single terms to describe virtually different concepts” (p.153).<sup>9</sup> Frederick recommends that we clearly identify the lines that divide the various states of existence in the sex trade and attach appropriate operative terms to signify differences.

Following Frederick’s cue, we offer a clarification for what we mean when we refer to youth “entering the sex trade,” “exiting the sex trade” and “staying out of the trade.” As this study has shown, **“entering the sex trade” entails physical, social, economic and structural coercion – child abuse, poverty, homelessness, and other inequalities.** In this regard, eradication, and elimination are operative terms. The second state (**“exiting the sex trade”**) involves a **wish for an imagined new self - born out of a near death experience and/or a will to refuse an abusive cycle;** here peer collaboration, connection, support and community action are key words. The third state (**“staying out of the sex trade”**) entails **attaining a concrete, reliable self where the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects are healed and secured.** Balance, practice, knowledge and intervention are operative in this regard. Understanding these differences allows for understanding the nature the problem and what is required to arrive at solutions.

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<sup>9</sup> “Fallen Angels: The Sex Workers of South Asia,” Frederick, J. & Kelly, T (Editors), Luster Press/Roli Books: India, 2000

(ii) The second major conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that **sexually exploited youth in Canada are overwhelming Aboriginal**. Ten of the 15 study respondents were Aboriginal. Save the Children Canada's report, titled, "Sacred Lives: Canadian Aboriginal Children and Youth Speak Out About Sexual Exploitation" notes,

*It is known that Aboriginal children and youth represent a disproportionate percentage of commercially sexually exploited children and youth across Canada. National surveys have shown that 14-65 per cent of youth in the sex trade describe themselves as Aboriginal. In some communities the percentage is as high as 90 percent (even in areas where the Aboriginal population is less than 10%).*<sup>10</sup>

Similar findings can be found in the Report put out by Saskatchewan's Special Committee to Prevent the Abuse and Exploitation of Children Through the Sex Trade. The Report (2001) states,

*"As many as 300 child prostitutes [SIC] work the streets of Regina. A similar number are on the strolls of Saskatoon. Almost all of those children involved with the sex trade - some as young as nine years - are Aboriginal."*<sup>11</sup>

Despite these shocking figures, very little is known about Aboriginal youth in the sex trade and even less on successful approaches to exiting. Surprising still is that this serious lack of knowledge of the most affected group of youth in Canada runs parallel to the fact that Canadian awareness of sexually exploited youth has increased in the last 20 years.<sup>12</sup>

**Aboriginal youth must be regarded as people who have unjustly inherited internalized cultural shame brought about by racism, socio-economic and political disadvantage, family fragmentation and isolation.** As such any approach enabling them to exit the sex trade must include meaningful components for social, economic and cultural re-connection, personal healing and an opportunity for them "to work with communities to ensure that no other youth will be forced to experience their struggle for survival".<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sacred Lives: Canadian Aboriginal Children and Youth Speak out about sexual Exploitation," Save the Children Canada, 2000 p.41

<sup>11</sup> Special Interim Report for the Children: "Battling the Child Sex Trade", Stephen LaRose, (contributor) 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Sacred Lives: Canadian Aboriginal Children and Youth Speak out about sexual Exploitation," Save the Children Canada, 2000 p.41

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.76



# EXIT ROUTES

## EXIT ROUTES: THE PROGRAM FRAMEWORK AND DESIGN

After listening to and working with scores of Aboriginal experiential youth in the sex trade, Save the Children Canada began to explore the possibilities of cultural solutions to exiting. It also seemed reasonable to search for solutions within the Aboriginal context as the overwhelming amount of youth in the sex trade in Canada emerged out of this group. Towards this aim, a solution was sought in the “Medicine Wheel,” which represents in Aboriginal cultures a powerful metaphor for the totality of life.

### **Medicine Wheel Model**

Literally regarded, the Medicine Wheel is a cobblestone structure placed in extremely large two circle formations, where the inner circle is relatively smaller than the outer; and the outer circle encompasses the inner one.

### The Medicine Wheel



The inner circle has a central pile with a number of lines connecting the circles. The term Medicine Wheel was first applied to a wheel found in Wyoming, United States. The “medicine” part of the name implies that it was of religious significance to Aboriginal people. An interpretation advanced by an Aboriginal astronomer, Dr. John Eddy, was that the medicine wheel reflected Stella arrangements with logical patterns and guiding

principles to mark time and seasons.<sup>14</sup> The wheel would thus have functioned as a calendar. Stonehenge has also similar structures and was thought to represent the Summer Solstice Sunrise, Newgrange with the Winter Solstice Sunrise, Solomon's Temple with the Equinox Sunrise. While not much is known about the original use of Medicinal Wheel, in many First Nations cultures in Canada it is used as a model for healing, teaching, enlightening, transforming – gaining spiritual energy.

