


12-29-2018

# The Power in Stories That Cannot Be Replaced

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## Recommended APA Citation

Christmas, R. W. (2018). The Power in Stories That Cannot Be Replaced. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(12), 3118-3135. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss12/17>

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## The Power in Stories That Cannot Be Replaced

### Abstract

This paper is based upon research that included interviews with 61 experts across Manitoba, including police, First Nations and other political leaders, government and non-government service providers and sex trafficking survivors, who collectively represent over 1,000 years of experience combatting victimization in the sex industry. It describes a researcher's experience taking a qualitative, story-based approach to investigating the modern social problem of sex-trafficking. Based on his thesis, "Modern Day Slavery and the Sex Industry: Raising the Voices of Survivors and Collaborators While Confronting Sex Trafficking and Exploitation in Manitoba" the author highlights the power that the stories hold, emphasizing how no other method of research would be quite as effective. The power of the stories told simply cannot be replaced.

### Keywords

Stories, Narrative Research, Grounded Theory, Qualitative Research

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### Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the survivors of sex trafficking who made themselves vulnerable and told their stories to help others. I also wish to acknowledge my PhD dissertation committee, Dr. Sean Byrne, Dr. Jessica Senehi, Dr. Rick Linden and Dr. Laura Huey for their guidance and support in completing this research.

## The Power in Stories That Cannot Be Replaced

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In 2013, I participated in Professor Jessica Senehi's Narrative, Trauma, and Community-Building seminar at the Arthur V. Mauro Center for Peace and Justice, at the University of Manitoba, as part of my PhD coursework. One prevailing memory stands out among the lessons I learned there; that is, how powerful stories are, both in the influence they can have between people, and the impact they have on individuals. The story, by definition, has context and meaning, and penetrates the human psyche in a visceral way that mere facts cannot. In that class, we made introductions among the 10 or so doctoral and master students in the seminar. Then we did an exercise, making it into a story about our life and where we came from, and why it was meaningful to us. Going around the circle, telling our stories was interesting and fun, and unique to the way we normally communicate. I believe I forgot the formal, factual introductions we first made, almost immediately. The stories, however, I remembered for the following year or two. Something about the context and meaning made them significant and memorable.

I realized then that a story-based approach was the way I should go about researching my chosen dissertation topic: the sexual exploitation of young women and children in the sex industry in Manitoba and Canada (Christmas, 2017). In this paper, I outline some guiding literature that determined the qualitative, grounded approach that I took in my research. In the literature review, I also describe some works around narrative-based, qualitative enquiry. The balance of the paper presents some of the stories I gathered, and why these stories must be told; because there is no other way that is quite as effective. For this paper, I drew on the stories of the survivors as they are most impactful.

My primary research and dissertation on sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, titled, "Modern Day Slavery and the Sex Industry: Raising the Voices of Survivors and Collaborators While Confronting Sex Trafficking and Exploitation in Manitoba" (Christmas, 2017), sought to ascertain people's subjective observations and descriptions of the current state of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking in Manitoba in 2016, and what interventions could stop it. I chose this topic for my PhD research, heeding my professors' advice to pick a subject I am passionate about, as I had invested a large part of my 35-year law enforcement career investigating sexual exploitation and intervening with sexually exploited youth. The latter 28

years of my career, with the Winnipeg Police Service (WPS), has often taken a path developing strategies to protect the vulnerable.

Early in my career, I was assigned as a uniform patrol officer in Winnipeg's North End where a lot of street level prostitution has historically occurred. In those early days I developed a passion for attempting to protect young girls from exploitation, setting up enforcement projects, working the "low track" and patrolling the areas that were notorious for street level prostitution. Later in my detective career, when the first Canadian Integrated Child Exploitation Units (ICE Unit) were established to investigate Internet based child exploitation, I was invited to join within the first year. The ICE Unit was highly successful and became a template for units established later across Canada. In that role I developed a passion for thwarting sexual exploitation and human trafficking. In a later assignment as a team leader in the Child Abuse Unit I supervised a specialized detective team investigating child abuse, child exploitation, Internet luring, child homicide, child death and historical sexual assaults, learning the nuances of vulnerable person victimization and investigations. While in this role, 18 years into my policing career, I returned to University to complete my Master of Public Administration Degree through the joint program at the University of Winnipeg and University of Manitoba. Drawing on new skills such as environmental scanning, policy and budget analysis, I began to see more risks around vulnerable women and children in Canada. These new perspectives coupled with my later peace and conflict studies further inspired my passion for collaboration and multi-disciplinary approaches to social problems. When it came time to select a focus for my dissertation, it was a natural choice for me to look at what we are doing, as a system, for vulnerable youth, and what we might do better.

The main goals of this research were to gather and analyze the perspectives of survivors and practitioners in Manitoba and contribute to theory and practice with respect to sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. Another goal was to provide the opportunity for survivors and practitioners at all levels to have a voice and contribute to the solutions by outlining their ideas about how to tackle the growing social scourge of sexual exploitation and human trafficking. A qualitative approach was selected, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather insights and perspectives from experiential survivors of the sex industry, police officers, councilors, social workers in government and non-government organizations, prosecutors, policy and lawmakers, and leaders in the provincial, federal and Indigenous governments. The intention was to gain a full picture of the social phenomenon of sex trafficking, as well as how all the stakeholders interact with each other when addressing the sexual exploitation of young women in Manitoba.

