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# The waters of sexual exploitation: understanding the world of sexually exploited youth

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## Abstract

*The sexual exploitation of youth is a complex and multidimensional social problem. Understanding the antecedents and factors that entrap youth into the world of sexual exploitation is imperative for effective interventions. This article presents a visual entitled the Waters of Sexual Exploitation that is used as a training tool for social service personnel to understand the world of sexually exploited youth. The visual was developed through an extensive review of the literature as well as interviews with individuals involved in the sex trade, with specific focus on the overrepresentation of Aboriginal youth who are sexually exploited. The Waters of Sexual Exploitation visual helps to capture the complex relationships that develop between sexually exploited youth, the people that exploit the youth, and the helpers working with youth exiting this world. The visual is enhanced by the inclusion of the lived experience of a survivor of this world.*

**Keywords:** *sexual exploitation, sex trade, social service, Aboriginal youth*

## WATERS OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION



Illustrated by Bram Keast-Wiatrowki

## Introduction

The sexual exploitation of youth is a complex and multidimensional social ill. There are a number of factors that impact the vulnerability of sexually exploited youth and predispose them to sexual exploitation. These factors also work to entrap youth and make exiting the sex trade a challenging task for both the youth and helpers. The visual dubbed the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* presented in this article seeks to capture this complexity by explaining the world of the sex trade, giving voice to the experience of the youth who are being sexually exploited, describing people who exploit the youth and highlighting challenges faced by people who try to intervene. This visual was originally conceptualized by the author, Rocke, in 2002 while developing a training curriculum aimed at individuals working with this population. The first author, Rocke, worked with a curriculum advisory committee that included both Indigenous and experiential members in developing the six day training session that has since been delivered to over a thousand social service personnel.<sup>3</sup> The training has had largely positive reviews and consistent anecdotal comments from experiential individuals that the visual reflects the world of sexual exploitation (K. Hallick, personal communication, May 18, 2015; J. Runner, personal communication, June 19, 2017). Within this paper, the second author, MacKensize, shares her own story from entrapment to freedom from the sex trade to enhance the salience of the visual.

The *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* visual depicted in this article seeks to highlight the complexity of the sex trade world and advocate for a more comprehensive understanding in order to support holistic responses to those individuals that wish to exit this world. This visual will be of particular interest to students and practitioners in both understanding the world of sexual exploitation but to also plan appropriate interventions for the children and youth trapped within this world. This article will also be of interest to those individuals that work with Indigenous youth as the sad reality is that within Western Canada over 80% of sexually exploited youth are of Aboriginal descent (Lowman, 2011; Scheirich, 2004).<sup>4</sup>

## Context

This paper has adopted the definitions utilized by the Province of Manitoba (Canada) Sexually Exploited Youth (SEY) Strategy to address child and youth sexual exploitation. The Province of Manitoba SEY Strategy was developed in 2008 and is commonly known as *Tracia's Trust - Front Line Voices: Manitobans Working Together to End Child Sexual Exploitation* (Manitoba Family Services and Housing, 2008). The SEY Strategy was named after Tracia Owen who tragically took her own life at the age of 14 after being sexually exploited. The SEY Strategy defines child and youth sexual exploitation as:

the act of coercing, luring or engaging a child, under the age of 18, into a sexual act, and involvement in the sex trade or pornography, with or without the child's consent, in exchange for money, drugs, shelter, food, protection or other necessities (Scheirich, 2008, p. 1).

<sup>3</sup> The training uses the term experiential to refer to individuals that either continue to or have worked in the sex trade.

<sup>4</sup> Western Canada includes the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia.

