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“I’ll do whatever as long as you keep telling me that I’m important”: A case study illustrating the link between adolescent dating violence and sex trafficking victimization

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“I’ll do whatever as long as you keep telling me that I’m important”: A case study illustrating the link between adolescent dating violence and sex trafficking victimization

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Introduction

At least 10% of US youth experience physical or sexual abuse by a dating partner each year.¹ The consequences of being abused by a dating partner during adolescence have been documented by numerous studies. Girls who are abused in dating relationships may later experience depression, suicidality, eating disorders, school problems, aggressive tendencies, injuries, and death.²⁻⁷ However, one specific consequence of unhealthy dating relationships that remains underexplored in this literature is the possibility of commercial sexual exploitation or trafficking by intimate partners. While numerous individual- and community-level antecedents of sex trafficking victimization have been documented (e.g., childhood history of abuse, family members in sex work, lack of employment, dating relationships with older men, political instability, and natural disasters),⁸⁻¹⁰ the field lacks information about dating partners as agents of exploitation. To be clear, several reports have documented that some commercially sexually exploited people are lured into the commercial sex industry by individuals who dupe them with false romantic promises.¹¹ In contrast, exploitation by people who are in true romantic/dating-type relationships with their victims is understudied, and the reasons why some youth may participate in commercial sex at the request of their intimate partners has been virtually unexplored in scientific literature. One prior qualitative study using data from a convenience sample of social service and law enforcement professionals and 32 female sex workers in Canada found that 16% of the women were “turned out” (i.e., initiated into sex work) by romantic partners.¹¹ However, that study did not explore how or why those women were able to be exploited by partners. This case series is designed to provide detailed information on how adolescents may be vulnerable to unhealthy dating relationships that evolve into sex trafficking victimization.

We preface this report with the following clarification of terms because professionals from multiple sectors use different terminology to describe their work with sexually exploited children. “Sex trafficking” has typically been used to describe the organized relocation of people for sex work through violence, deception, and bondage.¹² “Commercial sexual exploitation of children” is defined as the use of children as sexual objects for remuneration in cash or in kind.¹³ The definition of sex trafficking in the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 does not require relocation of victims in order for forced sex work to be considered trafficking, and any time a minor less than 18 years old is involved in commercial sex, it is considered human trafficking.^{12,13} Therefore, in this report, we refer to commercial sexual exploitation of US minors as sex trafficking.

In this report, we also use the terms “dating violence” and “intimate partner abuse” interchangeably. An important consideration relevant to dating abuse research is that the phrases “dating violence,” “intimate partner abuse,” and “domestic violence” can be used to describe physical, sexual, and emotional abuse between two individuals in a dyadic, committed relationship, but that these terms can also be applied to more contemporary “dating relationship” configurations, which may include triads, open relationships, polyamorous relationships, strictly sexual uncommitted partnerships (e.g., “friends with benefits”), or one-sided relationships that are described as romantic and intimate by one party but not the other. The flexibility of the definition of “intimate partnership” is critical; outmoded and narrow concepts of “dating” or “partnership” delegitimize the experiences of some youth and make it more difficult to understand precisely why and how they enter into detrimental interpersonal relationships.

It is estimated that approximately 100,000 to 300,000 minors are at risk of being trafficked domestically (within the US) each year¹⁴ and that minors who are sex trafficked domestically are often urban-residing youth of color.¹⁵ Though advocates for sex trafficking survivors have been vocal about the role of dating partners in sexual exploitation,¹⁶ to our knowledge no prior studies have explored how youth become vulnerable to sex trafficking through unhealthy intimate partnerships. Therefore, we sought to chronicle the experiences of four women whose relationships with abusive dating partners while they were minors led to sex trafficking victimization. Documenting and presenting the experiences of these survivors in case series format is intended to provide a foundation for future, urgently needed qualitative and quantitative research.

Methods

For this exploratory study, we conducted in-depth interviews with 4 adult women (aged ≥ 18 years at the time of the interview) in the northeastern area of the United States; these women had experience with unhealthy dating relationships leading to commercial sexual exploitation. Participants were recruited through a community organization that conducts violence advocacy and aids survivors. The sample size of 4 interviews was selected because a case series of 4 interviews offers richer information than a case study of 1 person’s experience and because 4 was the maximum number of interviews the research team was able to conduct given resource limitations (i.e., this was an unfunded study).

In August 2014, a trained qualitative researcher conducted interviews in private rooms located at the organization. Our semistructured

interview guide was designed to elicit life history narratives and included probes on topics relating to dating relationships and initiation into sex work and trafficking. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were digitally recorded. Participants received \$25 gift cards as remuneration at the completion of the interview.