In total, 61 people were interviewed, representing about 1,000 years of collective experience either participating in, or surviving the sex industry in Manitoba. The research was conducted under the strict guidance of the Human Ethics Research Committee of the University of Manitoba, using standard precautions to protect the participants. No rewards were offered, and care was taken to create a comfortable and non-threatening environment for each interview, utilizing a semi-structured interview format which allowed participants to elaborate as they wished. The questions focused on several issues as follows: (1) What makes people vulnerable to being exploited and is there something we could do to reduce this phenomenon and prevent exploitation?, (2) What could assist people to exit the sex industry?, (3) What strategies have been effective?, What should be done going forward?, (4) What barriers and opportunities exist within and between organizations to improve service and collaboration?, and (5) What effect do laws have and what should the police be doing?

In analyzing the resulting 1,500 pages of transcripts, intact answers, in the form of short stories emerged, and the questions asked became less relevant than the stories subjects wanted to tell. Following is an example of a small, but impactful, story that is similar to many that were gathered. The name of the interview subject is changed, as was done with all survivors

interviewed, in order to protect her identity. Ashley, a survivor, describes the typical life cycle of a trafficked life. Her striking story illustrates that being trafficked in the sex industry is more like torture and slavery than a career choice for most women. Her story, in the following passage, is direct, impactful, and is a complete thought about the snapshot of the period of her life in which she was trafficked.

**ASHLEY:** From a survivor's view, I was first victimized at the age of 15. I was groomed and coerced into entering the sex trade, and then to selling myself on Ellice and Home.

All the money I made went to drugs.

I was then introduced to an older man who pretended he was my boyfriend. He had me working out of an older girl's apartment who was out of town. I was advertised on the Internet and I would see many men a day there. He said he was keeping all the money and that I would get a car, my own condo, clothes. He bought me jewelry, but I didn't see any of the money.

Then I ended up moving from Winnipeg to Vancouver, and back to Winnipeg to an abusive dangerous predator, and then to Toronto where I was with a very controlling abusive predator who actually sold me. I was in jail and I had a surety, and I guess he had had enough of me, so he essentially sold me to another predator who ended up being murdered. He was shot in the head after which I returned to Winnipeg.

Then when I came back to Winnipeg, I was trying to get help for my addictions and I had ended up getting a big settlement from a lawsuit I had in Vancouver. And I wasn't able to manage the money, and I felt so hopeless, so much guilt, and so much shame that I jumped off of the Maryland Bridge.

I landed on the ice. I broke my back and my legs, and my feet were crushed. So I spent six months in the hospital rehabilitating from that.

And from then I still was entrenched in the sex trade. That's all I had known my whole teens and adult life. I had been brainwashed by these men into thinking that I needed them.

So, I had a son and I lost him to CFS.

The turning point really wasn't for me until I was pregnant with my daughter.

Ashley describes her story matter-of-factly, as though she is used to telling it, and perhaps it is therapeutic, to have yet one more person acknowledge what happened to her.

Stories, such as this, stand on their own; however, information was taken from them and placed into several different empirical areas within the manuscript for my thesis. Ashley described the challenges that sex industry survivors face, the turning point for getting out, the entrenched psyche of sex trafficking victims, and how people are targeted and groomed for trafficking. Analyzing the data, it became decreasingly relevant what question was asked to prompt the story, because the answers could stand alone. At one point, all of the questions were removed, leaving only the pure stories of the survivors to analyze. Analyzing the narratives in this way removed the distraction and tendency of trying to fit the meaning of the subjects' answers into the questions that were asked. Rather, the themes emerged and became clear as the narratives were sorted into themes and then chapters, sections and sub-sections for the dissertation. It also became clear that my research project had taken on a string story-based approach, even more so that I had originally anticipated.

### **The Narrative, Story-Based Approach: The Literature Review**

In the introduction to the inaugural issue of, *Storytelling, Self, Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Storytelling Studies*, Sobol, Qentile, and Sunwolf (2004), describe the broad range of ways that storytelling is used in a variety of academic disciplines. Czarniawska (1997) and de Rivera and Sarbin (1998), in particular, reference the social sciences. My definition of “stories,” for the purposes of this paper, stretches the traditional, common conception of the term, referring to the answers the research subjects provided in the context of my PhD thesis project. My argument for thinking of these quotations as stories is simple: they generally have an introduction and conclusion, with a context and clearly defined message that the subjects wished to provide. Some of the passages are one paragraph, and some are up to one page or more in length, and they all are intact narratives that answer a defined issue or set of issues. It is clear when one reads them, what the speaker is trying to convey. The gestalt of these narratives is difficult to deny; they have meaning that compel the reader to identify with the story-teller and situate their position in society, as well as the problem they are discussing.

My study draws on a social integrationist view of the environment, meaning the subjective interpretations of my research subjects is emphasized. Blumer (1969) wrote that social integrationists view human experience as a reflective, subjective, and reactive journey in which interactions are interpreted and understood subjectively. Despite being almost 50 years old, this perspective by Blumer is still relevant today. My research sought to gather participants’ stories, describing their observations and experiences, and how they interpret them.