In contrast, a sex trade worker is understood to mean an adult who trades sex for money or goods whereas a child or youth who exchanges sex for money or goods is understood as being sexually exploited (Scheirich, 2008). However, many consider the sex trade as inherently exploitative as:

the definition of sexual exploitation is best conceptualized on a continuum ... from female sexual slavery ... to survival sex ... through to more bourgeois styles of sex trade ... where both adults are consenting, albeit in a way that is shaped by their gender, occupation, ethnicity, socio-economic status and cultural values (Gorkoff & Runner, 2003, p. 15).

Civil society remains conflicted over whether prostitution should be legalized (Bazonmay, 2016), however despite the international debate about the sex trade there appears to be universal agreement that the sexual exploitation of children and youth needs to be eradicated.

## Waters of Sexual Exploitation

The *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* visual depicted in this article attempts to capture this complexity while supporting the perspective that interventions must also be flexible enough to address the differing circumstances that individuals wishing to exit the sex trade find truly helpful. In the development of the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* visual, the author (Rocke) utilized the metaphor of the “murky waters” to explain the world that sexually exploited youth inhabit. Although many Indigenous beliefs understand water as both sacred and healing (Anderson, Clow & Haworth-Brockman, 2013) the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* depicts water that has been polluted by the sexual exploitation of youth. For the Indigenous experiential individuals who utilize the *Water of Sexual Exploitation* visual during training the metaphor of “murky waters” reflects the reality of several murdered sexually exploited youth whose bodies have been found in the Red River in Manitoba.<sup>5</sup> The tragic death of Tina Fontaine whose body was pulled from the Red River after being sexually exploited and murdered (Blaze Baum & D’Aliesio, 2015) is one high profile example. As a result, community volunteers began an initiative entitled *Drag the Red* (Lambert, 2016) in which local residents volunteer their time and resources to search the Red River for murdered and missing Indigenous women.

The visual was originally created after the completion of an extensive literature review and further presented to the curriculum advisory committee established by the coordinator of the Manitoba SEY Strategy. The committee was made up of Indigenous and experiential members and included two provincial trainers that were tasked with developing the curriculum. Subsequently an artist (Bram Keast-Wiatrowki) was contracted to recreate the visual that appears in this article. The *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* visual describes the sex trade world with specific focus on the sexual exploitation of youth. The world of youth sexual exploitation is depicted as existing in the “murky waters” below the surface that cloud the view of most individuals living within conventional society.<sup>6</sup> Conventional society is shown as existing above the water where many inhabitants remain unaware of the experience of sexually exploited youth. To understand the “murky waters” of sexual exploitation, the world is visualized as a whirlpool within the waters; with

<sup>5</sup> The city of Winnipeg was built around the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. This point is now known as The Forks and was historically a meeting place for many Indigenous groups for thousands of years before the European settlers arrived (Newton, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Conventional society refers to those individuals that have limited knowledge or contact with the sex trade.

street sex at the bottom of the waters and the more “accepted” forms of the sex trade closer to the surface of the waters.

## Entry into the Waters of Sexual Exploitation

The average age of entry for sexually exploited youth is 13.5 years of age (McDonald et al., 2007; Seshia, 2005). Both systemic and individual factors make youth vulnerable to sexual exploitation. The systemic factors include involvement in the child welfare and/or correctional systems, poverty and racism/oppression (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2014; Ferland, Denby, Neuman & Bruce, 2012; Gorkoff & Runner, 2003; Kingsley & Mark, 2000; McDonald et al., 2007). MacKensize explains how her own experience of being part of the 60s scoop made her vulnerable:<sup>7</sup>

I think there were a few systematic factors that made me vulnerable. One of them being of Aboriginal descent, one of them being born an Aboriginal child during that period of time where they had policies in place that removed Aboriginal children from their homes and communities to give them a better life ... that me being adopted in the 60s scoop into a non-Aboriginal home would give me a better opportunity to succeed in life. To “**de-Indianize” the child.**