According to this latter Aboriginal interpretation of the Medicine Wheel then, it is described as encompassing Four Directions and Four Realms. An individual, in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture, are thought to comprise Four Realms as well: the physical, mental, spiritual and reflective; and these realms are attached to the Four Directions: North, South, East and West.

The north is the place of beginnings because it is a place of rebirth; the east represent the new light of day, which is seen as a place for new thoughts; the south, as the highest point of sun which is seen as an opportunity to make connections with powers greater than the self; and the west is a place for letting go and of introspection. These then align up as North = the physical realm, East = the mental realm, South = spiritual, and West = the

reflective. For an individual to attain totality, all four elements must be balanced; and the path to balancing is achieved by following specific paths in the four directions.

Unlike Western models of psychology, which begin with the personal work of looking into the incidents of past to explain the present, the "Medicine Wheel" begins in the South direction. The personal work of the South involves healing our past in order to shed it. Results are achieved when the past no longer owns us and directs us. In fact, according to Aboriginal thinking it is here when we first become free; when the choice for a new self is born and when mastery of one's skills and performance is achieved.

The next path on the wheel is to move to the West direction. Here the work consists of facing our death, facing our fears, investigating where violence lies in our lives, and transforming ourselves. This is where change occurs. The North work connects us to the lineage of ancestors in acts of rebirth. It is where wisdom, understanding and strength take hold and where the new beginnings take root. The way of the East is beyond our ordinary reality. The work of the East is more abstract, and deals with enhancing other ways of seeing new possibilities. It connects and bonds because wisdom and illumination lead us to come to know our relationships and our

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<sup>14</sup> "Traditional Indian Code of Ethics," Source Four Winds Worlds Development Project, University of Lethbridge, Alberta, 1992.

proper place of self. A sense of belonging is extended here which gives rise to a new sense of pride, respect, dignity and unity.

The path taken on the Medicine Wheel depends on where you enter at; and since a circle has no true beginning and end, one can enter and continue in the direction of the sun which brings one back to the beginning. At the beginning, one is ready to start again with new insights and understanding. The process of learning is life long; the context of learning is the self; and the method of learning circular and collaborative.

### **The Talking Circle Formation**

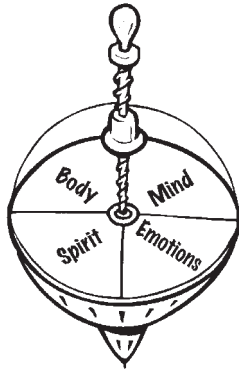
Closely associated with the Medicine Wheel, is the Aboriginal belief that decisions made about ones life are arrived at through collaboration with group members. The process of coming to a group decision collaboratively is called a “Talking Circle.”<sup>15</sup> The circle itself has a defined form and provides for particular results. It has no beginning and end; no top or bottom. The circle-shape is so extravagantly common in nature and our lives—it is everywhere. Our ceremonial social life generally revolves in circles and they are important in our storytelling. In context of the “Talking Circle,” the term refers to a group of people sharing an interest or activity where each has

the opportunity of speaking freely and no one person takes precedence over the other. All talk builds on the ideas already being discussed and adds to it. The overall aim of the “Talking Circle” is to achieve consensus and collaboratively find the common ground to move forward to common objectives. The sense of community and group belonging is emphasized; conversely, the sense of ego and individualism underemphasized, if not all together removed. According to Aboriginal thinking, the “Talking Circle” is the best way to achieve new understandings of the self and others, where actual movement towards a new state of balance is attainable and sustainable.<sup>16</sup>

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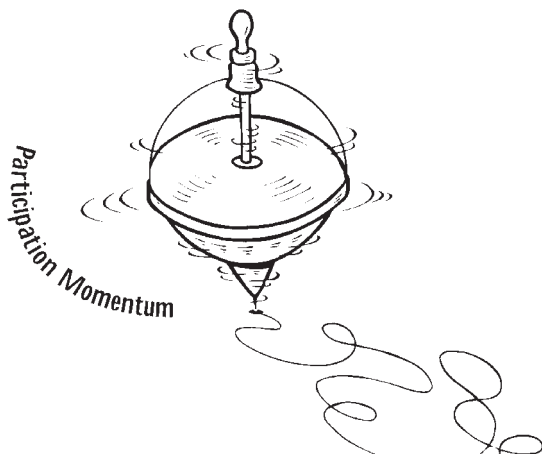
<sup>15</sup> [www.Turningpoint.ca/forum](http://www.Turningpoint.ca/forum)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