Drawing from a constructivist grounded theory approach, we used content-based analysis of the participants' narratives with the ultimate objective of constructing a theory (or framework) from the data. This approach also acknowledges that the interpretation of data necessarily reflects both researchers' and participants' subjective lenses; in other words, participants are interpreters of their own experiences, rather than objective reporters.^{17,18} Therefore, the constructivist approach encourages researchers to include as much of the original text as possible so that the reader can plainly see the links between the participants' words and the researchers' themes¹⁸ and emphasizes the researchers' ethical obligation to "describe the experiences of others in the most faithful way possible."¹⁹ We addressed this ethical obligation by involving the participants in the analytic process, as described below.

Audio recordings were reviewed by one member of the research team, who transcribed participants' statements and then edited them to construct brief narratives of each participant's story. A second member of the research team then reviewed the recordings and independently developed narratives to compare with the first researcher's findings. The researchers then came to consensus regarding revisions that would improve the integrity of the narratives and used an "open coding" approach to identify axial themes across narratives. All 3 authors came to consensus about which axial themes emerged and were germane to the present analysis; themes that emerged but would require additional interviewing to explicate were classified as secondary themes. After identifying themes, we selected illustrative quotes. Finally, each of the 4 participants read the draft manuscript and provided feedback on the narratives to improve accuracy and ensure anonymity was protected. Only one of the 4 participants proposed a change to her narrative, and it was a minor alteration to the sequence of certain events. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by a university human subjects committee. Pseudonyms are used, and some details have been changed to protect anonymity.

Results

Among 4 women who completed qualitative interviews for this exploratory study, 3 were black and 1 was Hispanic. Their ages ranged from 25 to 55

years, and all 4 were initially trafficked between 15 and 17 years of age. Primary themes regarding adolescent victimization experiences included the following: (1) feeling physically unattractive and unimportant; (2) lacking examples of healthy relationships; (3) experiencing sexual abuse and subsequent dissociation and emotional debilitation; (4) being flattered by romantic gestures early in abusive dating relationships and becoming emotionally attached; (5) gaining confidence from dating individuals of higher social status; and (6) experiencing short-term satisfaction from out-earning other women. Secondary themes for future research included complex relationships with female guardians (i.e., mothers or grandmothers); participation in shoplifting, drug trade, or other crimes at the request of the perpetrator; and the role of substance use and dependence in perpetuating sexual exploitation.

Case 1

Jane grew up in subsidized housing with 5 siblings, her mother, and her mother's abusive boyfriend. She wasn't close with her family growing up and was "a really, really insecure kid" who did not like her physical appearance and was teased by peers about being poor and having darker skin than other black girls she knew from the neighborhood. She felt that boys overlooked her and favored other girls whose families appeared to have more money. When Jane was 15 or 16, Nick moved into the neighborhood. He was a couple of years older and started dating one of her friends. One day, he told her that he found her attractive and liked her and they wound up "hooking up" in a stairwell, which was her first time having sex. She never told anyone, but Nick continued dating her friend, and the word got out that Jane was promiscuous. Nick stopped being nice to her, but out of insecurity and hope that a relationship would develop, she continued to hook up with him. She became isolated from her female peers and was lonely, finding "solace" in casual sexual encounters. Within a year, she met Joe, a 24- or 25-year-old man who dealt drugs. She stopped going to school and started helping him sell drugs by making deliveries and by providing other "favors." She lived with him in a "trap house" where drugs were sold and used for about 6 months until he left to go live with his wife and children, whom Jane had not known about. Jane had no money and did not want to return home to face her mother. She met an older, "motherly or sisterly" woman, Tammy, who seemed very friendly. Tammy and Jane entered into an intimate partnership. Tammy was also openly dating several other women, but she and Jane shared a bed, and Jane was Tammy's primary partner. Tammy explained to Jane how to make money in exchange for sex, and Jane agreed to try it. The

first time Tammy arranged a sexual encounter, she permitted Jane to keep all of the money. It seemed like an easy way to earn money; however, each subsequent time that Tammy arranged sex work for Jane, Tammy kept all of the money. During this period, Tammy provided Jane with food, housing, clothing, drugs, alcohol, and an occasional personal allowance. In their relationship, Tammy was initially very kind, buying dinners and small gifts and telling Jane that she loved her. Over time, however, Tammy became increasingly verbally, physically, and sexually abusive. At one point, Tammy arranged a three-way sexual encounter for the two of them with a client, but Tammy got high and did not show up. As a result, the client did not pay the full price, and Tammy later severely beat and sodomized Jane for not having collected all of the money. Subsequent to this event, Jane had a moment of reflection where she realized that she was using too many different drugs and did not know how to earn money or stay safe without being under the control of another person. She realized that she was being treated unfairly and moved into her own apartment, trying to sell sexual services by herself online. Once, after being severely beaten by a client, something which occurred frequently, she was so injured that a friend insisted she go to the hospital. Although she didn't want help from her mother, Jane's mother later helped her access state services. Jane now believes that Tammy had recognized her insecurity and purposefully targeted her, knowing that she had a need to feel wanted and provided for. Now that Jane is employed, educated, living independently, and enjoying a positive relationship with her mother, she hopes to help other girls develop self-confidence and healthy relationships.