The individual factors that make youth vulnerable to sexual exploitation include a history of physical/sexual abuse, limited education, learning disabilities (including Fetal Alcohol Effects/Fetal Alcohol Syndrome), dysfunctional family of origin, and little or no access to family and friends (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2014; Ferland et al., 2012; Gorkoff & Runner, 2003; Kingsley & Mark, 2000; McDonald et al., 2007). MacKensize describes how her history of child sexual abuse set the stage for later sexual exploitation:

... childhood sexual abuse began with my adoptive grandfather who would in exchange for the games that he taught me would give me small amounts of pocket change, candies, **barrettes for my hair and I would do sexual favors for him. And the first time he didn’t** have a treat for me after we played this game, I was upset being a child probably around **five, I didn’t keep the secret ...** I ran to grandma and told but from that day forward I was blamed, I was shamed. I was taken to the church and the whole congregation prayed for the little girl that seduced a grown man with my devilish, sinful, lustful advances. I was made to feel dirty. I was made to feel used ... I now realize that this was the beginning of the grooming process they had put in place for me ... And then he began introducing me to his now perverted friends. And the game began. And I performed sexual things for all his friends.

One of the highest risk factors that predispose youth to becoming involved in the sex trade is homelessness (Lutnick, 2016; Scheirich, 2004), which often occurs when the youth can no longer live at home and do not find the services provided by the child welfare services meet their needs.

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<sup>7</sup> The 60s scoop is a term describing the removal of Indigenous children during the 1960s away from their families and communities under a belief that it would be in their best interests to be placed in homes away from the poverty found on reserves. Approximately 75% of these children were adopted into non-Indigenous homes in Canada and the United States (Walmsley, 2005).

During the indoctrination process into the sex trade the youth learn the rules of this world. The longer the youth remain involved in the sex trade, the more distant the connection to conventional society becomes and the more difficult it is for youth to reintegrate into conventional society. Helpers often experience an inability to communicate and relate to youth entrenched in the sex trade world. It is therefore critical that helpers learn the unique aspects of the sex trade within their community in order to both assess the dynamics accurately and develop successful interventions. Working with and allowing experiential individuals to take a leadership role is the key to successful interventions with sexually exploited youth (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2014; Cook & Courchene, 2006). Experiential individuals have been, and continue to be, part of the Manitoba training teams to ensure that the changing dynamics within the local sex trade are continually reflected.

There is a well established process rooted in proven psychological techniques that essentially traps victims in the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* (Perrin, 2010). The first steps of recruitment include seeking out vulnerable youth to exploit. The recruiters are well aware of the individual and systemic characteristics that make youth vulnerable to sexual exploitation. For example, MacKensize highlights how her vulnerability began at a very early age:

**... when I was 5, I made my first disclosure of my first abuser. If my grandmother would have picked up the phone or put me in the car and taken me to the police maybe my life would have been different from that point. I would have been protected from the initial abuse. But because I wasn't protected from the initial abuse from the adopted family, and the other people watching the big picture saw that, the other abusive people stepped forward because they saw that "nobody did nothing to grandpa" ... And that's how predators look for that vulnerability.**

When youth are identified, a recruiter will begin the process of engagement by building an intimate relationship with the victim (Hammond & McGlone, 2014). Pimps and gang members have been known to have playbooks to help each other with successful recruitment techniques (Perrin, 2010). Once a relationship has been established, either coercion or manipulation is used to get the victim sold for sex for the first time (Hammond & McGlone, 2014; Perrin, 2010), as described by MacKensize in her story:

**... a pimp who is in on scene, knows what's going on had been watching me. And saw my youth and my naiveté. And he was introduced to me. And he sweet talked me and they know how to groom and what to say to coerce and charm their ways into your life. For myself, it was a sense of belonging and love. This man told me how beautiful I was. How he felt sorry for me that people were taking advantage of me. I thought at that point no one is taking advantage of me. I'm getting things out of this. And then he explained that we could make money off of this. And I wouldn't have to go back home, I could run away. And he would take care of me. And I thought "wow" this guy really likes me, thinks I'm sexy, I don't have to be with my grandpa's old creepy friends. And I am going to start cashing on this. And when I went from lollipops and pocket change to five hundred dollar fee, my self-esteem rose along with my status.**