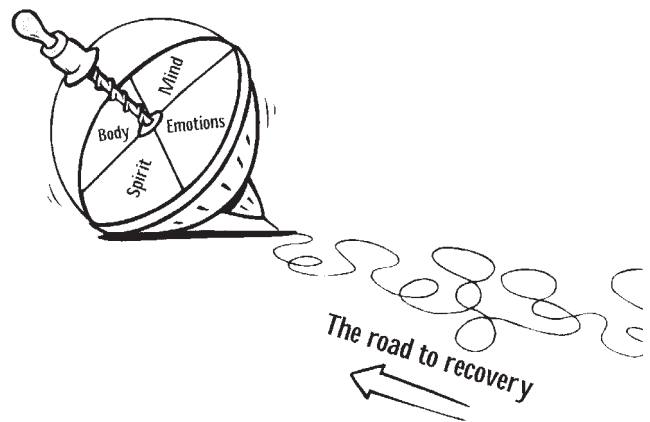


### The Spinning Top Method

The movement of the spinning wheel towards a balanced self can be seen to represent the Medicine Wheel. This movement can be described as a rotating top. When released with enough energy, the top will choose a preferable direction to rotate on its major principal axis for a long time, even if there are disturbances. The faster the spin the more it will withstand disturbances. However, the spinning top is usually unstable without a constant flow of energy input. There will come a time when the spin diminishes. When this happens, the top will wobble, move off its axis and eventually fall on one side of its shape. To spin it again, it must be picked up, given energy and then released. Once directed, it will rotate its weight, shape and contact point in a perfect balance.



Using the metaphor of the spinning top and the model of the Medicine Wheel, and applying it to the context of youth sex trade workers exiting the trade, what we arrive at is the principle of force and velocity, propelled and carried forward by the momentum of the first energy charge. Translating this within the context of our research findings, the moment of getting the top spinning around its major axis (a perfect balance of the physical, mental, spiritual and reflective) is arrived at from decision to exit and carried forward and sustained through experiential peer participation, expert facilitation and collaboration. The energy administered to, and the path selected for the top, is dependent on the conducive nature of the environment relative to the decision, the skill and knowledge set available and reliability of the alternative path selected.



Once the top is spun, there will come a time when the energy dissipates and the top begins to slow down, loose its rotation, wobble to a halt and fall of its side. Since this is inevitable, the wobble represents the difficulty

in exiting the trade. The side on which the top falls (lets say body) will determine the aspects of a balanced self that has been neglected. Through experiential peer participation, collaboration and expert facilitation the person attends to the neglect, picks up again and continues to practice exiting. The top will eventually stop and fall, alerting the experiential youth as to what is required for a balanced self to be achieved. The idea about this spinning top and Medicine Wheel is to get the youth to heal all aspects of their being and to understand that these aspects are always interconnected. In fact, the road to recovering a new balanced self is dependent on how the interconnectedness is sustained between all four realms of person. Practice is the only way to flag the loss of balance and to correct it fast enough before relapse can occur. Once relapse occurs the participants starts again until a new consciousness is formed.



# EXIT ROUTES

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## THE PILOT PROJECT

Employing the Medicine Wheel model, the Talking Circle formation and the Spinning Top method to the key findings of the research study, Save the Children Canada decided to design a pilot project to test the success of the exiting approach. This project had three components: youth participation and collaboration, exiting activities and community development. Each component has distinct, yet interconnected goals. The goal for the youth participation and collaboration component was for experiential youth to identify an objective with an overall outcome that would be beneficial to them and the community at large, link this to a joint activity that will produce the outcome and the inputs required to bring it about. The goal of exiting activities was to practice how decision get translated into concrete actions, what skills set are required and the capacity of the group to work collaboratively to bring about expected results. The goal of the final

component was for members to assess the impact of the outcomes and provide feedback on the collaboration that produced the joint activity. The overall goal of the project was to facilitate permanent exit for these youth.