This approach was inspired in part by previous studies, such as Wiseman’s book, *Stations of the Lost: The Treatment of Skid Row Alcoholics* (1970), in which the author reported on her in-depth study of alcoholic men and a broad spectrum of services in an area of Los Angeles known as “skid row.” She wrote, “To study human beings in any area of their social life it is necessary to view that area of life in terms of their experience and from their point of view” (p. xii). Through qualitative, story-based narrative interviews Wiseman leads the reader on an insightful and rich journey around skid row. My intent was to conduct a similar type of a multi-perspective study around sexual exploitation and human sex trafficking, highlighting the stories of people who see it from much different perspectives, from the political leaders to the victims and everyone in between. By gathering the narratives of people from such diverse perspectives, I hoped to dissect the issue in new ways, and hence, gain unique insights into the world of human sex trafficking and sexual exploitation in Manitoba.

My feeling is that statistical analysis of complex phenomenon such as sex trafficking and exploitation is challenging and limited. Measuring the efficacy of intervention programs is a particular chronic challenge for administrators and leaders in that area. Anecdotally, many social workers and practitioners have expressed their exasperation to me, over the difficulties of finding proof that can justify funding or allow government and service agencies to pivot toward being more evidence-based. How do you assign a statistical value to themes such as “exploitation” or “slavery” for thematic analysis in research? Such terms are explosive and traumatizing to those who have been through it personally, whereas they may have much different meanings to policy makers and other readers who have not been victimized personally.

Furthermore, social phenomena such as sex trafficking are exceedingly difficult to measure and understand without the cooperation of those with direct experience in it. Otherwise, it is nearly impossible to penetrate—as a significant aspect of the culture of organized crime engaged in trafficking is the oppression and brutalization of people who talk

out of school about it. This social phenomenon is highly secretive and elusive to authorities, making research difficult (Christmas, 2017).

If the victims of sex trafficking can be identified and tracked through the process of a particular program, or programs, the validity of the statistics are questionable, because these people are highly intersectionally challenged and hard to track. With the statistics gathered, we then must think critically about the validity and reliability of them. Speaking in his colourful way, Winston Churchill has been quoted, highlighting the importance of scrutinizing statistics and how they can be manipulated to create different perceptions. He said that when he asks for a statistic on infant mortality, he is seeking numbers that proved that fewer babies died when he was prime minister. That, according to Churchill, is a “political statistic” (Fairlie, 1968, p. 203).

All major Canadian Police agencies submit crime data to Statistics Canada for interpretation and identification of crime trends. Newark (2011) critiques Statistics Canada’s methods of gathering crime data, stating, “Many of the most common conclusions that are drawn about crime in Canada are in fact incorrect or badly distorted” (p. 1). Without going into detail around the statistical methodology used, one can say there are opinions that are critical of the process (Newark, 2011). The takeaway, in relation to this paper is that a phenomenological investigation of people’s stories, and their subjective meaning, is relevant and important. Phenomenological approaches emphasize people’s experiences and the meaning they attribute to them as key in understanding things (Giorgi, 1970). Statistics and scientific evidence, when available, can be very compelling; however, they are not necessarily the most effective lens for understanding human beings and what is most meaningful to people.

It was clear from the onset that women and children in the sex industry are intersectionally challenged, with layered issues such as unresolved trauma and substance abuse, most often on top of poverty and lacking supports. Some scholars have suggested that qualitative research is ideal for the study of intersectionality, because it allows us to explore and capture the rich multidimensional nature of humanity and people in their unique contexts (Hankivsky, 2011; Hunting, 2014; McCall, 2005). Qualitative research is also said to be best suited to research that has a goal of improving social justice for marginalized people (Hankivsky, 2011; Hunting, 2014; Rogers & Kelly, 2011).

Qualitative research, according to Palys and Atchison (2008), is “human centered,” phenomenological, and highlights the perceptions and human agency of research participants. Mac Ginty and Williams (2009) have also written that person-centered qualitative approaches can better capture “local voices and Indigenous solutions” (Mac Ginty & Williams, 2009, p. 8). My research focused largely on the victimization of Indigenous people in Manitoba, as the vast majority of sex trafficking survivors are Aboriginal females.

My research was intended to gather people’s subjective perceptions, with no preconceived assumptions about what they would say. This constituted a grounded approach utilizing inductive analysis of the observations gathered from the participants narratives. The grounded approach means that the data was not gathered to test existing theories; rather, the theories and findings would flow from the data (Charmaz, 2005; Creswell, 2007; Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Patton (1980) wrote that grounded theory uses “inductive analysis, which means patterns, themes and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data, rather than being imposed on them prior to collection and analysis” (p. 306). My questions were open-ended, allowing interviewees the opportunity to provide a story, offering rich subjective insights that could not be obtained in any other way (Senehi, 2009). Some of the stories highlighted in the following illustrate how impactful they are.