Case 2

Samantha was born outside of the US and adopted as a baby by a "very white family" who lived in a wealthy, primarily white suburb. She had a happy childhood and felt "normal" until adolescence. When she began middle school, she started to realize that her race/ethnicity made her look very different from her peers; this caused her to feel physically unattractive. When she was 15 years old, she took the subway to the city and met an adult black man, who was the first person to tell her that she was beautiful. She started to attend parties in the city and distanced herself from her suburban school friends. The group of young men in the city treated her very well and frequently bought her gifts and took her out to eat. She rarely thought about how much older they were than her and only realized after time that they were drug dealers. One night their 40-year-old boss, Richard, who was very good looking and had a reputation

for being powerful within their group, selected her to go on a drug-related errand with him. She was very proud that she had been selected by Richard, and she later became his girlfriend. It made her feel special that he took her out to eat and trusted her with drug-related errands. Although their relationship was sexual, she did not think of it as exploitation because she loved him. She started realizing that in addition to selling drugs, Richard and his friends were also in a large gang organization. She felt important to be the girlfriend of someone with high status in a well-known gang. Samantha continued her high school studies and told her parents she was out frequently because of a part-time job. She no longer had any close school friends who would have noticed that she was out so much. While still in high school, she began working at a nightclub, and a coworker there told her she was beautiful and would make a lot of money dancing. Richard was supportive of the idea, so she got a job at a dance club and started stripping. Richard initially accompanied her to clubs, arranged lap dances for patrons there, and kept half of her earnings. Samantha was surprised but somewhat pleased when it became clear that she could outearn other dancers at the club and was very popular with the patrons. One day, when she was still 16 years old, Richard suggested that she dance for a private party that he set up for her; it was attended by 7 male gang members whom she knew. She felt very uncomfortable, but Richard told her, "you really don't have a choice" because she knew too much about the gang and the members' identities. She tried to protest, but Richard gave her drugs, and she followed his instructions to have sex with all of them. Richard suggested that she do these "favors" for private clients more often. She was eager to please Richard, did not believe she had a choice, and was given cocaine to help her get through the nights. After learning that one man with whom she had unprotected oral sex was HIV positive, she became increasingly concerned about her situation but realized that the gang would not permit her to end her involvement with them. Richard began to "pimp" Samantha more regularly, and things in her life deteriorated very rapidly after this point. She had enrolled in college but was ejected from her dormitory for violent behavior. She stopped attending classes and started using heroin at age 17, when 13 gang members raped her for her official gang initiation. She eventually began exchanging sex for heroin without Richard's involvement, and the gang members started to view her as untrustworthy. Her parents tried to be supportive, but they no longer played a significant role in her life, and she was uninterested in their opinions. Samantha got pregnant by Richard twice between the ages of 19 and 23; she had one miscarriage and one abortion. She stopped caring about anything but heroin and drifted away

from Richard emotionally while remaining financially dependent on him. She lived in her car for a while and felt certain that she would either overdose or be killed by the gang. After having an “epiphany” at age 24 that she had become a “junkie” and “couldn’t do it anymore,” she went home to her family and returned to school. She had one other abusive relationship that lasted for 6 years but eventually got out of it when he went to prison. Samantha graduated from school, started a master’s degree program, and found a job.

Case 3

Fran grew up in a middle-class black family in an urban neighborhood; her family appeared to be “functional” within the community. Her mother was strict and “old-fashioned,” with a mentality that “children are meant to be seen and not heard.” Fran feared displeasing her from an early age, believing herself to be “irrelevant” within the family. She was bullied at school because she lived in a large house, had nice things, and was light skinned. Fran disliked herself, wished she got more attention, and “went on mission” to look and act like black girls who lived in more chaotic public housing with mothers who were “cool.” She started spending more time with a group of girls who had bad reputations, which allowed her to start getting attention from James, a boy who played football and “was all that” and was the first person to tell her that she was pretty. Around age 15, after “hanging out” at his house for several months, James pressured her into having sex, and she became pregnant. She had the baby to remain connected to James because she was in love with him and also to be independent from her family and get welfare that James pressured her into sharing with him. “Boosting” (shoplifting) and “having warrants” were common in their social group. Fran and James were in an ongoing intimate partnership and perceived by others as being together as a couple. James pressured Fran into shoplifting, but she was not as good at stealing as her friends were, so when she was 16 years old, James decided to put her “down” on a street corner to earn money for him through sex work. The first car that approached was actually a police officer who threatened that he would arrest her if she did not perform oral sex on him. Fran was very distressed, but James and “the other girls” taught her how to recognize and avoid police officers. With time, she learned that white sex workers earned more money, so her light skin helped her “for the first time.” She started earning a lot of money and felt a greater sense of self-worth. However, James’s demeanor changed, and he became physically violent toward Fran when she expressed a desire to quit sex work. She never viewed him as a “pimp” but rather as her