### THE PROJECT SETTING

This project was located in Vancouver, British Columbia, at Save the Children Western Canada's office. It was designed, developed and implemented by experiential youth in the sex trade and overseen by a program manager who also was experienced in the trade. However, not all staff at the Western office involved with this and other projects were experiential however, they did have some training and had worked in different capacities with street involved youth and were experienced in working on other anti-oppression projects. This project started in the spring of 2001 and ran for a ten-month period.

## GROUP FORMATION AND OPERATIONAL RULES

Since the project was designed to test the exiting model and method for arriving at collective decisions and executions of joint activities, we needed to set up our exiting peer group and outline the rules of conduct. This was a five step process. We choose to work with four sexually exploited youth from the sex trade industry who had already made the choice to exit. They were provided with an hourly wage during the 10 months project period.

### **STEP 1**

The first step of the project was the peer group formation. Youth participants were selected after an in-depth interview, which reviewed the experiences of sexual exploitation, social skills capacity, preparedness for alternative employment and reasons behind the decision to exit. An essential criterion to join the peer group was the willingness of youth to participate with other experiential youth and work with a trained facilitator in determining an exiting plan of action and joint activities. The role of the facilitator was to provide help with and guide the determination of the joint activity and action plans.

### **STEP 2**

The next step was to build the peer group and the strengths of the individuals within the group. The facilitator's role here was to ensure that each member understands the Medicine Wheel model for achieving balance, the

Talking Circle form for arriving at participation and collaborative decisions, and the Spinning Tip process for assessing results of the self in movement with others. The facilitator works with members to build the foundations for a balanced self and co-operative work plan. If members experienced trauma during the exiting process, they were referred to a qualified counselor or specialist.

### **STEP 3**

The third step was to implement the joint-activity and plan for action. The purpose of this step was to ensure that the group had the capacity and co-operation to carry out the activity right to completion. The facilitator worked with each member to iron out differences, ensure that members had the required skill sets to carry out the joint activity.

### **STEP 4**

The fourth step in the project was to prepare the group members for transition to permanent exiting. All provisions were made to ensure that members experienced a sense of trust, commitment, involvement, connection and safety in their relationship with themselves and with others. Attention was given to job readiness to help ensure sustainable livelihood beyond the trade or the income from being a participant in the project.

### **STEP 5**

The final step was to review and evaluate the process and outcome, and reflect on the projects' impact on permanent exiting.

Once the group was formed, all participants helped established group rules of conduct. These rules were adherence to timelines and follow through on decisions collaboratively arrived at, transparency, no substance abuse, respect for differences, regular attendance and commitment to completion of joint activities. While we clearly understood that recently exiting experiential youth would exhibit codes of conduct that would dramatize internalized elements of the oppressive practices of the sex trade in which they have lived, and therefore, required some spaces for change. The youth developed and administered a “Three strikes and you are out” rule allowing youth three turns before being forced to leave the group.

## EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF THE PILOT PROJECT

The project had three planned outcomes.

The overall long-term impact of the project was to ensure the permanent exit of sexually exploited youth from the sex trade.

Permanent exit was identified as securing formal employment on a full-time or contractual basis with an employer. It was also identified as entering an educational course or program in a school or other formal learning institution.

The medium term-outcome of the project was for the group to collaboratively work on a

joint activity, which would bring about a change in their community and provide them with alternative skill sets relevant to finding new employment possibilities. An activity was regarded as any task that involved the participation and collaboration with the peer group and members of other organizations, institutions, private sector, and/or government agencies. While a range of a sub-activities were also identified, for the purpose here we regard an activity as one that is tied to overall project goal of facilitating exiting for the peer members and others in the trade, and increasing community awareness on the issue of sexually exploited children.

The short-term output of the project was for group members to make a compact with each other and with the facilitator on an action plan and the means of executing it. The action plan is to include the joint activity and clearly exhibit a letting go of past practices, openness to learning new ones, and a commitment to change. An action plan was taken to mean a statement of commitment, with overall goals, activities and responsibilities, built within time-lines and a set budget.

## ACTIVITIES

The experiential youth in the Exit Route Project decided on two major and related activities within the context of participatory and collaborative group discussion and recuperative healing processes. The first activity was the production of an Exit Route Manual to help other sexually exploited youth exit the trade by evaluating relevance and appropriateness of the existing social services in the Vancouver area. The second one was to work with other experiential youth and host in British Columbia, a one day event, called Street Fest 2001, to celebrate the annual Stop the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth Week.