## The Stories

One issue I struggled with, as my interviews began, was the challenge of language around prostitution. The whole topic of the sex industry is highly polarized, with some taking the position that it is a legitimate occupation that women should be protected in if they choose to use their bodies in that way. Others take the position that no-one chooses to enter the sex industry, but, rather, they are targeted and manipulated into it and then forced to continue by traffickers who profit from them. Terms, such as “sex trade” are loaded with subtexts, as they infer that selling sex for money is a legitimate trade or occupation. One of my research participants, Kelsie, is a sex trafficking survivor. In the following passage she described the importance of language around the issue.

**KELSIE:** Average age of entry into the sex work is 14 for women involved with our program at [—] whether that’s runaways through CFS, their mom sold them into the sex trade, or who knows.

All of their stories are different. But for many reasons, multiple systems have failed them, and they end up doing sex.

So some of our women don’t even use “sex trade” because that indicates a choice, and we never had choices. And then, on the flip side, some of our women say, “Yes, we have no choices, but we still have agency to make choices, despite our choicelessness.”

So, we want to empower our women to not feel like they’re choiceless even though they are in many aspects.

But they still have agency. They still have resiliency. They still have validity to survive despite those choiceless options.

So, that’s why we talk about “sex work.” Because it is work for them. Even if it’s a choice or no choice, they still see it as work—work that they didn’t necessarily choose or that they necessarily like. But some of our women feel like only using “sexual exploitation” takes away their ability to make agency.

So we navigate that process very carefully. And we’re constantly talking about language and talking about how we can improve around language, knowing that all of the labels that we use are patriarchal and based on a colonial system.

Kelsie makes the important distinction between “work” and exploitation, while also highlighting how people need a sense of agency and control even while they are “choiceless.” While Kelsie mentions the term “sex trade,” her intent is more in line with the majority of my respondents who stressed that it is not a trade or preferred occupation, but rather, women participating in forced prostitution.

Another survivor, Ashley, describes how she came to realize that she was being sexually exploited.

**ASHLEY:** I think to me it’s all the same really. In my opinion, “prostitution” is “sexual exploitation” and a form of violence against women.

No child says, “When I grow up I want to be a prostitute. I want to be in the sex trade.”

I was a victim and like I didn’t even identify—and this is what I think is a crucial point—I didn’t identify as a victim because I didn’t know what sex trafficking was. I didn’t know what sexual exploitation was. I didn’t know what grooming was. And think maybe if I’d known about those things—.



A substantial portion of my thesis was dedicated to clarifying terms, the meaning they have for people and the way they are used. These meanings will be apparent in the stories that follow.

Earlier I mention the devastating meaning that terms such as “slavery” can have to some people that is so much more significant to certain individuals over others. The following story related by Kaitlin, a sex industry survivor who graciously shared her experiences with me, demonstrates this as she graphically describes, in the following narrative, the type of degrading and oppressive experience that is a typical experience of the survivors I interviewed.

**KAITLIN:** Usually with the gang members, they—, you know, they scare you up. And I remember I had one biker tell me that “You know what? I’m gonna fuckin’ have you locked in the basement. And no one’s gonna know your down there. Guys are gonna be coming from all over just to fuck you. And they’re gonna be paying me not you. They’ll do whatever they want to you. Shit on you. Piss on you. Make you eat their shit.”

And I remember I was crying I was so scared, “I’ll do whatever you want.”

“They’ll do whatever they want, but they’ll pay me not you.”

And then I was just, “Okay, I’ll give you your money.”

It really scared me. I paid, doing what I had to do. And I just gave them all the money.

Then it was just like. “Here, chill, relax, have a beer.”

I remember, too, thinking once I don’t owe any of these guys any money. I am outta here. So I laughed.

It was how they tricked me. They said, “You don’t have to worry about food. You don’t have to worry about clothes.” Like a pimp. But they didn’t come out and say, “I’m gonna pimp you out.” They basically sugar coated it.

I remember that there was a couple of girls sitting there with a bunch of gold and jewelry. And they had a bunch of crack. And they were saying, “We never go out on the street.” And little did I know these guys were pimping them out like escorts or something like that. And they made more money, I guess. It was degrading.

And when I just look back, I just think, “Oh my god! It was so fucking stupid.”

I look at my sons and think, “Wow, I wasn’t even developed yet. How could someone sleep with someone like that?” It sickens me. These guys are animals.

I honestly think that prostitution would probably go away if there was less drug dealers and gang members. But I don’t think that’ll ever happen.

This account by Kaitlin depicts slavery and torture. Her story demonstrates a common understanding that people might envision as slavery, as well as the definition of slavery that is laid out by The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons (UNESCO, 2014; United Nations, 2014).

Stories from survivors, about how they were targeted, groomed into the sex industry were also equally compelling. They show the vulnerability and lack of choice that many girls and women have in being recruited. They are impactful because, hearing their stories and the context that their stories provide, one can easily imagine oneself in their shoes. Ashley is a survivor whose story illustrates how traffickers often identify vulnerable people and exploit their weakness while manipulating them into the sex industry.

**ASHLEY:** I think the critical moment when I entered the sex trade was when I was 15.

Like I had been bullied in school. I was vulnerable. I felt a need to belong and feel accepted.

I had been going to community centers and spending time with friends. A couple of the girls and myself met some guys there, and they introduced us to crack. And we wanted more. And then that was the point where I was on the streets.