boyfriend and the father of her child. When James was imprisoned for 2 years, Fran began dancing in a strip club. When she was 24 years old, she met “Ty,” a man who was infamous throughout the city for being a powerful criminal. After Ty, who dressed exceptionally well, expressed an interest in Fran, she felt glamorous and was thrilled to earn respect and a reputation as Ty’s “girlfriend.” He took her earnings and became exceedingly physically abusive to the point that she feared for her life. She started using heroin and had Ty’s baby when she was 26 years old. Custody of her children was transferred to Fran’s mother, and Fran enrolled in several detox programs without having a strong intention to get clean. She remained in a troubled relationship with Ty and continued using heroin and crack until she became pregnant with her third child at age 30. She realized that she did not want to have “another baby born addicted,” so she enrolled in an inpatient substance abuse treatment program, got clean, and has been employed and “out of the life” ever since. Reflecting back, she views “those boyfriends” as contributing to “all of the ugly stuff” in “her story” and believes that young girls and their parents need to be educated that it is often relationships with people who are known within their neighborhoods—rather than strangers—that lead to control over young women through violence and fear.

Case 4

Donna grew up in the South with a very poor couple she believed were her parents but who were actually her grandparents. Her grandfather frequently sexually assaulted her and also physically assaulted her grandmother; however, she pushed many of the details of her childhood out of her mind. Although she and her grandmother never discussed the sexual abuse, Donna is certain that her grandmother must have known about it. When Donna was 8 years old, her grandmother moved her to a northern state to live closer to her actual mother. She remained close with her grandmother, who told her “she would never leave” her, but Donna always felt different growing up, like she “didn’t belong,” was broken, and “wasn’t God material.” Donna was made fun of by other children because of her accent and her family. She learned that she could gain respect by winning physical fights, even though “that’s not how you get friends.” Donna and her mother did not get along well, and her mother was very strict. Her stepfather was very kind to her and was “the only father” she ever had, but their relationship challenged her already strained relationship with her mother. Although Donna was smart, tested up a grade level, and was viewed within her family as the one who would succeed, she developed a “dumbed-down” identity in school and

frequently smoked marijuana in order to fit in. She graduated from high school and won a full scholarship to college at age 17. Around that time, she met "Roy," a 21-year-old man whom she fell in love with. When she first had sex with Roy, she had a flashback of her childhood sexual abuse but tried to play it off. She found out that she got pregnant, was terrified of her mother's reaction, and decided to have an abortion against Roy's wishes. Their relationship ended, and family conflict around that time led Donna to refuse to go to college. She took an office job and started drinking at clubs every night. One night, she met a dancer who explained that she could earn a lot of money strip dancing. Donna thought that earning money for dancing could be lucrative and also improve her self-esteem, so at age 18, she allowed the woman to set up dancing jobs. Donna was very successful as a dancer and was told that she was "born to strip." She began to spend more time with a female coworker and that coworker's boyfriend. The coworker's boyfriend became Donna's intimate partner as well. Within a short time, the female coworker had pressured Donna into sex work, and the boyfriend also began arranging sex work jobs for her. Donna and her coworker were often pitted against one another within the triadic intimate partnership and competed for rewards such as sleeping in the bed instead of on the floor by outearning the other through sex work. After a while, Donna started to meet other "pimps" who offered to help her arrange jobs and protect her from her existing partner/"pimp." One of these men was named Will. Donna met Will when she was 22 years old. He was a very good-looking man and started paying a lot of attention to her, buying her dinners, and giving her rides in his car. Will soon started demanding the money that Donna earned from dancing, and she started using crack and having sex for money on "private dates." She fantasized that she and Will would start a relationship, but he became increasingly controlling of her work and earnings. She became more addicted to drugs, and although she did enter into a romantic partnership with Will, he became increasingly violent and threatening. He told Donna that he would hurt her if she failed to do exactly what he said. She continued to fantasize that they would one day buy a "house on a hill" and live together like a traditional couple. Soon thereafter he drove her halfway across the country and forced her to engage in sex work on the street. She was arrested, and Will did not bail her out of jail immediately. When she was bailed out, Will forced her to go back to street sex work and also to take a job as a dancer in a strip club. He arranged for her to be spied upon at the club, so he knew with whom she arranged dates. One time, after Donna was with a client Will did not like, he kicked her, forced her to have anal sex, and hit her so hard that her vision blurred. The next day,