As conceptualized by the experiential youth in the peer group, under the guidance of the facilitator, the Exit Route Manual was designed to provide tools, skills and capacity building experiences to facilitate the truthful exits of youth in the trade. The Exit Routes Manual evaluates existing social services in the greater Vancouver area in terms of their appropriateness and relevance for the needs of sexually exploited youth. The skills sets to be learnt through this activity, include attaining a balanced and confident self image, public speaking, computer skills, marketing, researching, and organizing.

The primary aims of hosting Street Fest 2001

were to create a safe public environment to address sensitive issues regarding the prevention of the sexual exploitation of children, raise community awareness on the issue, advertise the services and programs available to exiting youth, and increase the youth participation in collaboratively coming up with solutions. The secondary aim was to showcase and highlight the diverse talent of sexually exploited youth. Activities involved hiring the experiential youth workers, organizing a Steering Committee (comprised of sexually exploited youth, adult professionals and community and government representatives) to oversee the program and media relations, organizing entertainment, security, emergency health and volunteer services for the event.

## PILOT PROJECT DETAIL RESULTS

### **(i) Permanent Exits**

At any one time the project was designed to support four youth. Due to turnover, seven youth were involved of which three did not complete. Factors that contributed to the remaining three youth leaving the project varied greatly from several relapses back into the sex trade and/or drug and alcohol addiction, heavy absenteeism, unmet expectations of the facilitator and challenges with bringing consensus to peer group dynamics. Out of the four experiential youth that remained, two have been employed in off

street work; one has not made any job interviews, despite having several set up; and one has been living in a recovery house to heal from her involvement in the commercial sex trade. No youth reported registering in courses at a school or other center of learning. The two that have been alternatively employed had a high rate of group attendance, showed solid personal boundaries, actively offered support to other peers when needed and reacted well to negative comments from the peer group. Both participants also made a strong commitment to the overall goals of the project and respected the group's rules of conduct.

Of the three youth that left the group after a short period of attendance, one is involved in a detox program; one is currently employed in off street work, and one living on disability. These youth discontinued attending the group sessions because they indicated not being able to handle the intense group dynamics. In one case, group members employed the "three strikes and you're out" rule to push one youth out of the group. Temporary relapse into the sex trade was experienced by at least four youth participants. The number of relapses varied from one time to several times during the length of the Exit Route Project. The three participants that reported no relapses also reported no heavy drug and alcohol use. Two of them, however, left the group after one to two months of attendance. The four group members that stayed for the duration of

the project, reported that while youth participation, collaboration and healing were very positive and skills learnt useful, they identified the following:

- a need for parental involvement in the lives of sexually exploited youth
- governmental competence in understanding the issue and providing services that include sexually exploited youth
- non-risk disclosure of their past sex work life with employers
- housing facilities
- more money and resources to stay out of the trade, expansion of the group to include all their friends still trapped in the sex trade
- experiential social workers and counselors
- systemic change in the organizations that offer support for experiential youth
- opportunities in which their sex trade experiences could be used to educate the community in dismantling stereotypes of the youth in the business.

## **(ii) Joint Activities**

### THE EXIT ROUTE MANUAL

The production of the manual for exiting took slightly longer than anticipated. Members identified the delay in production as a result of working on Street Fest 2001, which took longer than expected. Preliminary results on the development so far, however, have been very positive; participants have expressed a sense of accomplishment and ownership in the

work output. Evaluation on this aspect of the project have indicated that, although the manual is user friendly, practical and achieves results in locating an off street job, it should also be targeted to achieving more professional work with higher paying salaries, and help identify appropriate educational opportunities for sexually exploited children and youth. None of the group members were able to secure entry to formal learning. Other results show that youth workers who are putting the manual together were nervous about the project coming to an end. They expressed an interest in still being involved in the group process as they feel they need to do more work on their physical, emotional, mental and reflective selves. The issue of trusting the newly forming identities was brought up several times.

#### STREET FEST 2001

The experiential youth group members hosted a highly successful and visible Street Festival with the co-operation of and support from other service providers, government agencies, volunteers, and experiential youth. Attendance at the Street Fest was in the thousands, with a steady flow of young people entering and exiting throughout the day. Local media covered the event and several television reporters conducted interviews with the organizers, other youth and the general public. A speaker's corner made it possible

for youth to record their messages of choice and to share their opinions and points of view on sexual exploitation of children with the wider community. A volunteer Save the Children Canada videographer also recorded a number of messages from youth, and has worked with a team of experiential youth in producing a video entitled, "Street Fest 2001: Our Quest for Expression".

