

“I wish somebody would have done something then.”

– ROBIN, SURVIVOR

Schools can be a critical safety net. But many girls are slipping through the cracks.

Schools often punish girls’ attempts to cope with violence.

Children who have suffered untreated sexual abuse might disengage, skip school or exhibit behaviors that staff deem challenging. When girls learn they can’t trust anyone, including adults, these behaviors are a way of gaining back power.

The system is especially hard on girls of color and those with learning differences.

Data shows that girls of color are disproportionately punished for minor infractions with suspensions, expulsions or experiences with law enforcement. Girls with learning differences, especially if they are not diagnosed or supported, are at a higher risk for low self-esteem and failure in school.

School systems have the potential to stop exploitation before it starts.

They have the people and infrastructure to support girls who are struggling, but they often lack the resources to do so in a sustained, non-discriminatory and trauma-informed way.

Exploiters know where systems fail marginalized teen girls.

Recruiters find the places where kids gather to look for the most vulnerable and exploitable—even inside institutions that are meant to protect children.

“

This is not something that just happens on the other side of the world. It happens at our bus stops, eateries and schools...

– NE’COLE, SURVIVOR AND SERVICE PROVIDER

”

1/4



One out of four American girls have experienced some form of sexual violence before the age of 18.¹

The Life Story

MOMENTS OF CHANGE.

Sharing the voices of survivors of sexual exploitation. Revealing the opportunities we all have to create a better world for girls and women.

SCHOOL

STEPS TOWARD CHANGE

At a pivotal moment in girls' lives, school can be a place of prevention and intervention to stop exploitation before it starts or goes any further.

Shift school climate.

Build school staff's ability to see the connections between a girl's behavior and underlying trauma including sexual abuse, poverty and violence. Training can reveal implicit and structural gender and racial bias that results in disproportionate rates of marginalized girls leaving school. They need support, not punishment.

Bring knowledge to school.

Sexual-exploitation curriculum can break the silence and help school communities discuss over-sexualization, self-esteem, what healthy relationships look like and the realities of sexual violence and exploitation.

Mend the safety net.

Rather than hiring disciplinary staff, school systems can hire more counselors. These are professionals who can recognize the signs of recruitment and establish trauma-informed, culturally-sensitive protocols for intervention. For marginalized girls, a supportive relationship with an adult in school could make the difference.

Invest in girls.

The commodification of girls and sex comes from many sources including social media, popular culture, advertising and music. Girls experiencing society's failures—poverty, racism, disability, housing instability—may not have a counterbalance to those priming forces. After-school and in-school programming that supports and empowers girls can counter prevailing norms and shift paths.

WHO CAN SHIFT THE SYSTEM?

Adults work in schools because they care about kids, even when the system makes it tough. For the girls who are struggling, these are the adults who could matter most.

EDUCATION FUNDERS

LEGISLATORS AND POLICYMAKERS

TEACHERS

PRINCIPALS

SCHOOL NURSES

COUNSELORS

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

“

I think a lot of times—especially in schools—sex, prostitution and sex trafficking are taboo topics. Agencies, organizations and institutions don't want to admit that they have a problem.

— CHUCK, SERGEANT, HUMAN TRAFFICKING DETAIL

”

Saar, M. S., Epstein, R., Rosenthal, L., & Vafa, Y. (2015). The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls' Story. Human Rights Project for Girls, Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, & Ms. Foundation for Women, pp 5.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The Life Story: Moments of Change shines a light on the realities of women in the sex trade, elevates their voices and experiences and highlights opportunity for change. This material is meant to inform and inspire those who work across the intersections of education, housing, public health, mental health and addiction services, economic and racial justice, and many other areas. **Learn more at:**

THELIFESTORY.ORG