another dancer from the club noticed Donna's injuries and let her live with her for a couple of weeks. The club managers protected her from Will when he tried to find her at work. She earned enough money to buy a one-way ticket back to where her parents and child were living. She achieved sobriety by frequenting group meetings and realized that she was not actually "born to strip" and had value beyond the money she could earn through sex work. She continues to struggle with developing intimate relationships but realizes that she has a lot of reasons to trust herself and her instincts. She wants to help other girls not feel "the brokenness" and loneliness that she felt growing up.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore how and why unhealthy dating relationships may lead to sexual exploitation for some young women. These case studies demonstrate that violence and abuse within intimate relationships can play a role in the initiation of youth into sex work while later complicating women's efforts to return to conventional life. We identified 6 themes in these narratives that help explicate why and how girls may become vulnerable to exploitation by intimate partners, including the following: (1) feeling physically unattractive and unimportant; (2) lacking examples of healthy relationships; (3) experiencing sexual abuse that causes subsequent dissociation and emotional debilitation; (4) being flattered by romantic gestures early in an abusive dating relationship and becoming emotionally attached; (5) gaining confidence from dating someone with higher social status; and (6) gaining confidence from earning more than other women (see Figure 1). Our findings are consistent with prior research that suggests victims of sex trafficking who are minors are enticed into sexual exploitation by 5 factors—love, debt, addiction, physical might, and authority—and that adolescents are sometimes pressured into sex work by individuals perceived to be romantic partners.^{11,20,21} Our findings also are consistent with Marcus and colleagues' conclusions that the narrative of trafficked youth as "captive slaves" is not always applicable.²² One interpretation of our data is that the adolescent girls and young women had opportunities to leave abusive partners at any time and thus were "choosing" to engage in sex work of their own free will. However, an alternate interpretation would be that the girls had windows of opportunity to leave their abusive partners without facing violent retribution, but those windows were short in duration. Moreover, drawing on the partner abuse literature, the windows of opportunity to exit sex work and leave their partners were complicated by emotional attachment to their partners, drug dependence, conflict with

guardians, and their perception that they were reliant on their partners for food, shelter, and transportation.²³ In sum, our findings extend the existing knowledge base on intimate partner violence by providing a preliminary framework for understanding how and why some unhealthy or abusive intimate relationships may render young women vulnerable to sexual exploitation (see Figure 1).

The first factor that contributed to exploitation by intimate partners among our participants was low self-esteem during early adolescence that co-occurred with difficult relationships at home or school. Among the 4 women we interviewed, 3 had relatively structured home environments, 3 had clear opportunities and support to pursue higher education, and all 4 had the intelligence for academic success in high school. As Kennedy found in her qualitative study of adult female sex workers, girls from middle-class homes (as opposed to underclass or impoverished homes) became entrapped in sexually exploitive relationships through emotional manipulation (e.g., love and affection) rather than physical might.¹¹ A key factor in all 4 of participants' early vulnerability to exploitation was that they felt physically unattractive, describing themselves as insecure, self-conscious, and too light or dark skinned compared to peers. They also described feeling unimportant, hungry for attention and compliments, and undeserving of being treated well. Thus, being told that they were attractive by new acquaintances and being treated as though they were important in these new social circles, compelled girls to attach to them emotionally. Even when they found themselves engaged in criminal activity that initially made them uncomfortable, they were not deterred from spending time with their new acquaintances because those people made them feel desired and worthwhile.

Three of the cases reported that they did not have examples of healthy romantic partnerships in their immediate families, friendship circles, or neighborhoods, which influenced their inability to distinguish respectful and appropriate partner behavior from abusive treatment. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that children who are raised in homes where there is intimate partner violence are at increased risk for dating abuse victimization.^{24,25} Samantha (case 2) was raised by nonabusive, non-neglectful parents but reached a point in her adolescence when she found it difficult to model herself on them or the other adults in her community because she had been adopted. Some dating violence prevention programs for secondary schools, such as Coaching Boys Into Men,²⁶ have begun to address the fact that some youth lack positive examples of healthy relationships in their families and among celebrities and media stars they idolize. Discussion of model

healthy relationships could also enrich the existing content of psychoeducational groups for girls at risk for commercial sexual exploitation.

