

Stockholm Syndrome in the Pimp-Victim Relationship

By Natalie Kitroeff

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If you want to understand why girls who are sex-trafficked don't run straight to the police, Withelma Ortiz, known as T, could tell you a thing or two. The 22-year-old has a pretty good grasp on the issue — having been first sold for sex at age 10.

T was 10 years old when she met a man who said he could change her life. She had told him that she'd essentially been in foster care since birth, living with families that sexually and psychologically abused her. He was appalled. He said he wanted to take care of her. He would feed her, clothe her, take care of her when she was sick. "He basically told me that I could survive," T recalled. "You know, when nobody cared what happened to me, nobody cared what was going on with me, I could survive." T's biological father was in jail, and her biological mother was nowhere to be found. She was not about to turn down the first person who ever tried to make that kind of connection with her.

In a way, the man was right: He did change her life. He began selling T for sex across the West Coast. It turned out that her youthful "tween" body was a major selling point, and he demanded that she meet a quota of a thousand dollars a night. "The chains around the mind, the captivity of the mind, it started there," she said. "But it got to a place in which my physical life was threatened." Her pimp would beat her mercilessly — but then would beg for her forgiveness. This was unusual for T. She was used to caretakers beating her, but no one had ever been sorry for it. "Somebody finally beats the crap out of you and then comes back and kisses it and says, 'I want to make it better.'" To a 10-year-old T, this was love.

After five years of this abuse, her pimp was arrested on sex-trafficking charges. But it took T years to realize that he could no longer hurt her. And when he was put on trial, she refused to testify against him. She regrets that decision deeply, but is very clear about why she made it: "One word," she told me bluntly. "Stockholm syndrome."

The psychological manipulation involved in T's relationship with her pimp seems to be a common feature of sexual exploitation in America. Pimps prey on vulnerable girls and women, using a cunning mix of violence and tenderness to alternately degrade and then elevate them. The result is that these girls and women become psychologically attached to their pimps, and do not turn against them out of a dependency that is equal parts fear and misplaced affection.

This dynamic was on full display in a historic sex-trafficking indictment by the Manhattan district attorney's office.

Several years ago, public prosecutors in New York City began to notice that women the police were arresting for prostitution had a few things in common. They all came from Allentown, Pa., they all had similar business cards, and, curiously, matching tattoos. The name King Koby was inked in different places on their bodies; one had it above a bar code on her neck, another next to a dollar sign on her pelvis.

The discovery set off a major investigation that culminated last week in the indictments of Vincent George Sr. and Vincent George Jr. – father and son – on sex-trafficking charges. The pair are accused of running a prostitution ring that garnered hundreds of thousands of dollars selling women for sex, women who in return were “given a few dollars a night to buy food and other necessities.” It was George Jr. who branded the women with his street name, King Koby, but both father and son used other forms of psychological abuse to keep them in line.

But these women refused to testify against their exploiters. In fact, according to court documents, they refused to admit that they had pimps at all. District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance Jr. compared their reaction to that of domestic violence victims, saying in a press release, “These victims are often emotionally and economically dependent upon their abusers, and remain silent as their worlds grow smaller and more dangerous.”

For girls and women who were raised in unsafe and unloving environments, this dependency runs particularly deep. If you’ve never really felt valued, it is even harder to speak out against perhaps the only person to ever show you love.

T’s story has a happier ending. When I first met her in New York City, she gave me a bright pink business card. Just under her name in small print, it reads: “Advocate/Activist/Go-Getter.” T is an ambitious woman with an undeniable will to survive, and those descriptors fit her perfectly. After seven years of being sold to men, she managed to escape that life, and even get her high school diploma.

Now her eyes are set on college. T’s dream is to get a degree in mass communication, and perhaps even spend a semester studying abroad in Puerto Rico, where her father’s family still lives. She has even started a campaign – T Goes to College 2013 – to raise funds to cover tuition.

When I asked her what she wanted to do after college, T said she would always continue her advocacy work for sex-trafficking victims and foster children. But she didn’t want to commit to a career just yet. “I don’t want to limit myself,” she explained. And that, you can be sure, she won’t.

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