Included in the this festival was an Open Stage for live and DJ music, a wall for graffiti drawings with spray cans provided by the organizers, a movie tent for showing videos related to the issue of sexual exploitation of children, an art and crafts display where experiential youth exhibited their talent, and an information table to update and brief the public and youth on services provided by the province to street involved sexually exploited youth. The day ended with a vigil ceremony to remember the youth sexually exploited in the trade and to commit to fight for the dignity, protection and right to alternative work with equal pay for these children.

While this event was a huge success, evaluation reports indicate that some of the organizers, who were from the peer group, felt left out due to the fact that on the day of the event they had been given chores that took them out of the limelight. At least one participant indicated not feeling appreciated and did not feel a sense of belonging. These

reports point to the suggestion that the group did not operate as if every member was equal and that decisions made were not entirely collaborative, taking in to account very different skill sets and “conditioning” from street life. Other reports also point to conflict experienced between experiential youth on the project and in the office and the role taken by the actual producers of the event and the lead players on the day of event.

### **(iii) Action Plan**

The results of the Street Fest 2001 activity and the completion of the Exit Route Manual, coupled, to some extent, with the two youth who found employment, would seem to point to the success of the action plan. However, factoring turnover in the participants from the start of the project and the ones that eventually remained for the duration of the project, a different picture emerges.

Since evaluation was conducted only at the end of the project, the progress made had no way of being formally assessed. It is important the regular assessments be implemented into the project in the future. On reflection, it appears that the action plan generated at the appropriate point of the project was geared to deciding on activities without at one and the same time being grounded on the emotional experiences and capacities of the participants. The rules of

conduct that the youth themselves incorporated and later changed may have been too restrictive in allowing the youth to learn from mistakes and offering true transparency on their emotional, mental and physical well-being. The facilitator may have been too busy dealing with various issues, as they emerged with the youth, that attention might not have been given equally to everyone.

Furthermore, since the activities involved a simultaneous learning and applying the skill sets learnt for future employment, the duration of the project might have been too short to deal adequately with the rich and complicated inner life of the project participants.

## **KEY LESSONS LEARNED**

The results of the work on this project reflect many of the issues and dilemmas faced by anyone supporting sexually exploited youth exit the sex trade: whether the service offered are appropriate and accessible to those that expressed need for it; how best to ensure that the service provided caters to the particular needs expressed, regardless of gender, race, culture, sexuality and disability differences; and the working alternatives of a balanced self identity that need to be developed in order to best achieve long lasting and sustainable results.

Save the Children has learned valuable lessons from its experience supporting sexually exploited young people exit the sex trade.

We have learned that an exiting approach, which is grounded in Aboriginal healing, does have application with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sexually exploited youth exiting the sex trade. As the model of the Medicine Wheel and the method of the Spinning Top applied in this context of healing suggest, the path to exiting, is not a linear and solitary one. Relapses are inevitable. When young people relapse whether it is back to substance abuse or to the sex trade, focus should be put on the contributing factors as opposed to issuing blame.

The role of democratic participation and collaboration of experiential youth cannot be underestimated in determining the success or failure of the exiting process. Many young people who have been sexually exploited have developed extremely resilient, but highly individualistic, survival strategies. Trying to create healthy group rapport and collaboration within the Exit Routes peer group has been challenging. Save the Children has learned the importance of trying to establish co-operative relationships within the peer group, as well as between the peer group and the other staff.

It was a challenge to provide the entire positive role modeling that was critical for the project participants as the experiential staff at Save the Children were also addressing some of these same areas of difficulty in their own positions. Inter office dynamics over these areas created conflict and communication difficulties between two office “cultures”: that of the experiential youth, and that of the other staff. Additionally, because of interpersonal dynamics of some staff, the participants became engaged in trying to sort out the issues of their mentors, (many of whom were former experiential youth) rather than the mentors always being available to support the needs of the participants, which should always have remained at the forefront. There were also differences among experiential staff as to what best practices should be in place to support the project participants. It was clear that the organization was not as prepared as it ought have been to ensure that participants and support staff on this project did not get ghettoized in overall operations.

The facilitator who worked with the peer group has had to take on numerous and varied roles, including being on-call around the clock for the participants. Furthermore, the extent and nature of the demands on the facilitator were not adequately predicted when the program was launched. The facilitator was not always able to understand the issues of the

sexually exploited youth for she had no prior first-hand-experience in the sex trade.