Third, all 4 of the women described being raped, sexually abused, or coerced into their first sexual experience in adolescence. Two of the participants spoke about feeling “numbed out” or dissociating during subsequent sexual encounters, with one describing a state of “shock” during subsequent sexual encounters. Dissociation is a coping mechanism that involves detachment from reality, and for some, entering into an altered state of consciousness like daydreaming. Previous research has established that sexual abuse is associated with feelings of dissociation²⁷ and poor psychological functioning²⁸ and that rape and sexual assault victimization are predictive of future sexual assault victimization.²⁸ The association between first sexual assault victimization and subsequent adverse sexual experience are mediated by depression and anxiety,²⁸ which Donna (case 4) described as feelings of “brokenness” or hopelessness. Donna further explained that her own history of sexual abuse victimization tied directly to her decision to participate in sex work, because she thought that as long as she had to endure sexual contact with others, she might as well get paid for it. Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is also predictive of future dating violence victimization²⁹ as well as increased levels of substance use, risky sexual behavior, reduced self-esteem, and ultimately increased vulnerability to mistreatment by dating partners.²⁹ Our findings confirm that this pathway may also lead to sex trafficking victimization, mediated by attachment to an intimate partner who may or may not have premeditated plans to exploit.

A fourth factor that was identified is that girls were first courted by the people who later became exploitative and that the onset of abuse occurred after they were emotionally and/or financially dependent on that individual. As other researchers have described in some detail, each girl in our sample was initially “wined and dined” or given gifts, taken out for meals, and flattered with compliments and affectionate language by a dating partner who gained their emotional attachment but later became abusive and sexually exploitative.^{11,21} Unlike prior reports, however, the narratives in the present study suggest that not all of the affection on the part of dating partners was feigned. For example, in Fran’s case (Case 3), the man who first exploited her was her high school boyfriend. They had been a romantic couple for more than a year before he initiated Fran into sex work, and they had a child together. While the relationship was not healthy or empowering for Fran, it is possible that James entered into the dating relationship without intentions to groom Fran for sexual exploitation,

although he was involved in other girls' sex work (unbeknownst to Fran) during the early phase of their dating relationship. In summary, because the dating relationships that ultimately became exploitative were at first exciting, genuinely romantic from their perspective, and boosted the girls' self-esteem, the girls remained in these relationships even when the partners became abusive and sexually exploitative. It is common among partner abuse survivors to report not recognizing or acknowledging that a dating relationship has transitioned from romantic to abusive (e.g., "a subordinating of the self," according to Campbell et al., 1998).^{23,30}

Once in a dating relationship, the girls' feelings of self-esteem were further bolstered by having intimate partnerships with individuals who had higher status in their communities or in a particular subculture. Specifically, Samantha (case 2) felt proud when she was chosen by a powerful criminal leader to be his confidante and girlfriend. Jane (case 1) was bullied by peers for being promiscuous and then left high school and her family home when invited to move in with a handsome adult male, in part because of the improved social status that a live-in relationship conferred. In an attempt to maintain a high school dating relationship with someone of higher social status who was handsome and an athlete, Fran (case 3) agreed to have sex with her partner, had his baby, shared her welfare money with him, participated in shoplifting, and initiated sex work. A few years later, Fran derived feelings of pride when she became the girlfriend of a flamboyant, high-profile criminal even though he quickly became severely physically abusive towards her. Standing out to a powerful man and being "chosen" by him for a dating relationship—even when exploitative—appears to have made the girls in our sample feel temporarily confident and successful.

All of our participants also reported having moments early in their sex work careers when they felt proud that they could outearn other women or become popular among male clients. Fran (case 3) commented that selling sex to strangers on the street was the first time that the lightness of her African American skin was an advantage instead of a liability. Donna (case 4) was frequently told that she was "born to strip" because she was so successful at dancing, and there was a period of time when she took pride in hearing such remarks. Samantha (case 2) felt surprised but proud that she was able to outearn other strippers in a club by giving lap dances when she was still underage. These moments of satisfaction were fleeting but did not offset contrary, simultaneous feelings of doubt, anxiety, fear, and depression.

In addition to the 6 themes described above, we identified the following topics that were consistent across women's narratives and

require further investigation: (a) participants' mothers or grandmothers appeared to play pivotal roles in their decisions to leave home during adolescence and also to recover from "the life" as young adults; (b) girls were encouraged by dating partners and peers to engage in criminal activity, such as shoplifting and holding/transporting drugs, cash, and weapons; this appears to have increased their emotional commitment to exploitative partners and reinforced barriers to seeking help from family or law enforcement; and (c) initiation into and increasing dependence on illicit drugs during their relationships with exploitative partners reinforced their dependence on partners and may have subsequently exacerbated their need to participate in riskier forms of sex work, even after leaving exploitative partners. These factors are included in the proposed conceptual model of how girls become vulnerable to dating abuse victimization and subsequent sexual exploitation (see Figure 1) but are beyond the scope of this manuscript.