It is common for sexually exploited youth to feel a sense of empowerment when they are initially involved in the sex trade based on their perception that they now have some control over their bodies through the exchange of sex for money when contrasted with their earlier experiences of abuse and rape (Campbell, Ahrens, Sefl & Clark, 2003). Once involved, however, many youth will eventually feel trapped

within the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* and find it extremely difficult to exit the sex trade world.

As part of the “grooming process” youth are encouraged to disassociate from their biological family and become part of a new family which they are told will provide the love and acceptance that they did not receive in their family of origin. MacKensize outlines her own need to have a family and how she initially was convinced that she would find this in the sex trade:

So he [my pimp] knew I was on the street and he knew my child had died and he, using **that tactic of Maslow’s Hierarchy “belonging”, knew I needed and wanted a family. And that’s what he** offered me. He offered to take me off the streets ... So I believed him ... and he internationally human trafficked me all across Canada, throughout the USA, and even from Florida to the Bahamas. By age 17 I had been a survivor of human trafficking of 3 different countries. And I am a child of CFS ... taken away from my Aboriginal peoples to be given a better life!

Youth are told by their recruiter or pimp that the conventional world considers them as disposable and unwanted (Tutty & Nixon, 2003). In the end, youth begin to accept that their worth is only valued by their pimp or gang members.

Lutnick (2016) challenges the dominant narrative of youth being forced into sexual exploitation by a pimp. Her research found that there are a number of ways that youth can become sexually exploited including introduction by family, friends, and acquaintances. Ferland et. al (2012) also found that it was common for youth to be initiated into the sex trade by other family members and friends as a viable way to make money and escape poverty. This more nuanced understanding of the how youth become sexually exploited points to the need for interventions to go beyond the victim/offender dichotomy.

The use of the internet to sexually exploit youth is becoming increasingly common (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2014; Sinclair, Duval & Fox, 2015). The grooming process used by Internet predators is similar to those used by recruiters who also seek out vulnerable youth and then work towards building a trusting relationship before the sexual exploitation (Kloess, Beech & Harkins, 2014). Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones and Wolak (2010) found that there has been a 280% increase in the arrest of offenders who sexually exploit youth over the Internet between the years 2000 and 2006. Children and youth can also be solicited for virtual sex acts which may then be used for the production of child pornography to be later shared with other offenders worldwide (Kloess et al., 2014).

## Hierarchy in the Waters of Sexual Exploitation

There is a very distinct hierarchy within the sex trade world between “high track”, “mid track” and “low track” (Lowman, 2000). At the bottom of the sex trade world are the sexually exploited people involved in survival sex; this includes the sale of sexual services on the streets by homeless youth and women in poverty who have few other options. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy are looked down **upon by others in the sex trade world and are often referred to as “crack whores”** – a reference to the fact that many suffer some form of drug addiction. **Drug-using women are of the “lowest” status among** anyone working the streets. These are the most vulnerable sex trade workers as they often do not have any “protection” from pimps and are targeted by predator johns (Lowman, 2011). In Western Canada, 80% or more of these women and youth are of Aboriginal descent (Lowman, 2011; Scheirich, 2004).

The middle of the hierarchy is the hidden sex trade which occurs in trick pads, gang houses, drug houses or on the Internet. Youth exploited in the sex trade primarily work in gang houses, trick pads or drug houses; and are depicted at the next level of the whirlpool known as "mid track". The youth are held captive and treated like slaves where they are given drugs and food in exchange for being sexual services (sexual exploitation). In Western Canada, youth living in trick pads, gang and drug houses are almost exclusively of Aboriginal descent (Kingsley & Mark, 2000). Within Western Canada, Aboriginal youth and women are disproportionally represented in both the "low" and "mid" track areas of the sex trade world (Cook & Courchene, 2006; Kingsley & Mark, 2000; Lowman, 2011; Lynne, 1998). It is estimated that only 5% - 20% of sexually exploited youth are visible on the street whereas the majority of the exploitation occurs behind closed doors (Kingsley & Mark, 2000).

