

America's Sex-Trafficking Victims

By Natalie Kitroeff

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I was born in an affluent suburb of Philadelphia, to two professors. Lisa, a woman my age from a poor neighborhood in Washington, was born to a rapist and an alcoholic. I was my parents' first and only child. Lisa was one of 12. I'm now working at The New York Times, while Lisa is recovering from brutal mistreatment at the hands of pimps and johns.

My parents never pressured me to get good grades, but they made it clear that I had better try my very best. Many kids don't have these opportunities, my mother would say, so you better not waste yours.

Lisa is proof of this truth. If I've lived a charmed life, then Lisa's was doomed from the start. Her mother drank heavily, and Lisa was born with fetal alcohol syndrome.

People with fetal alcohol syndrome tend to have a host of developmental problems, including difficulty paying attention, bad memory, learning disabilities and speech problems. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site lists a couple of factors that can help, if not cure, the disease: a loving and nurturing home environment, for example.

Unfortunately, Lisa wasn't brought up that way. When she turned 4, her father began to rape her and her two sisters, she says, and court documents back her up. The abuse continued for 10 years.

In 2009 and 2010, Lisa testified against her father in court. While abusing his daughters, records from the trial show, he would tell them that he was teaching them so that they would learn what it is like when they get older and have to deal with boys. Andrea Powell, who runs FAIR Girls, an organization that fights sex trafficking and has been supporting Lisa since she was 18, says that Lisa and her sister both said their father would invite men back to the house to participate in the abuse. Their testimony sent their father to prison for 45 years.

Lisa, a pseudonym I'm using to protect her, spoke to me in a small room in the office of FAIR Girls. She doesn't like to talk about her dad, she told me, or her about family at all, for that matter. "I don't have a dad," she said. "I don't have a family."

But still, her words come freely when she does talk about him. As if uninhibited by the subtle mental blocks – telltale signs of fetal alcohol syndrome – that slow her speech and blur her focus, Lisa recreated the scene in the courtroom with disarming clarity. She was upset, she said, to see her father sitting all the way across the room. And after telling the jury what he had done, she said she asked to see her dad. "He was going away for so long," she said. But they didn't let her – and any sympathy for her father evaporated soon thereafter. "What goes around comes around, that's what I say."

A year later Lisa was buying groceries when a stranger called her over to his car. He told her that she was pretty, she said. She said that she was "boy crazy" at the time, and desperate to have a man in her life again.

I remember that feeling well. When I was 17 there was no such thing as unwanted attention from boys. When cars honked at me and my friends, we would strut around with irrepressibly self-satisfied grins.

But things were different for Lisa. It was probably no accident that the stranger at the supermarket sought her out; he may have been stalking her for days. Pimps tend to target vulnerable girls and women, exploiting mental and emotional weakness to psychologically and physically control their victims. They hunt down young women like prey, and sell them like a slab of meat over and over again.

He told Lisa he wanted to be her boyfriend. She believed him.

After a while he sat her down and told her the truth: he was a pimp, and Lisa wasn't his only "girlfriend." She told him that she didn't want to get into prostitution. "You already stuck in it," he told her. Unable to push back, soon she found herself having sex with men in hotels across D.C. for money (all of it went to her pimp, she says). Some men were violent — she remembers one who wouldn't let her scream while he beat her.

One night, a john refused to pay her. Lisa's pimp told her that she couldn't come back until she brought him his money. Left on the side of the street, and wearing a dress that just barely covered her body, Lisa had no choice but to walk. It was cold, she recalled, the dead of winter, and she hadn't eaten anything in two days. Her cellphone was dying, but then who would she call, anyway?

If it had been me, I would have called my mom. She would have picked me up in an instant. But Lisa's mom was probably too drunk to see, let alone drive. My dad has a less attentive relationship to his cellphone, but after a couple of buzzes he would have answered too. Lisa's father was locked up; not that she'd call him anyway. "I thought I was going to die out there," she said.

After that, Lisa got out. "I don't deserve this," she told me, "I'm never going back down that road."

And so far, she hasn't. Now she spends most of her days at FAIR Girls, making jewelry and practicing yoga with other sex-trafficking survivors.

Lisa typifies the problem of sex trafficking in America: because the victims are often marginalized girls of color, no one really cares about them. When a white girl goes missing, she ends up on the national news, while girls like Lisa are dumped on the side of the road and forgotten.

Helping protect the Lisas of this country seems like the obvious thing to do. But the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, a law that increases funding for victims and hardens enforcement, has stalled in the Senate because of political wrangling. (The bill has been reauthorized three times since it was initially passed in 2000.)

Perhaps members of Congress can afford to put politics over the women and girls who are bought and sold for sex in this country. After all, their daughters were born to congressmen or women, not rapists. They have my luck, not Lisa's.

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