Taken as a whole, the themes that emerged from this case series suggest several next steps for research and practice. First, more research on the prevalence of and contexts surrounding sexual exploitation by dating partners is urgently needed. Studies involving representative samples of dating abuse survivors would be particularly useful, as the nongeneralizability of existing sex trafficking research is problematic. Obtaining a representative sample of a hidden and transient population is difficult, and the results of research based on convenience samples may be subject to participation bias. Second, we organized the themes that emerged from this case series, which are consistent with previous research on the precursors to dating abuse and/or sex trafficking victimization, into a framework that we believe provides a helpful starting point for additional research. We do not propose that the framework can or should be generalized but rather offer it as a first iteration to be improved upon by others who continue to collect evidence on this topic. Third, given the debate in the field about whether some minors willingly "choose" to participate in sex work and whether exploitative partners should always be subjected to criminal penalties associated with human trafficking, our findings should be viewed as confirmation of this dialectical possibility: (a) some domestic minors who engage in sex work may not be compelled to do so by force or violence, and the "captive slave" trope may not apply in all cases; and (b) reasons that youth initiate and remain in sex work are complex, with driving factors sometimes including unmet needs for love, belonging, affection, praise, and attention. While in theory the victims motivated by these drivers should be able to exit sex work at will, in the short term some may voluntarily forgo autonomy, physical safety, financial

security and health when faced with a choice between these basic and psychosocial needs.

This study faced several limitations. A common and reasonable criticism of trafficking research is that samples are often biased because access to sexually exploited people is often controlled by social service or law enforcement “gatekeepers” and because those who are able and willing to speak with researchers may differ from those who are not sufficiently safe or disinclined to do so.^{31,32} This case series was not designed to be representative of domestic minor sex trafficking victims nor are results intended to be generalized to all youth who may have one or more of the potential risk factors we identified. Rather, our objective was to conduct an in-depth exploration of one particular avenue into domestic minor sex trafficking that has received little attention to date. In addition, there are inherent limitations of case series research; the sample for this study was small (n=4), experiences of sexual exploitation occurred more than 20 years ago for 2 of the participants, and all 4 were affiliated with a sex trafficking survivor advocacy agency. Thus, our preliminary findings regarding risk factors for dating abuse victimization and subsequent sex trafficking need to be confirmed through larger studies. For this reason, our proposed framework for understanding factors that increase youth vulnerability to these forms of victimization is offered as a starting point for future investigations and should be expanded through additional research. Finally, the process of condensing and presenting the narratives and illustrative quotations may have reflected biases of the researchers or participants. However, we attempted to minimize bias by having 2 researchers review audio recordings independently and later come to consensus, and by providing participants with opportunities to review the narratives for accuracy. Furthermore, our conclusions are consistent with the findings of several prior studies,^{11,20} while also deviating from the “popular accounts” and so-called “myths of sexual slavery” that have been criticized by some scholars.^{22,33}

In conclusion, this study presented 4 narratives from sex trafficking survivors who had been both abused and sexually exploited by dating partners and contributes to the existing knowledge base on both dating abuse and domestic minor sex trafficking. Additional research that explicates why and how some youth become vulnerable to abusive dating partners who then sexually exploit them is needed in order to improve prevention efforts.

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Figure 1. Proposed framework for conceptualizing risk for dating abuse victimization and subsequent sexual exploitation by the abusive dating partner

