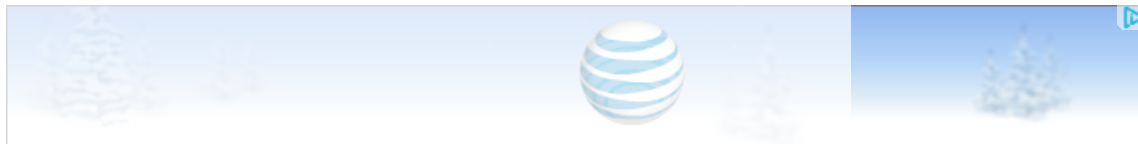


# Forbes



**Meghan Casserly**, Forbes Staff

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## Girls For Sale! Changing The Conversation On Exploited Kids In The U.S.

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Activist Rachel Lloyd on pimps, johns and how  
Lawrence Sanders on his new book, "The  
about trafficked teenaged girls

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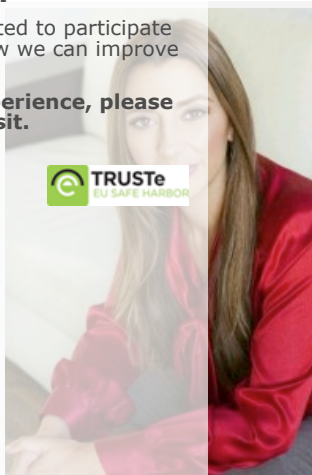
In the United States, the number of girls who are trafficked into prostitution is estimated to be over 100,000.

[Rachel Lloyd](#), advocate and activist, was herself a victim of what's known as commercial sexual exploitation at the age of 17 while living in Germany. By 19, having survived attempts on her life by both her own hands and those of her pimp, she escaped.

At 23 she was living in New York and founded [GEMS \(Girls Educational and Mentoring Services\)](#), the only program of its kind in the state, which annually aids more than 200 sexually exploited or trafficked teenaged girls, many struggling to escape the clutches of what sex workers call "the life."

In honor of [Human Trafficking Awareness Month](#), Lloyd talked to [ForbesWoman](#) about the harsh realities of [American girls working the streets](#), the glorification of the sex culture and how it's going to take a lot more than legislation and celebrity spokespeople to put an end to the sale of children for sex.

**MC: Help me out with the language used to discuss these girls: "trafficked," "sexually exploited," "commercially sexually exploited," "prostitute." What's the difference?**



GEMS founder and advocate Rachel Lloyd



**RL:** We don't use the word prostitute at all to describe girls in the commercial sex industry; there's just too much stigma around that word. You say "child prostitute" or "teen prostitute" and immediately the image is girl on the street, high heels, stockings, the works. As opposed to "This is a child who's being bought and sold by adults for sex."

When we're talking about trafficking, we're talking about a situation here there's a third party making money. Commercial sexual exploitation, means any person who's in the sex industry who's exchanging sex for money, for somewhere to stay, even for food. We work with girls who are commercially sexually exploited and trafficked, and 99% of the girls we work with have had a pimp or are currently under the control of a pimp. So almost all of the girls qualify as trafficking victims.

### **What's the biggest misconception about sexually trafficked women and girls in America?**

I think the biggest misconception is that it's a victimless crime. That it's harmless. That girls and women are just (A) too lazy to get a job at McDonald's, or (B) like having sex all the time. Some of the things that get said about women and girls in the sex industry are heinous.

The reality is that the vast majority of the girls who end up in the sex industry are coming from homes where there's been sexual abuse, physical abuse, trauma and domestic violence. For children, the discussion of choice is a moot point. If we say children can't choose to drive or to drink or to vote, how can children choose to be in the sex industry?

### **How big of a part of the American sex trade is comprised of underage girls or children?**

It's difficult to pinpoint. The most referred-to statistic says that 300,000 youths are at risk for being exploited by the sex industry. The challenges to more specific numbers are that the only way to do it would be to look at arrest records, but girls are often told to say that they're older than they are so they end up being prosecuted as adults.

Also, it's an underground issue and a transient population and this isn't a group that's coming forward to be counted or participate in studies. You don't want to overestimate the number so it looks like hyperbole. That's what happened with the [Ashton Kutcher PSAs](#) and the [hype that followed](#).

But it's happening. As an indicator, we've served 330 girls and young women GEMS in just the last year. And the severity of the abuse and the trauma and what it being done to girls both by the men who are trafficking them—the pimps—and by the men who are buying them—the johns, the so-called "regular men"—is horrific.

### **Talk about how the idea of a "pimp" just isn't that scary, considering the way these guys are portrayed in pop culture.**

The documentary features clips of young men—pimps—who shot the footage

themselves. They hoped that they could shop it to HBO and make a reality show, but in the end it ended up convicting them. But the reality is, that when you look at the media out there, they weren't that far off-base thinking it could be a hit.

Look at Hugh Hefner and the *Girls Next Door*. That looks very much like a pimp with three girls. You see Kendra go to her mom and grandma and say, "I want to leave him; I've been there since I was 18 and I'm ready for something else," and they were both like "What? No! He's taking care of us. He's paying our rent!" Watching that I'm like *What?* Her own family just pimped her out!