Finally, although the exit routes methodology places a high value on the meaningful participation of youth survivors of sexual exploitation, it does not place enough emphasis on revising existing related services to ensure that they are more appropriate for, and potentially staffed by, sexually exploited youth.



# EXIT ROUTES

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

The replication of Exit Routes Approach elsewhere should take into consideration the following recommendations:

- Addressing poverty remains a major constraint to staying out of the sex trade. Until housing and basic incomes can be maintained, it is difficult to stay on the path to exiting. More strategic interventions are required to ensure that these issues are adequately addressed to enable young people to actually concentrate on their healing process.
- In designing new projects to facilitate exiting it is important to understand that while there are cultural differences among sexually exploited youth, material compulsion of poverty with the accompanying demand for work and want, strips away these differences and push youth into a shared and recognizable history of oppression. Once employed in the sex trade, these youth lose both cultural and economic value, and the cycle of exploitation is further entrenched and prolonged. Poverty eradication is the obvious answer; but perhaps what is needed more immediately is education on the issue with the larger community to bring about long lasting exiting.
- Substance abuse will continue to plague many young people trying to exit the sex trade. In Western Canada, criminals involved in the sexual exploitation of children are often also involved in the drug trade. Any project supporting the exiting of youth must not only bring on board a full-time substance abuse expert to offer the required support during the exit process, but must be designed in such a way that affords honesty and compassion, and leaves room for mobilizing

collective care from group members. While the link between sex work and substance abuse has long been associated, the link between these and isolation has only recently been connected.

- More attention needs to be paid to how exiting youth's spend their evenings and weekends. Making a transition from a night schedule in the sex trade, to the day schedule of many off the street jobs, needs to be thought through and factored into the project design. When exiting, a young person starts to disassociate him/herself from those in risky lifestyles for fear of being drawn back in. This creates a void that needs to be filled.
- Mechanisms, structures and values of hosting organizations need to be adapted in order to ensure that projects working with and for sexually exploited young people are not ghettoized or short-lived. This requires on going anti-oppression training to ensure that all staff have a solid understanding of the issues sexually exploited youth encounter and the challenges in exiting. Likewise, host organizations need to ensure no double standards are in place.
- Participation of sexually exploited young people per se in the project is insufficient to ensure successful exiting. Equitable based collaboration and ownership both within the

peer group, between it and the larger organization, and between these and the larger community, is essential and will require intensive support. Experiential youth also need to work across differences. For example, they may need to work with others, who may not have been sexually exploited in the sex trade, but who have had excellent anti-oppression training and management experiences in running organizations and supervising projects.

- Youth participation level must be adapted to the age, maturity, experience and understanding of the individual youth and must be designed to enhance the healthy social and psychological development and healing of experiential youth. It must not impose a burden of responsibility, which may hamper the individual youth's development or weaken his or her self-image. Positive relationships and mentoring are important to help children and youth heal from the traumatic effects of their experiences. It is important to bear in mind that child participation should not limit the responsibility of adults to act in the best interest of the child.
- Opportunities, support and resources for participation must be relevant and appropriate to address the circumstances under which youth live. Some ways to facilitate equal access to participation could

include paying for youth expertise, using non-intimidating processes, interpreting the culture of government and law in plain language, and providing a forum for open dialogue. It is the responsibility of adults to listen to all youth, including those who are less forthcoming and articulate. It is also important to include pragmatic supports such as paying the costs of transportation and day-care.

- Evaluation and accountability mechanisms must be built into all of the programs and projects that are developed. Young people must play a significant role in monitoring and evaluating the actions taken by government and the community in addressing their issues. Agencies must provide all who are interested with comprehensive and understandable information about how experiential youth are involved in programs.
- The design of the projects must stimulate the desire of youth to participate by providing fun, meaningful and challenging activities.
- Participation must increase the skills and abilities of the youth who are involved. Youth can acquire marketable skills during the process of participation so that they can move beyond working in the sex trade if they choose. Processes that use

the experience and expertise of the marginalized must create a better life opportunity for them or they become part of perpetuating exploitation. Experiential youth should be paid for their expertise and be seriously considered for any employment opportunities created in the development of strategies designed to address the issue.