The highest level of the hierarchy (closest to the top of the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation*) is afforded the highest status in the sex trade world and includes adult pornography, Internet sex chat rooms, massage parlours, exotic dancing and escort services. According to anecdotal information, most (if not all) are female and 80% are middle class Caucasians (Lowman, 2011). All of the sex trade activity at this level occurs indoors. Many of these women have full time paid day jobs and jump off the "choice pier" that is floating above the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* in the evening and rarely become involved in other aspects of the sex trade world. "High track" women have verbalized that they entered the sex trade of their own free will and their experience has become the basis for many that advocate for the legalization of prostitution (Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform, 2014). However, others argue that this choice is often made when other viable options are not available (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2014).

## Levels of Violence within the Waters of Sexual Exploitation

The level of violence that is experienced by individuals at the lower and mid level of the sex trade world is a constant reality and is normalized for sexually exploited youth (Nixon & Tutty, 2003). Almost 100% of the women and youth working at the lower levels will have experienced violence from johns, pimps and other sex trade workers (Ferland et al., 2012; Lowman, 2011). MacKensize explains that violence is endemic in these levels of the sex trade world:

... the girls themselves will fight amongst each other. Violence is a way of improving your status. If you could take a damn good beating and continue on with what **you're doing** your status increases – at least it did on my behalf.

For youth that are involved with a pimp or gang member, experiencing violence is often paradoxically viewed as a sign of love and caring as demonstrated by MacKensize in her own experience:

Because it showed [my pimp] that I was loyal to him. One time he beat me so bad that I ran out of the house ... [onto the street] ... straight into the traffic and I collapsed in front of a car. The ambulance came and the cops came and [my pimp] was in the house. I remember the cops had him **and they said, "Did he hurt you?"**. I was visibly beaten and I said, **"He didn't do nothing to me."** They said, **"We know he did this – there's only the two of you - someone seen you running."** At that point there was no way I would talk or say anything. Two minutes before the cops came I was running for my life from [the pimp]. But when the cops were there to save my life from further violence I knew how to keep my mouth shut.

This type of violence has powerful controlling aspects that keep the youth entrenched within the sex trade world (Lutnick, 2016).

Within the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* there are differential levels of violence. At the bottom echelons the youth and women can expect a high degree of violence from the pimps, johns and other sex trade workers. This violence can often be deadly, as predator johns frequently target the youth and women working on the street as their level of protection from pimps and other sex trade workers is diminished, especially if they are drug addicted. Historically, the police response to the level of violence experienced by sex trade workers on the street has been glaringly absent, as demonstrated in the unchecked murder of almost fifty sex trade workers by Robert Pickton in the downtown eastside of Vancouver, Canada (Oppal, 2012). In contrast to street level prostitution where various studies have shown that 80% to 100% of the women have experienced extreme violence (Nixon & Tutty, 2003), the level of violence experienced by sex trade workers at the upper echelons involved with escort, call girl and Internet services is substantially less (Lowman, 2011).