Ashley describes the starting point where she was vulnerable and a point at which someone might have intervened to help her avoid taking her life on tragic trajectory.

In the following narrative, Kaitlin, a survivor, describes her experience starting in the sex industry.

**KAITLIN:** The very first guy I remember—. We were standing on Higgins. And I remember I was asking [another girl], “How do I stand?”

She told me, “Stick your head forward and your leg, and hold your hip.” And I remember I was doing that.

And all of a sudden, this guy came driving by. I know he was Italian. he was this old Italian guy. And he told us to jump in. And she jumped in the front, and I jumped in the back.

He goes, “How old is she?”

And she was looking at him, and, I don’t know, she was playing him, rubbing his leg. And she was like, “Why? What do you like?”

He said, “How young is she?”

And she told him I was 12.

And he looked at me and said, “Is she bald?”

She said, “Ya.”

And he said, “Okay, ya, I’ll take her.” Like I was a piece of lunchmeat or something.

He asked her, “How much do you want?”

She said, “Just give me \$80.” So he gave her \$80. But she said, “I’m coming with you guys.” Cause I guess he thought she was gonna get out of the car.

I was wondering—. I wondered if they knew each other? Like if he’d done this with her before, like with another younger girl?

So, I remember we went to the Holiday Inn on McPhillips. It used to be there. And we went there.

And he gave me \$240, and he told me, “Don’t tell her.” He said, “Here, keep this to yourself.”

And I remember like, you know, what happened in the hotel. And she was sitting outside in the hallway. And then after, he just dropped us off.

I remember that it was gross. And I remember I didn’t like the way it made me feel after. And I remember that we ended up getting high and drinking. And that was the first guy, the very first John.

In Kaitlin’s case the traffickers recognized and took advantage of a vulnerable child, knowing she had no familial support and would be susceptible to substance abuse. They took advantage of that and got her addicted to crack cocaine, which can happen rapidly. They made her feel

like she belonged, gave her promises of money and made her feel ashamed ensuring she quickly became entrenched in the sex industry sub-culture.

Some youth are recruited and groomed right out of group homes that family services have housed them in. For example, one survivor, Grace, describes how critical it is for social workers to be trained and aware of indicators of sexual exploitation. She describes being vulnerable and then suddenly being sexually exploited.

**GRACE:** OK, so I was raped at age of 11. And it caused me to be really erratic, and I started drinking a lot.

My Mom was unable to cope with that and so placed me in the care of CFS under a VPA agreement [voluntary placement agreement] in hopes that I would change focus and go back to being how I was prior to that rape that I experienced.

I was really young. I didn't know what to do. I had nobody to talk to about it.

Rape wasn't really something that was even in my mind to understand or comprehend. And my Mom didn't have the supports. And I didn't have any knowledge about where to go and how to get help. It was just very shaming and dirty.

So I was placed into a short-term group home. And I was angry. And it didn't matter who tried to help me and support me, I was mad. And it just kind of spiraled out of control.

I was living in a group home just up on Margaret and Salter over by Kildonan Park. And there was another youth there who AWOL'ed, so unplanned absences.

It started off as very harmless. Like we were hanging out downtown, drinking Stone Cold two-litre beers, right?

At this point I'm 12, and then there was this about 16-year-old youth. I can't even recall her name, but I remember what she looks like. We were standing on the corner of Ellice and Spence right by the University. There is a restaurant right there on the corner. And she was like, "I'll be right back, guys." And she hopped in a car, and then came back with \$80.

I was like, "How do you do that?"

And she said, "Oh, you just go with them and have sex."

And so I thought at that point, "I've already been promiscuous and abusing substances so I didn't have any care." So I jumped in the next car that came.

And then it just kind of escalated for years until I was really badly beaten by a young adolescent female who was pregnant.

So, I guess, from the age of 12 to 15, I was exploited in street work. So standing on the corner of Ellice/Toronto was a major kiddy corner for me.

I had frequent johns that I kind of kept when I moved back to my parents' house. But that slowly kind of fizzles off because then I was at an age when I could get a job.

I was very motivated. Like I went back to school. But I mean I still suffered addictions.

And maybe I wasn't being exploited, but I still exchanged sex and like, I mean, when it's your job you develop—.

Grace describes a theme that was raised by many of the survivors I interviewed, that no one understood what she was going through and therefore, no one intervened to help her. Here again, I cannot see a way to understand the perspective and experiences of people like Grace, without the context and meaning of her story in a narrative form.

Some of the stories are very short, but they tell so much. We should keep in mind, that some people are more stoic and less apt to describe at length their experiences. In fact, many Indigenous people are quiet and do not tend to speak a lot, especially about things that are embarrassing for them. For example, Grace, another survivor I interviewed, described her experience of being targeted because she is Indigenous. The following narrative is short but impactful and tells a story about what she went through and offers a glimpse into what many visible minority people must experience. Without the context of the short story, “no-one liked natives where I lived” the details would have much less meaning. Gathering them was, at times, gut wrenching.

**GRACE:** I was recruited out of child welfare. I had been adopted, and things were not going well so I was put into “care.”

I was sexually abused at the age of eight.

I am Native, and no one liked natives where I lived in Thunder Bay. So I hid my identity. I was 11 years old when this happened, and I was first exploited at age 12.