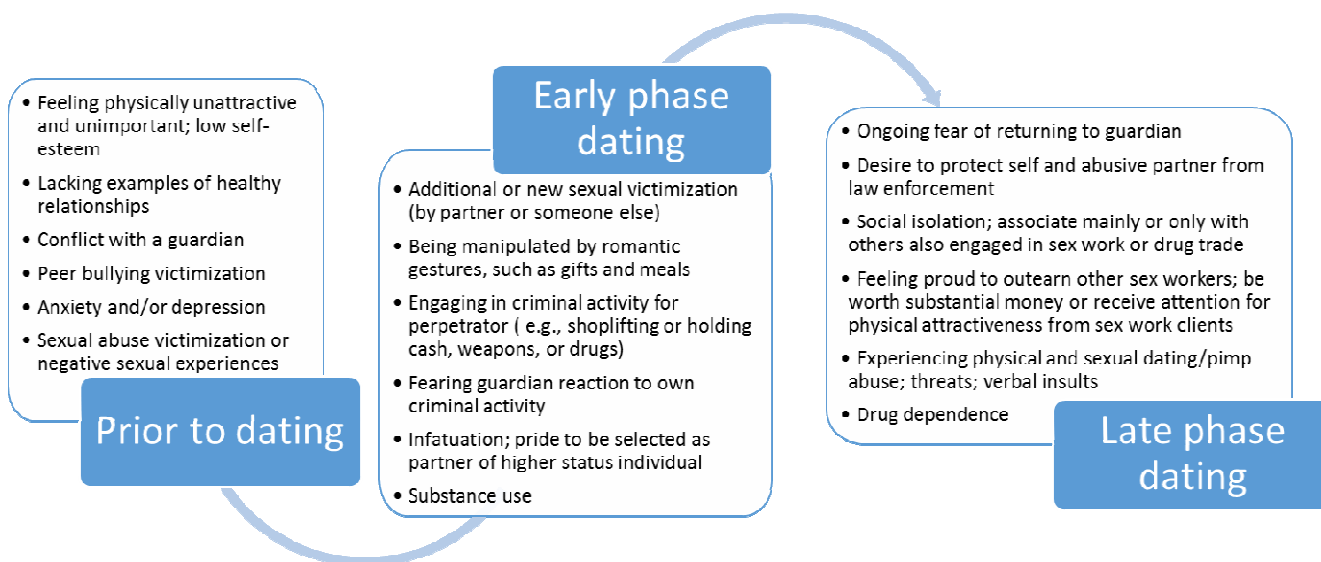


Table 1. Key Findings from Interviews Regarding Why Girls Are Vulnerable to Being Sex Trafficked by Dating Partners (n=4)

Main theme	Examples
(1) Insecurity about physical attractiveness; lack of self-worth	<p><i>“I come from a 3-parent home. I did not need to be in this. I just lost myself and thought I could find myself in these things.”</i></p> <p><i>“I was a girl who did not know any better. . . . My perception was that that was the best that I could do.”</i></p> <p><i>“For me, it was how I felt about myself, so that I would allow people to treat me any way that they wanted. You could be horrible to me 95% of the time, but if 5% you were good to me or said something nice, then that was OK. I would take that 95% bad.”</i></p> <p><i>“Somebody is paying attention to me, listening to what I am saying, giving me all these compliments. . . . I did not even think they are so much older than me.”</i></p> <p><i>“I’ll deliver your drugs, I’ll hold your guns, I’ll do whatever you need me to do, as long as you keep telling me I’m important.”</i></p>
(2) No experience with healthy dating relationships	<p><i>“I did not know what dating was. . . . We were just hooking up. That was it.”</i></p> <p><i>“I don’t have references to healthy relationships. I don’t know what it’s like to have somebody want to be with me for me.”</i></p> <p><i>“What I thought was a healthy relationship was really screwed up. . . . The fact that a man—or a boy at the time—was interested in me seemed like a relationship and was really appealing to me.”</i></p>
(3) Sexual assault and rape survivors may feel “broken” and hopeless	<p><i>“I figured if I had to [have sex] then I might as well do it for money. If someone’s gotta look at my body, touch my body, it might as well be for money rather than for free.”</i></p>
(4) Early dating phase includes flattery and romantic gestures that facilitate girls’ emotional attachment and fuel fantasies of a committed relationship	<p><i>“This one guy was very friendly, really nice to me. He would walk me from the club, pay for dinner. He was making his investment and setting it all up. In my mind, I wanted it to be that we were dating, but everything was centered around the club. I was in love with the fantasy, I believed we were going to make enough money to buy a house.”</i></p>

“It’s what happens a lot. . . . If you think about a bad relationship that you were in, at first it wasn’t bad. There was so much love there, but maybe after about 6 months, or however long it is, it just turns bad, but you want so much for what it was in the beginning to return that you’ll stay in that relationship and you’ll do anything in hopes that it will return back to that. But the problem for girls in the life and with pimps is that that was never real, so it will never, ever go back to that because it never existed. But in the girl’s mind it existed and in the pimp’s mind it was never real, so it will never go back to that.”

“To me, he was my boyfriend. I had a baby with him. We got together before any of this. So to me, he wasn’t a pimp.”

(5) Girls may be attracted to acquaintances with higher social status in their peer group or community; these acquaintances then exploit the girls

“Usually a pimp or someone who will try to recruit you is not a stranger. Be careful who you’re looking up to in your neighborhood that’s living this fast life, on drugs, in gangs. You know, I don’t care if he’s your neighbor; you all went to kindergarten all through high school together, that is a potential person. Chances are, particularly for inner city kids, somebody in your neighborhood is more likely to recruit you into the life than a stranger. . . . But nobody ever told us about the guy in our neighborhood . . . that ‘slick guy’ and those girls who are getting that money fast, nails done, the outfits, all of those things they can’t afford. Those people are right in your face.”

(6) Initial involvement in sex work may temporarily convey a (false) sense of power or control for some girls; outearning other sex workers or feeling sought after can boost self-confidence in the short-term

“When they started throwing money, I felt valued sexually, like I had control of it. I knew sex equaled power, and I knew that power equaled money and that I was going to get it that way, because I couldn’t do it the other way.”