

The Perfect Victim: ‘Young girls’, domestic trafficking, and anti-prostitution politics in Canada

Elya M Durisin and Emily van der Meulen

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‘We can save the girl next door and we can save young women all across Ontario if we get this done now.’

Todd Smith (Progressive Conservative Party), 17 April 2017, p. 3604.

The current human trafficking preoccupation in Canada centres in large part on the domestic sexual exploitation of girls and young women, frequently referred to as ‘children’ regardless of their age. This represents a significant change from previous understandings of trafficking, for example in the 1990s and early 2000s, when attention in the political sphere was almost exclusively focused on the transnational migration of exotic dancers from Eastern Europe. Over the past decade, this new perspective has coincided with a modified political landscape for Canadian sex work law and policy. In 2013, the country’s Supreme Court ruled in *Bedford v Canada* that key prostitution laws were unconstitutional, validating long-standing claims by sex workers and allies about the harmfulness of the anti-sex work provisions in the Criminal Code.

Although the Conservative majority government criminalised the purchase of sexual services and related activities in 2014, the Supreme Court ruling the previous year, along with the increasingly visible Canadian sex worker rights movement and the upsurge in research and publications created by and with sex working communities, made it less and less feasible for politicians and others to continue claiming that all adult sex workers were exploited victims. It is our contention that this changed socio-legal context is, at least partially, driving the current focus on people under the age of 18 who engage in commercial sexual exchange. They represent a new victim in both law and public perception, one

who has no voice and whose subjectivity can be fully erased or appropriated.¹ However, while attention has ostensibly shifted to young people, the criminal justice interventions that have emerged in response negatively impact both young people and adult sex workers.

The perfect youth victim, who has been evoked in both federal and provincial policy as well as public debates, thus serves to legitimise the development of new or modified legislation that imposes greater restrictions on women's bodily autonomy, freedom of movement, and income generating activities in a context where anti-sex work laws have been found to be harmful. In this short article, we explore a recent example where this perfect victim was conjured up to influence policy in Ontario, the country's most populous province, with girls and young women spoken *for* in ways that demonstrate clearly the misrepresentations and erasures of the experiences of both minors and adults. We analyse debates in the Legislative Assembly of Ontario among Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) on two virtually identical trafficking bills, with the name of the first, the *Saving the Girl Next Door Act* (2016), clearly capturing the stance we are critiquing here. It failed to pass before the legislature was prorogued but was reintroduced as the *Anti-Human Trafficking Act* (2017) and implemented shortly afterwards.

While the legislation was purportedly intended to address the trafficking of any individual, the concerns articulated by MPPs across party lines were overwhelmingly about child sexual exploitation and 'young girls.' MPPs frequently expressed concern about 13- and 14-year-olds,² but cited the dangers to those as young as 11 and as old as early 20s. These arguments drew on widely circulated yet debunked claims that the average age of entry into sex work (and hence trafficking) is 13 or 14,³ while also demonstrating how easily the category of youth can be expanded into adulthood. In these instances, young girls are represented as vulnerable innocents with an absence of sexual knowledge; they are naïve and easily manipulated by exploitative men and boyfriends:

Here's a typical story: A girl is online. She starts to form a relationship with a man who, it turns out, is methodically grooming her. Young, vulnerable and often lacking in self-esteem, she becomes convinced she's the

¹ Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), 'Policy Brief: Young sex workers', NSWP, 2016, <https://www.nswp.org/resource/policy-brief-young-sex-workers>.

² See, for example, statements by Laurie Scott (Progressive Conservative Party), 5 April 2017, p. 3425; Wayne Gates (New Democratic Party), 5 April 2017, p. 3434.

³ See J Lowman, 'Crown Expert-Witness Testimony in *Bedford v. Canada: Evidence-based argument or victim-paradigm hyperbole?*', in E van der Meulen, EM Durisin, and V Love (eds.), *Selling Sex: Experience, advocacy, and research on sex work in Canada*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2013, pp. 230-250.

centre of his world. Gifts follow, money, the promise of being loved and looked after.

- Indira Naidoo-Harris (Liberal Party), 21 March 2017, p. 2940

Our little girls are on the Internet having conversations with cute boys, and then they meet them. The second time they meet them, they might smoke a joint and have to work it off, and get trafficked for the weekend to a weekend hotel party...

- Jennifer K. French (New Democratic Party), 21 March 2017, p. 2947

Such narratives appear to reproduce the deeply engrained stereotype of the ‘pimp,’⁴ but here he becomes a novel ‘boyfriend-pimp.’ Indeed, it is girls’ sexual interest in boys that makes them vulnerable.⁵

Family and community are represented by MPPs across the political spectrum as the most appropriate and safest places for girls and young women. As such, the protective cover of the family is a bulwark against exploiters and predators, with home perceived as a haven from harm:

Young women, girls and vulnerable workers are being recruited and moved away from their homes and communities. They are being threatened, isolated and controlled, and often form a desperate trauma bond with their traffickers.

