

# There Is No Single Story of Prostitution



An Educational Guide for  
Communities and Volunteers  
by Kelsey Decker

Different Pathways. Different Women. One Shared Reality.

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# Before You Begin: A Note to the Reader

This resource is designed to educate volunteers, leaders, and members of the broader community about the many pathways into prostitution and commercial sexual exploitation.

It is not intended to sensationalize harm, debate morality, or reduce complex lives into simple categories. Instead, it offers a wider lens—one that reflects the realities many outreach workers and service providers encounter but are rarely taught.

The information shared here draws from lived experience, fieldwork, and observed patterns across multiple forms of exploitation. While individual experiences vary, this guide aims to **increase understanding, improve responses, and encourage dignity-centered engagement.**

Some topics discussed may challenge common assumptions or feel uncomfortable. That discomfort is often part of unlearning oversimplified narratives. Readers are encouraged to approach this material with curiosity, humility, and care.

This resource is educational and not intended to replace professional training, clinical care, or legal guidance. It aims to support more informed conversations and more compassionate action within communities.

Information in this resource may be shared freely for training, discussion, and community education. When used or distributed, please credit the author. Attribution helps ensure the integrity of the work and supports continued education and outreach.

## A Shared Responsibility

When communities understand *how* women enter exploitation—and *why* leaving is often complex—they are better equipped to respond with wisdom rather than judgment.

Education is one of the first steps toward change.

# Why This Perspective Matters

When communities lack this understanding, harm is often unintentionally reinforced. Well-meaning responses can become dismissive. Expectations can become unrealistic. And women who need safety and support may instead encounter judgment, pressure, or silence.

Understanding the many forms of prostitution—and the women within them—matters because it changes how people respond. It shifts conversations away from blame and toward dignity. It helps volunteers, leaders, and supporters recognize why leaving is rarely immediate or linear. And it encourages care that is patient, informed, and rooted in reality rather than assumption.

This resource is not intended to persuade or debate. Its purpose is to educate—to offer a clearer lens through which communities can see, listen, and engage more responsibly.

The pages that follow offer a closer look at the many pathways into prostitution, beginning with a common question that often oversimplifies these realities: *choice*.

When understanding deepens, responses change. And when responses change, lives are impacted.

## Why “Choice” Misses the Mark

Public conversations often hinge on one question:

*Was she forced—or did she choose it?*

But that question is too small.

A more honest one is:

**What conditions made this the most survivable option available to her at the time?**

When trauma, poverty, lack of childcare, coercive relationships, untreated mental health needs, prior abuse, or economic instability narrow a woman’s options, consent becomes compromised—even when no overt force is present.

**Choice without viable alternatives is not freedom.**

# How to Use This Resource

This guide is intended as a learning tool, not a checklist or diagnostic manual. It can be read in its entirety or used in sections, depending on your role and context. Below are a few suggested ways to engage with the material.

## Volunteers & Outreach Teams

- Read with the goal of **understanding complexity**, not mastering categories
- Notice which populations you naturally think of—and which ones you rarely consider
- Use this resource to reflect on:
  - Who your organization currently reaches
  - Who may be unintentionally overlooked
- Allow this guide to shape *how* you listen, not just *what* you say

**This resource is meant to support posture before practice.**

## Donors & Supporters

- Use this guide to understand why exit from exploitation is rarely simple or immediate
- Let it inform expectations around timelines, outcomes, and success metrics
- Recognize why long-term, relational, dignity-centered care is essential in most situations, but isn't always an option

**Support rooted in understanding is more sustainable—and more effective.**

# Educators, Advocates & Community Leaders

- Use this guide to challenge oversimplified public narratives
- Reference sections when training volunteers or presenting to groups
- Pair this resource with additional research, survivor-led insights, and professional training

**Education is most effective when it is layered and ongoing.**

## How *Not* to Use This Resource

- Do not use this guide to label, diagnose, or confront individuals
- Do not assume you can identify someone's story based on appearance or circumstance
- Do not use this information to debate someone's lived experience

**Understanding should lead to care, not control.**

## A Final Encouragement

The goal of this resource is not to make readers experts. It is to make responses more human.

When communities understand the many pathways into exploitation, they are better equipped to respond with patience, wisdom, and dignity.

Conversations about prostitution are often shaped by assumptions rather than understanding. Simplified narratives—about choice, morality, or individual responsibility—can make it easier to judge than to listen, and easier to distance ourselves than to respond wisely.

This resource was created because the realities of commercial sexual exploitation are far more complex than they are often presented. Women enter prostitution through many different pathways, and those pathways are shaped by vulnerability, coercion, survival, and systems that limit options long before sex is ever exchanged.