Grace’s point that she was abused as a child is consistent with the experiences of my study participants. The high incidence of early childhood abuse correlates with the high number of Indigenous young women who end up trafficked by predators.

Kaitlin, another survivor of forced prostitution, describes girls are often vulnerable to being taken advantage of when they come into the city from the rural communities they were raised in. Predators are aware that young girls will have to move into larger urban centers if they wish to continue their education, because in some areas there is no place to complete high school.

**KAITLIN:** You know, if someone would have come up to me when I was in high school, and would have said, “Hey, you know, what if you go on the street and smoke crack and that and showed me a picture before and after of a girl”— I probably would have been, like, “Okay ya you know what?” I would have probably looked at my friend, and said, “You know what? You’re not my friend. Fuck off.”

There are a lot of girls that come in from the reserve, and they’re naïve. They don’t know how the city is. They come in, and right away they get sucked in.

I’ve had a couple of friends who went missing and murdered all because of one girl that got them started. The one girl that got me started got them started. And all of a sudden, they are gone.

I’m proud to say that, I’ve never introduced anyone, never got anyone hooked on crack.

In the above passage she describes how naïve girls often are to the dangers waiting for them in the City. Other survivors who I interviewed described how predators know young girls who are coming to an age where they will have to move, and they start grooming them in advance.

Another survivor, Julia, also describes in the following, how there were occasions when police and social workers could have intervened if they had recognized that they were witnessing forced prostitution and had known how to intervene.

**JULIA:** I think that a lot of people probably knew what was going on. Again, just kind of seen me as a bad kid, or delinquent kid. And probably didn't really know what to do.

You know that happens now, right? Workers, they're like, "Oh, I don't know what to do with this kid," you know? "They keep running away. They keep doing this. They keep doing that."

But is there a point in time where people could have grabbed me up? Yeah, tons probably. I remember having contact with lots of social workers that just let me walk away.

And yeah, I walked right around the corner and, you know, the guy who was trafficking me was right there. He was the one pursuing me, telling me, you know, leave, leave, leave, leave, leave.

So, to everybody else, it would look like that's what was going on. Tons of times police officers pulled up to me or, you know, see me coming out of a strip club, you know. I was thirteen. Did I really look like I was 18? Probably not [laughs].

Lots of times I was picked up in different parts of the country and flown back. But they were always right here to come get me. So the minute they'd stick me somewhere, you know, it wasn't hard to track me down, right? So were there times, yeah, are there times now that we probably miss the boat for kids? Yeah. It's hard to keep up.

Those guys who are abusing kids in that way, they're thinking about that all the time and that's all they're doing. So they have so much time to think about every which way they can to access kids and make kids vulnerable, and we don't.

Like, we don't have that much time. We're not given that many resources.

So even people that have lots of experience—, and you know, like I said, things change, you know. So, again, five years ago, we just had to go down one track, right. You know, 10 years ago, that was the only place going on, you know.

And now, there's a new website every single day, with new code words every single day. So, to keep up to that, it just takes a huge amount of human resources, right, that we're never, ever given, unfortunately.

It is disturbing to think that many youth could be saved, if only professionals they had contact with, as Julia points out, had recognized the signs of exploitation and had taken some action.

Subjects I interviewed described the layered challenges that survivors struggle with, including substance abuse, childhood trauma, post trauma stress, and other mental health issues that are exacerbated by the daily trials of violence they encounter in the sex industry. The following is part of my interview with Kaitlin, a sex trafficking survivor. She describes the process of how she became involved in being sexually exploited and how she tried to get out.

**KAITLIN:** I was 12. I hung around with girls who were doing it, an older crowd of girls. They struggled in addiction, but I can say, honestly, I kind of think I grew up around it.

My mother was a prostitute. And I remember growing up in a house with a bunch of prostitutes. So I kind of think that has something to do with it.

My mother was an IV-user, so I grew up around that. And I think that's why it was so easy to go into addiction.

I was 12 years old when I first did my first hit of crack, and I was hooked. And by the time I was 13, I was already out on the street.

It was probably mostly to do with gangs and drug dealers.

I believe now that I'm older that I was lured by this older crowd of girls because I was young, and there was more money. I was lured into this.

I remember I was hanging out with this girl, and next thing I knew I was in this house in the West End. And this guy was, "Here, want some crack?"

And I said, "No." They kind of tricked me into it. I thought it was like weed, or whatever they told me it was, and I did it. And after I was hooked.

By the second night I remember the guy telling me, "Well, you owe me so much money, and if you don't get it, I'm going to kill you."

So I had to go out and work.

He said I owed him about two grand, but I don't remember smoking that much. I think I only smoked a couple of pieces because I was really scared, and I didn't know what to do.

And I thought this girl, she was my best friend, she was doing it, too. I thought she was my friend. And I thought she cared about me and I told her I wanted to go home. I didn't want be here anymore. And she just said, "Well, you can't go anywhere. You have to stay here or else they'll hurt you."

So I stayed. Stupid me, I stayed.

From that I think, after, I was going home once a month just to say hi to my Mom. And she was still doing crack. But I would just go home and get clothes or whatever and then leave.