- Indira Naidoo-Harris (Liberal Party), 17 May 2017, p. 4511

On any given night, 30 to 40 families [are] looking on backpage.com for their daughters who are being trafficked throughout the province.

- Laurie Scott (Progressive Conservative Party), 5 April 2017, p. 3443

⁴ See K Gillies and C Bruckert, ‘Pimps, Partners, and Procurers: Criminalizing street-based sex workers’ relationships with partners and third parties’, in EM Durisin, E van der Meulen, and C Bruckert (eds.), *Red Light Labour: Sex work regulation, agency, and resistance*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2018, pp. 82-93; N Mensah, ‘The Representation of the “Pimp”: A barrier to understanding the work of third parties in the adult Canadian sex industry’, in C Bruckert and C Parent (eds.), *Getting Past the Pimp: Management in the sex industry*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2018, pp. 19-35; E van der Meulen, ‘Illegal Lives, Loves, and Work: How the criminalization of procuring affects sex workers in Canada’, *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women’s and Gender Studies*, vol. 8, 2010, pp. 217-240.

⁵ See S Angelides, *The Fear of Child Sexuality: Young people, sex, and agency*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2019.

Omitting the reality that girls and young women often leave their families because of abuse and turn to sex work to earn money,⁶ such ‘family as saviour’ discourses reinforce the very institutional norms and hierarchies that cause so much harm to begin with. In limiting trafficking to abusive acts committed by boys and men in the context of sex work, the harms girls face from the child welfare system, in the family, and from police and other authorities are ignored and erased.

The way that age is rendered nebulous by Ontario MPPs is key to expanding the scope of potential legislative interventions. While the overarching concern is evidently about girls under 18, it is not uncommon for politicians to conflate them with women over 18 as well:

So let's talk about those people at risk of being trafficked: 70% of trafficking involves sexual exploitation, and that targets our youth, young women, girls and boys, typically aged 14 to 22.

- Indira Naidoo-Harris (Liberal Party), 21 March 2017, p. 2939

As emphasized earlier, most of the victims of trafficking in Ontario and in London are young women: 93% are female, and almost half are between the ages of 18 and 24.

- Peggy Sattler (New Democratic Party), 5 April 2017, p. 3440

As these quotes illustrate, outrage toward child abuse is linked to adult sex work and then used to problematise women’s activities such that, through a rhetoric of protecting the ‘girl next door’, anti-prostitution perspectives become hegemonic common sense.

One impact of the focus on children and youths is that adult women engaging in sex work tend to be infantilised and presented as lacking awareness or agency, a familiar anti-prostitution argument:

[The police officer] told us that a 25-year-old woman who had no idea she was in North Bay – she had no idea what town she was in – was indeed involved deeply in the sex and drug trade.

- Victor Fedeli (Progressive Conservative Party), 5 April 2017, p. 3426

⁶ Global Network of Sex Work Projects. See also: J Musto, *Control and Protect: Collaboration, carceral protection, and domestic sex trafficking in the United States*, University of California Press, Oakland, 2016; C Showden and J Musto, *Youth Who Trade Sex in the U.S.: Intersectionality, agency, vulnerability*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2018.

Rather than discussing the structural factors that give shape to women's experiences, comments such as these risk positioning them as child-like or hapless dupes in need of the paternalistic state for protection, a stand-in for the patriarchal family that supposedly keeps girls safe. Despite the fact that many adult sex workers regularly contribute to discussions around sex work and trafficking, policy debates like the one explored here frequently give women and girls rights only as victims, not as agentic subjects. They also do not acknowledge the harms that accrue when police and the state are relied upon for social or gender justice.

Girls under 18 are entirely denied a voice in these debates. Instead, they are represented by policymakers who tend to neglect the profound victimisation experienced within institutions designed to help them. She is the perfect victim—voiceless, vulnerable, and easily manipulated. Her subjectivity is appropriated in the name of trafficking, and legislative changes are justified in the name of protecting her innocence. Anti-trafficking efforts thereby become proxies for anti-prostitution policies that have been clearly shown to harm adult sex workers, and potentially youths as well.⁷ Indeed, the shift to child sexual exploitation in Canadian policy debates legitimises the ongoing criminalisation of sex work and undermines sex worker's demands for social, economic, and legal justice.

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Elya M Durisin is an independent scholar writing in the fields of sex work, human trafficking, and public policy. She holds a PhD in Political Science from York University, Ontario, Canada. Email: emdurisin@gmail.com

Emily van der Meulen is a Professor of Criminology at Ryerson University, Ontario, Canada. Her research focuses on the criminalisation of sex work, prison health and harm reduction, and surveillance studies. Email: evandermeulen@ryerson.ca

⁷ J Iman *et al.*, *Girls Do What They Have To Do To Survive: Illuminating methods used by girls in the sex trade and street economy to fight back and heal*, Young Women's Empowerment Project (YWEP), Chicago, 2009, <https://ywepchicago.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/how-the-reproductive-justice-movement-can-support-youth-in-the-sex-trade.pdf>.