## Physical and Mental Health Risks in the Waters of Sexual Exploitation

Substance use and abuse is also considered to be a normal fact of life in the sex trade. A high percentage of sexually exploited youth are addicted to some form of substance (Chettiar, Shannon, Wood, Zhang & Kerr, 2010). **The “relationship between substance abuse and prostitution is somewhat circular and co-determinate” (Goroff & Runner, 2003, p. 18). In other words, some sexually exploited youth enter the sex trade already addicted, whereas other sexually exploited youth become more entrenched in their addiction as a way of coping with the sex trade. Many sexually exploited youth are deliberately “set up” to become addicted by the individuals enticing them into the trade (e.g., boyfriends, pimps, gang members) as a means of further controlling the youth (Perrin, 2010). MacKensize describes how drug use becomes a vicious cycle for sexually exploited youth:**

Getting them hooked on the drugs is a good thing because it fools you to go out and get some money **'cause you need more crack. So you're a bit more serious about finding that money. If you're just straight, standing on a corner you might be timid and not easily approachable. But if you're stoned out of your mind looking for your next hit you'll be bending over looking over into every car smiling, waving. Trying to attract any attention to flag down your next hit. That's the way it works.**

Many of the youth living on the street suffer from a myriad of mental and physical ailments that are intertwined (e.g., addictions, depression, general ill health as well as higher risk for sexually transmitted infection). When combined with the violence and homelessness (lack of shelter, food and sleep) that many of these youth experience, these health issues result in feeling chronically “sick and tired” (Downe, 2003b, p. 92). **In contrast, many of the women at the higher levels of the sex trade world are less entrenched in addiction, as this can be viewed by the recruiters and pimps as bad for business (Lowman, 2000, Lowman 2011).**

## Systemic Risks in the Waters of Sexual Exploitation

Systemic factors that predispose many youth to sexual exploitation are also identified in the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* visual. These include a dysfunctional family of origin (Downe, 2003a;

Ferland et al., 2012), the sexualization of children within our society (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2014), being of Aboriginal descent with the experience of colonization and racism (Bourgeois, 2015; Jacob & Williams, 2008; Kingsley & Mark, 2000) and the failure of the child welfare system. The dysfunctional family of origin is depicted as a boat capsizing that results in the child or youth falling into the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation*. Sexually exploited youth often have histories of family dysfunction that include sexual and/or physical abuse (Nixon & Tutty, 2003; Sethi, 2007), witnessing domestic violence, parental substance use/abuse, parental involvement in the sex trade and experiencing neglect and poverty (Sethi, 2007). As a result, youth are set adrift from the capsized boat (home) but without any skills to survive in the conventional world. Once on the street, **many of the youth become involved in "survival sex" as their first introduction into the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation*** (Scheirich, 2004). The child welfare system is visually represented as a tattered net that is floating in the water. However, the net is full of large holes where many high-risk youth fall through into the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* that are waiting to claim them.

Most sexually exploited youth have been involved in the child welfare system at one or more points in their young lives (Bittle, 2002; Brannigan & Van Brunschott, 2004; Coy, 2009; Gorkoff & Runner, 2003; Kingsley & Mark, 2000, McDonald et al, 2007; Perrin, 2010; Scheirich, 2004; Seshia, 2005). Historically, child welfare interventions aimed at youth experiencing sexual exploitation have not been successful; most sexually exploited youth run away from their assigned placements and in doing so further ostracize themselves from the very system that is designed to help them (Coy, 2009; Nixon & Tutty, 2003; Sethi, 2007). Traditional child welfare placements do not meet the needs of these youth as **they simply "don't fit" into the rules and structure of most residential placements (Coy, 2009; Gorkoff & Runner, 2003)**. Entry into addiction treatment facilities is also difficult as staff are generally ill equipped to deal with a history of sexual exploitation (Berry, 2003). As mentioned earlier, homelessness has been identified as one of the highest risk factors for sexual exploitation (Lutnick, 2016; Scheirich, 2004) and for many youth the harsh realities of street life (e.g., hunger, weather, exhaustion, loneliness, illness and assaults) results in the sex trade being seen as a viable option for obtaining money.