# Introduction

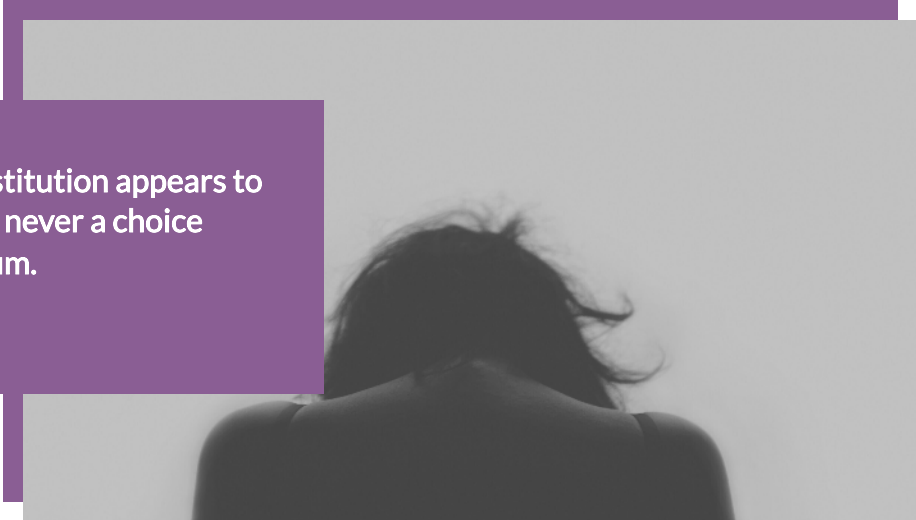
Globally, an estimated **6.3 million people are involved in forced sexual exploitation**, with women and girls representing the vast majority of those exploited for commercial sex.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most damaging myths surrounding prostitution is the belief that there is a *type* of woman who ends up there.

There isn't.

Women in prostitution come from every socioeconomic background. They live in cities and suburbs. Some hold degrees. Some are raising children alone. Some are fleeing violence. Some are navigating addiction. They are different women on different pathways, but with one shared reality.

Even when prostitution appears to be a choice, it is never a choice made in a vacuum.

A woman with long dark hair is seen from behind, looking out a window. The image is in grayscale and has a soft, ethereal quality. A purple rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing white text.

Even when prostitution appears to be a choice, it is never a choice made in a vacuum.

# Why I Wrote This

This guide is not written from a distance.

My understanding of prostitution and commercial sexual exploitation is shaped by lived experience across multiple entry points, environments, and seasons of survival. I have been in systems where choice appeared to be present on the surface but was constrained by financial pressure, coercive relationships, and the absence of viable alternatives.

I have navigated prostitution as a single mother, experienced exploitation that looked consensual from the outside, and encountered harm in spaces often misunderstood as empowered or independent. I have also spent a decade working alongside women whose stories differ from mine, but whose realities reflect the same underlying patterns.

In addition to lived experience, this perspective has been shaped on the front lines—through years of direct outreach, advocacy, and education with women in strip clubs, brothels, street-based exploitation, and online spaces. Walking alongside women in real time has revealed how exploitation adapts, how vulnerability shifts across seasons of life, and why simplified narratives consistently fail to account for lived reality.

This guide was not written to center my story, but to contextualize it. Lived experience and front-line engagement offer a vantage point that statistics alone cannot. What follows is both educational and experiential—rooted in patterns observed across many lives, not just one. The goal is not to speak *for* women in prostitution, but to help communities understand the systems that shape their experiences so responses can be grounded in dignity rather than assumption.

With love,

Kelsey Decker





# The Many Pathways Into Prostitution

## Escorting & High-End Prostitution

Often portrayed as the most empowered form, high-end prostitution is frequently misunderstood.

Women in these spaces may appear financially stable, educated, and independent. Many work in upscale environments and are assumed to be in control. What is less visible are the psychological dynamics beneath the surface—grooming by partners or agencies, pressure to meet quotas, emotional manipulation, and dissociation used to survive repeated boundary violations.

Women here may:

- Have college degrees
- Appear financially stable
- Operate independently
- Work in upscale environments

What's often hidden:

- Grooming through boyfriends, agencies, or managers
- Quotas, psychological coercion, and emotional control
- Dissociation is used as a survival strategy
- Trauma that surfaces long after exit

High-end does not mean harm-free.

It often means **better camouflage**.

# Sugar Dating / Sugar Babies

Sugar dating is commonly framed as a mutually beneficial arrangement—one person has resources, the other offers companionship or intimacy. In reality, many women enter sugar dating during periods of vulnerability.

A 2021 survey reported that **30–40% of “sugar baby” participants cited financial necessity as their top reason** for participation, including housing costs and education expenses.<sup>2</sup>

Sugar dating often exists in the gray space where consent and coercion overlap, and where violence quickly escalates. Many women in these spaces are:

- College students
- Single mothers
- Women facing a sudden financial crisis
- Young women socialized to monetize desirability

I entered sugar dating as a single mother in survival mode, looking for a bit of excitement. Unlike the common image of college-aged “sugar babies,” I was navigating adult responsibilities, financial pressure, and limited options.