- Experiential children and youth must participate meaningfully in the decision making process and play an active role in the development of the participation process itself.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Given the complexity of the phenomena, the implications of socio-economic factors that are involved, and the lack of national data on the actual number of children being sexually exploited, a **national study** needs to be undertaken to estimate the extent and types of the problem in Canada, the groups most effected, the collective life that appears to contribute to the problem and the long term impacts of sexual exploitation on youth as they mature into adults. The results of the national study could be used to design and co-ordinate interventions at the local, provincial and federal level. Furthermore, given this data it would be also possible to **co-ordinate agreements with neighboring**

**countries** and to develop an inter-regional policy to eliminate both the supply and demand of children for the purposes of sexual exploitation.

A serious shortage exists in the number of social workers, psychologists, counselors, police and educators who are **specialist in the sexual exploitation of children**. Save the Children Canada believes that more should be done at the local and national levels to expand educational programs focused on increasing the pool of social service professionals with expertise in the nature, extent and impact of sexually exploitation on children, their peers and families.

Furthermore, more should be done nationally to **raise public awareness** of the issue with the active participation of all public and private stakeholders. At the school level, teachings should include information on the sexual exploitation of youth to make young people aware of this reality, prepare them about factors that can increase risk and draw links between violence, excessive drug consumption and sexual exploitation. Policies designed to keep young people in school need to be enforced and all school leaving children need to be exposed to employment training that pays a decent wage.

A **national coalition** coordinated by sexually exploited youth needs to be set up to move the Canadian government and the public to adopt and implement policies designed to stop the demand and supply of children in the sex trade. Efforts also need to be directed at forging links with other national coalitions worldwide so that the truly interconnected and trans-migrational aspects to this issue can be understood, addressed and changed. Further, coalition links could provide the much needed intersectionality analysis to the sexual exploitation of children and youth phenomenon, such that class, race sex, gender, ability and citizenship become clear markers in our attempts to find solutions. While a great deal of international and national attention has been given to the sexual exploitation of children, this oppression is unlikely to be dismantled without the formation of social coalitions and/or movements.

Finally, in the health sphere, given the link between the demand for child sex and the spread of HIV/AIDS, **access to specialized services** must be guaranteed to all youth involved in the sex trade, regardless of the laws that prohibit them to work in this business. Youth exclusion, power imbalances and the means by which youth get transacted in the sex trade can make it virtually impossible for sexually exploited children to demand safer sex and specialized services.



# EXIT ROUTES

## RETURNING OUR VOICES TO YOKAHAMA

Five years after the first World Congress in Stockholm and three years after the Victoria Summit, Save the Children Canada returns to the Second World Congress in Yokahama still emphasizing the central role that experiential youth must play in finding lasting solution to exiting the sex trade. However, we would like to add to our emphasis by noting that youth participation in and of itself will not bring expected change if it is not guided by the principle of peer collaboration and organizational shifts in thinking.

Exit Routes have shown us both the limits and possibilities to youth participation, namely that participation without collaboration repositions imbalances of power and revictimizes the very people it is trying to include. This discovery has lead us to insist that youth participation requires fundamental paradigmatic shifts in how we understand inclusion and involvement.

In learning through the Victoria Summit, Ofelia Calceatas-Santos, UN Special Rapporteur on the "Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Pornography" has asked,

**HOW PRESUMPTUOUS WE ARE** in thinking we know what is best for youth.

**HOW INSULAR WE ARE** in our thinking. Most people aren't aware of what is occurring because they think, "if it doesn't happen on my doorstep, it doesn't exist."

**HOW VERY IGNORANT WE ARE** of the horrors these children are suffering; ignorant of the fact that poverty is not always the culprit.

**HOW INSENSITIVE WE ARE** to how much discrimination hurts our children, in a society that pays more attention to animals than to our children.

**HOW MISERLY WE ARE** in extending our care and attention to these children.

**HOW ARROGANT WE ARE** in thinking that because we are in a position of power, that we are entitled to abuse our children.

**HOW NAIVE WE ARE** in thinking that if we close our eyes, the problem will go away!<sup>17</sup>

At Yokohama, Save the Children Canada returns the voices we have heard from the children at Exit Routes. Their voices remain consistent. To find lasting solutions for children and youth exiting the sex trade, we (as nations, communities, individuals) need to listen to their voices. For it is in their voices, in their experiences, in their struggles, in their understandings, in the decisions, in their courage and in their calls for action that we find lasting solutions.

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17. Sacred Lives: Canadian Aboriginal Children and Youth Speak out about sexual Exploitation," Save the Children Canada, 2000