Racism, sexism, colonialization and poverty are also depicted as bubbles within the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* visual to highlight that Aboriginal youth and women are most vulnerable to sexual exploitation based on the history of colonization and cultural genocide that has had the most devastating impact on Aboriginal women and children (Bourgeois, 2015; Jacobs & Williams, 2008; Lynne, 1998; Sethi, 2007). This history has also resulted in Aboriginal women being five times more likely to die from violence than other Canadian women (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2009). The level of violence against Aboriginal women within Canada has drawn international attention (Jacobs & Williams, 2008) with Amnesty International taking special notice in a number of recent reports of missing and murdered Aboriginal women (Amnesty International, 2008; 2009).

## Johns and Predators in the Waters of Sexual Exploitation

The *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* depicts johns as either fishermen above the water with a fishing rod, or as scuba divers with a spear below the water. These different types of johns reflect the experience of many in the sex trade world (Lowman, 2000; Malarek, 2011). Johns who are symbolized as fishermen and living above the water in the conventional world are viewed as men who cannot control their sexual urges and/or are not getting their sexual needs met in current relationships. These johns

"fish" the youth out of the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* to buy sexual services while psychologically convincing themselves that the youth or woman choose this lifestyle and the purchase of sex is a harmless act (Malarek, 2011).

In contrast, predator johns are depicted as scuba divers that use spears to capture their prey and are the men who act out their violent tendencies during the purchase of sex (Lowman, 2000; Malarek, 2011). It is well documented that working in the sex trade is extremely dangerous and often deadly (Lowman, 2011), as depicted by the words "death" embedded in the reeds at the bottom of the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation*. Pimps and gang members are depicted as sharks that inhabit the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* visual and reflect the level of violence often used towards sexually exploited youth.

## Exiting the Waters of Sexual Exploitation

The people and resources that try and help sexually exploited youth are visually depicted in the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* as part of the conventional world located in a safe boat floating on the water. Interventions often occur during a time of crisis for the sexually exploited youth: the arrest of the perpetrator; the family is told; the child welfare system becomes involved; or, the youth seeks medical attention for a sexually transmitted infection or physical assault. At this point the youth is faced with a dilemma to either attempt escape or remain **in the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation***; many of the youth may still feel a sense of power and control that make the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation* appear better than the abuse they have experienced at home or within the system (Perrin, 2010). The re-socialization process is very difficult for a young person to make. The longer the child or youth is immersed in the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation*, the harder it is to remove themselves from it and return to conventional society. MacKensize reflects on her own work trying to help sexually exploited youth exit the sex trade:

Unfortunately we wait until the children are entrenched before our systems and plans come into place. When they're transitioning in [to the sex trade], if we could have a spot just for them where there's no entrenched youth, or maybe just at risk youth with them. And line them up with some realities of where this is headed.

For many youth, the sex trade world fills unmet needs that the conventional world has failed to meet. Further, sexually exploited youth can experience hostility (shaming/blaming behaviors) by members of conventional society, which in turn often leads to further entrenchment in the sex trade. In the event that a child or youth decides they wish to exit the *Waters of Sexual Exploitation*, the financial insecurity due to the inability to secure employment (Ferland et al., 2012) and adequate housing are often hurdles that are too difficult to overcome, resulting in further entrenchment in the sex trade.

Public awareness of the sexual exploitation of youth is increasing. The recognition of the need for coordination of all types of responses, including prosecution of offenders, the protection of victims and preventative programs is also being acknowledged (Bruckmüller & Schumann, 2012; Canadian Women's Foundation, 2014). As Downe (2003a) argues, interventions need to "provide opportunities where supportive and complex relationships akin to street relationships can be cultivated, but in contexts that promote self-confidence rather than exploitation" (p. 61). The final report of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (2015), that examined the history and effects of the residential schools system, identified how the 60s Scoop continued these devastating impacts on Aboriginal children and their

families. It is imperative that interventions for Aboriginal children and youth acknowledge this history and utilize traditional healing practices. The continued sexual exploitation of youth challenges us all to develop a more nuanced understanding of their reality which will result in more effective interventions.

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