And then there are the boys growing up in the *P.I.M.P.* culture. Look at the way boys are treating teenage girls, using the word pimping as a verb; that's really, really damaging. The combination of that attitude and how normalized the sex industry or strippers or stripping is for girls, come on. If your favorite rapper or your favorite show is glorifying pimping and then you meet this guy who's really cute and handsome and pays attention to you and he's also a pimp? And you're thirteen? Eh. It doesn't feel so bad.

### Who is a pimp today? What does he look like?

Think about it this way: If we're talking about people who sell drugs, and you're talking about a street-level drug dealer, we're talking about young men of color between the ages of 18 and 40. When we're talking about who's controlling drugs and who's profiting off of their sale, that demographic looks really different. It's the same when we look at the sex industry. We know globally that traffickers tend to traffic women and girls from their own culture. Ukrainian pimps traffic Ukrainian women. Mexican pimps traffic Mexican women and so what we see in America is predominantly men of color trafficking young women and girls of color.

I also think that for young men, because of the glorification of the pimp culture, if you start figuring out that you can make just as much money if not more selling girls as opposed to selling drugs...and the penalties are going to be a lot less and you probably won't ever get caught anyway because nobody's looking out for it...I mean why not?

**A recent study cites that 20% of men who've bought sex know that they are buying someone or something trafficked illegally against her will and over 40% believe it causes psychological and physical harms. So why do they participate in it?**

The truth is that they don't care.

They're getting their sexual gratification met. And to them, that's your job, that's what they see. That's what you're there for. A lot of those men feel like there will always be a population of women who may have had horrible lives or whatever, but they're there to meet your sexual needs. The lack of empathy is really appalling.

One of my girls was recently in a situation with a pimp on the west coast

where she wanted to escape but she couldn't. We'd gotten her a plane ticket, and a john came, so the pimp left the hotel room. And the girl said to the john, "Look, I really want to leave, can you help me get to the airport?" And he said to her, "Well can't [your pimp] drive you?" She was like "No, that's the point, I need to get away from this."

In the end he did end up taking her and she made it home. But I wonder if, after this experience—he's just bought a girl who after they were done said "I don't want to be doing this, and I need you to help me get away from the man you just bought me from"—does that change his mind? Or does he just go and buy a different girl the next week?

### **So who is a bigger problem? Who's the bad guy? The pimp or the john?**

I think in terms of business, the demand side of any industry is what keeps it going and what keeps it profitable.

We've started seeing pimps slowly being held accountable and being prosecuted, but we have so far to go towards seeing johns as a part of the problem. People get that pimps are violent, but the idea that these regular men are villains... These are fathers and brothers and husbands, we know them, we work with them, we go home to them, and yet they're going out and buying girls and women for sex.

### **How has the online culture changed sex trafficking and the commercial sex industry?**

There was a point in New York where the vast majority of what was happening was happening on the street or in brothels. So if you were doing street outreach, you could do a basic headcount. We used to go out and you'd think there's ten girls out there, that means there's probably 25 working. Now there's 10 girls on the street, and who knows—200, 300, 700 on [Backpage](#) right now?

And this is the challenge and the defense used by sites like [Backpage](#) and the [Village Voice](#). These girls aren't being advertised as "Here, buy an 11-year old." I'm a woman. I used to be a teenage girl at one point in my life. I've worked with teenage girls for 15 years. And I cannot tell when I go online who's 16 and who's 19. But that means that neither can the people at Backpage who are checking the ads. It means neither can the men who are buying them.

### **A spotlight has been shone on the international sex trafficking epidemic recently—largely thanks to the work of [Somaly Mam](#)—but even in pop culture. Is this making an impact domestically?**

Yeah, I think we've worked very hard over the past decade to bring awareness to this issue and to help people change their minds. We're beginning to move the needle in terms of how people view this issue. I think we've got a long way to go. I think it's critical that we don't paint this issue as just "poor little girls, and bad guys," but that we connect it to issues of racism and classism and

poverty and gender-based violence.

It's easy to get caught up in the sensationalized aspect of the sex trade, and not to dig deeper into the ongoing systemic and social change that **must** be done in order to have a world where women are not being bought and sold.

**Do you think legislation is a solution to the issue of sex trafficking?  
Where does that fit into your work?**

I think it's a piece of the pie. But you can't legislate everything. You can't legislate people's emotions. [Legislation brings a spotlight](#) that can then begin to shift the way people think about something. So sometimes it can be the first step. But the bigger work is in public perception.

At one point I met with the writers of [Law & Order: SVU](#), we had this really great conversation about how they've portrayed women and girls over the years and language they could use. And one night a few friends of mine called me and said "Rachel, turn on [Law & Order](#). It sounds like they've been talking to you."

***For more information on Rachel Lloyd and the work of GEMS, visit their website. The documentary [Very Young Girls](#) can be found on [Netflix](#). Lloyd's memoir, [Girls Like Us](#) is available in hardcover from [Amazon](#) and will be out in paperback February 28th.***



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