By the time I was 14, I was pretty much homeless and living at a crack shack and on the street. That's all I lived for is crack.

You know, sleep two days, I'd sleep at a john's place for a night, someone that I trusted. I'd go spend a night there and he'd take care of me, feed me, shower, buy me clothes. Then I'd say, "Okay, I'm going."

I'd be gone for a couple of days, and same thing over and over right up until I was 17 when I was pregnant with my oldest. I went home pregnant.

I still used. I don't like to admit it, but I used off and on through my pregnancy. When I stopped—I did stop for two months when I had him—I left my son with my mom, and I just went back on the street and the prostitution.

I was going from area to area, different areas all the time. North End. Central. Point Douglas. Main. Higgins. I don't know why I did that. As soon as I get too comfortable with people, I didn't want anyone to know who I was. And soon as someone started getting close to me, I would move to a different area and find a different group of girls to smoke crack with and shoot with.

That went on heavy till I was 17, and then I slowly stopped. By 18, I was pregnant again with my son. Their fathers were all drug dealers and gang members. For me, it was just someone to take care of me, and I would have to work the street to get high. I could just have my baby and get high. I did that. The relationships didn't work out. And I was back on the street.

Kaitlin's story is similar to others that I heard while conducting this research. Here Kaitlin talks about the psychological challenges that accompany efforts to escape the sex industry.

Grace, a survivor, described the trauma she endured in the sex industry and how she didn't really want to leave because she was so entrenched in that culture.

**GRACE:** It started out to have food and clothes because I was in Child and Family Services.

But the more you have to perform those, the more you work—no its not work—the more that you are abused, the harder the pain. So it started with crack, and then it went to meth, right?

So it's like you can't—when you are that age—you need to be able to kind of provide your way so maybe I would show up to a flop house, I guess you would call it, where like a whole bunch of kids hang out with money. But I'd show up with drugs, and they would be like I was taken care of and fed and clothed because there was a group of us.

There was one time this fucking asshole—sorry, pardon my language—he was going to save me, and he took me—I was maybe 13 maybe 14—and he took me to St. James off the street. And he's, like, “Oh, let's get better, blah, blah, blah.”

And then it was like three weeks later. I got sober for three weeks. Then he asked me to go and work. So I went and worked, and I made about \$300 and I got groceries.

But I don't want to do that sober. So a couple of days after that I headed back to our core of Winnipeg and, ya, it's mostly for drugs to survive, right?

Grace mentioned how post-traumatic stress has impacted her. The survivors I interviewed all described their intersectional challenges, explaining how difficult it is to escape the street and the compulsion to self-medicate, developing substance abuse problems as a direct result of the psychological trauma of forced prostitution.

Paige was trafficked all over Canada for over 20 years. She described the critical events that finally led to her opportunity to escape the sex industry.

**PAIGE:** When we talk about this, I always think, “What's personal to me? What happened for me? How did I get out?”

I said, and different times, “it was the police that saved my life.” Had I not been scooped and my warrant be put out there for arrest in other provinces, I may have died where I was. I was brought back on a warrant. I was a witness in a murder trial, and I really believe my life was spared.

But, for me, I didn't do anything.

People came to me. It was almost, like, I am a believer. I believe there is a force greater than myself and I really believe that when I was escorted back from [—] to Winnipeg and east to [—], I had no-where to go.

So I went to 180 Henry. And it was there at 180 Henry—. I had charges on me out of [—]. I was there and met [—] at Booth Center. And that began the healing journey for me.

It got me into the prostitution diversion program. So I didn't even know where I was going. I really did not even know what kind of camp I was going to, because another girl was going. From that camp I was introduced to so many different programs here in Winnipeg, such as TERF, Dream Catchers, Sage House, all of these programs. And they were all little stepping stones for me.

Paige describes the various programs as stepping-stones, emphasizing those critical events that basically forced her to change her life.

Some people just become spent, after years of abuse and injuries, often damaged by severe substance abuse; they become unsellable. Kaitlin describes in the following passage from her interview- how she progressed from the street to “working” indoors, and then eventually regressed back to survival sex when traffickers were no longer able to sell her.

**KAITLIN:** My sons went and lived with my Mom. She took care of them.

She got clean. So she had my sons.

The prostitution, I kept going, I think after I was 17, 18. I was slowly doing it off the street. I was working in massage parlors.

I met a guy who picked me up off the street, and he said, “You don’t have to do this on the street anymore.”

I guess I had a fat lip because I was getting beat up, you know, from bad dates and stuff like that. And he said, “You need somewhere safe to make some money and that.”

And I said, “Ya.” And he owned a massage parlour on Logan at McPhillips. And I worked there until I was 19, and then I went back on the street.

I remember he fired me because my addiction got so bad, and I wasn’t taking care of myself.

Nobody wanted me anymore, so I went back on the street.

Kaitlin’s story is similar to many in that she self-medicated severely with street drugs in order to placate the negative feelings caused by selling herself in the sex industry.

Elizabeth describes how some survivors experience relapses, even decades after leaving forced prostitution, highlighting the reality that the survivor is always in jeopardy of a relapse and falling back into life of addictions and selling sex on the street.

**ELIZABETH:** I’m experiential, identify as experiential today, even though I exited over 20 years ago. I’m still experiential. I’m no further away from that curb than any of the other women that are out there.

Just because it’s been 20 years—. The triggers are still real for me today. The work that I do is extremely rewarding, but it’s also hugely triggering. And anytime financial insecurity hits, stinky thinking does too. Yeah, it’s easy to go back to that frame of thinking.

I used to start my story by saying I was 21 years old and I left a relationship. I was violently raped. And then I started working in the sex trade.

But over the last few years, I started recognizing the fact that I was groomed for the sex trade long before that, and I actually turned my first trick when I was 18. And I had been primed for it for a number of years prior.

And just the people that I associated with and people that I considered to be normal everyday people were folks that were either in a place of exploitation or drug dealing or some kind of criminal activity. But at that point in my life, I thought it was normal life.

Elizabeth’s insight has significant implications for developing resilience training for survivors. They need effective responses for when they feel triggered, to avoid relapse. A large number of survivor/practitioners work in support roles assisting young people to escape the sex



industry. Agencies employing experiential survivors should have resources in place for their support. Therefore, experiential people play a critical role supporting other survivors.

Paige, like Grace and Elizabeth was drawn towards helping others to escape forced prostitution. Paige made a lot of interesting points about her work with sex industry survivors. She says having “lived the experience” she knows what it was like to stand on a corner selling sex and being able to relate to the value that she brings to helping others. Here’s how Paige describes working with survivors.

**PAIGE:** I come to the table working in the field, here with sexually exploited women and transgendered females, as a result of lived experiences of my own.

With a past of addiction, which my addiction took me down to the point of being homeless, I often say that when I got well or began to get well, I was almost emotionless—and no place to go. And that was pretty much the way it was for me.

So having lived experience was knowing what it was like to stand on a corner, if you will, jump in a stranger’s car only with one thought in mind and that is to pay in cash to supply a habit.

Looking back now, I also see those periods in my life where I was able to pull it together. It took a number of times, but I was able to go back to school. And able to maintain and get my grade ten. And then I did the GED and got my grade 12. And jumped back in and took a nursing program. And was able to work as a nurse for a little while and was able to maintain sobriety on my own.

I wasn’t happy, but I was sober. So I had successful periods, but I would always end up back up there somehow. So even back then I always knew I wanted to work with women. I did not realize then I would be involved in the sex trade. I still feel it is women who are involved in the sex trade that I am involved with. But I feel that I would be there for any women with pain. I know who I am, wanting to help people, yeah.

Paige was able to even go through nursing school and stay sober for many years, yet she was not happy. Her story, as with all of them, is visceral and impactful.

The power of stories, again, came to me as survivors described, from their perspective, what the system needs to prevent sex trafficking and help people to escape it. For example, Paige describes below how a safe house could be set up, built on the successful model of a one-stop shop that exists in Las Vegas, Nevada.

**PAIGE:** It would be a house of women who are wanting to get well, and I believe that the women would run the house and would need to manage.

But I don’t think it needs to be staffed. I think the women would need to be accountable to one another because they’re all adults.

We would bring them; we would start off with two women and then in a month or two or three. I’m not sure how it would work.

We would bring in two more and the two older ones would be accountable and if say that third person ends up smoking crack in the bathroom, she’s not going to be walking because they’re all going to want to be clean so she’s going to have to do a report and do a time out. And maybe she could then just be able to live there and there would be karma.

Where I get this from is there’s a house down in Nevada called Thistle Farms and it’s definitely worth checking it out. This woman who started out,

and she's brought tons of women through there, it's a home and they all live together.

Thistle Farms is what it's called, they made body products and everything now and they sell it online and all the stuff is what keeps the house running.

It's all made from the thistle plant, and if you study a thistle it is one of the strongest plants there are, and down in Nevada I think it is. Or wherever it was, it says "down on track let's go over here down by the railroad tracks here.

Even though it's dirty, it's heavy in weeds you might see some thistles. All the flowers might die, the grass might die but the thistle will live. That explains women."

It's a home and after they do a couple years there then they go off into the plant and they work or they go off on their own and they build their lives.

Paige suggests that a similar type of safe house could be created and run by the survivors, with seniors mentoring the younger women. Thistle Farms is a large manufacturing company run by sex industry survivors who are employed to produce body care products.

It seems very clear from my research that the solutions can be found within the community. This finding connects with the lessons from peace-building scholars such as Lederach (1995, 2005), who stresses that deep-rooted problems in the community are often understood and resolved by people in the grassroots who understand the nuances of local culture. This resonates for me, in particular as it relates to the importance of the stories that experiential people tell. It is through their stories that we gain the deepest insights, the way people see the world and the changes they would like to see. It seems clear, having shared some moments with the survivors, that there is something potent and undeniable in the power of stories that cannot be replaced.

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I wish to acknowledge the survivors of sex trafficking who made themselves vulnerable and told their stories to help others. I also wish to acknowledge my PhD dissertation committee, Dr. Sean Byrne, Dr. Jessica Senehi, Dr. Rick Linden and Dr. Laura Huey for their guidance and support in completing this research.

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**Article Citation**

Christmas, R. (2018). The power in stories that cannot be replaced. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(12), 3118-3135. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss12/17>

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