Like many women, I did not enter this space believing I was stepping into prostitution. I thought I was entering into relationships—ones that included financial support, companionship, and mutual care. That distinction matters because it shapes consent, expectation, and emotional investment.

Over time, it became clear that what was being offered was not a relationship, but access. Emotional availability was expected, sexual compliance was assumed, and financial support was conditional. The language of dating masked a transactional reality, and by the time that reality was fully visible, the cost of walking away felt high.

This is a common pattern in sugar-dating dynamics. What begins as relational is often revealed to be transactional. The shift is rarely explicit, and the realization often comes only after boundaries have already been crossed. Many women describe this moment not as a choice freely made, but as the recognition that what they hoped was a relationship had become prostitution in all but name.

# OnlyFans & Subscription Platforms

By 2021, platforms like OnlyFans reported 187.9 million registered users, with adult content creators making up a significant portion of the creator base—highlighting how digital economies shape sexual commerce.<sup>3</sup>

Online sexual content is often framed as empowerment because it removes physical proximity. Many women are told this is safer, more autonomous, and entirely under their control.

Women in these spaces are often young adults facing student debt, single mothers needing flexible income, or survivors seeking what feels like a less dangerous alternative. Some are recruited directly from strip clubs or escorting pipelines.

What is rarely discussed is the erosion that occurs over time: pressure to escalate content, algorithm-driven income instability, harassment, stalking, loss of control over digital material, and the emotional labor of constant sexual performance.

The absence of a physical third party does not remove coercion—it relocates it.

Women in this space may be:

- Young adults facing student debt or rising costs of living
- Single mothers needing flexible income
- Survivors seeking a “safer” alternative to in-person exploitation
- Women recruited from strip clubs or escort pipelines
- Influenced by social media narratives that normalize monetizing intimacy

What’s frequently unseen:

- Pressure to constantly escalate content to remain profitable
- Boundary erosion over time
- Algorithm-driven income instability
- Digital permanence and loss of control over content
- High rates of harassment, stalking, and doxxing
- Emotional labor that mirrors in-person exploitation

**Consent does not equal safety. Visibility does not equal protection.**

# Webcam & Live-Stream Performers

Similar to subscription platforms, but with added risk:

- Real-time coercion from viewers
- Pressure to perform degrading acts live
- Increased likelihood of recordings being redistributed without consent

Many women report intense psychological harm despite the online format.



# Pornography & Adult Film Performers

Pornography is frequently excluded from conversations about prostitution under the language of “acting” or “consent.”

Many women enter pornography very young, often during moments of financial or emotional vulnerability. What begins as one agreement often becomes a series of escalating expectations—acts they did not initially consent to, physical harm without adequate aftercare, and contracts that make exit nearly impossible due to digital permanence.

Women in pornography may be:

- Recruited at very young ages (often 18–22)
- Approached during moments of financial vulnerability
- Survivors of prior sexual abuse or exploitation
- Promised fame, flexibility, or quick income
- Told they are empowered because they “agreed” to participate

What’s frequently unseen:

- Pressure to perform acts they did not initially consent to
- Coercive contract structures and financial manipulation
- Escalation requirements to remain marketable
- Physical harm and lack of medical aftercare
- Racialized and fetishized content that reinforces harm
- Digital permanence that makes an actual exit nearly impossible

**Consent at the point of entry does not eliminate exploitation over time.**

Many women report that pornography was not a one-time decision, but a **slow erosion of boundaries**, where saying no eventually meant losing income, reputation, or safety.

When sexual access becomes a commodity distributed at scale, the line between pornography and prostitution is one of format—not function.

# Fetish & Niche Sexual Markets

Fetish-based markets are often misunderstood as harmless self-expression or niche entertainment. In reality, they frequently involve extreme objectification and power imbalance.

What looks like consent from the outside often conceals profound psychological and physical harm.

Fetish and niche markets are often framed as spaces of empowerment, exploration, or personal agency. That framing overlooks a critical reality: participation is rarely about desire alone—it is about performance.

What is often missed in conversations about fetish markets is the psychological cost. When a woman is valued primarily for fulfilling a specific fantasy, dissociation frequently becomes a survival response. The harm is not always visible or immediate, but it accumulates—especially when a person's identity is reduced to a function rather than recognized as a whole human being.

Women in these spaces may be:

- Recruited for specific physical traits or vulnerabilities
- Drawn in by promises of quick money
- Pressured to perform increasingly degrading roles
- Treated as an object rather than a person

**Fetishization does not just commodify the body. It fractures identity.**

In my own experience, entry into fetishized spaces required compliance with a role. Identity was not something I brought into the space; it was something assigned. Over time, worth became tied to how well I could embody that expectation, maintain the fantasy, and suppress discomfort.

Consent existed in theory, but it was shaped by pressure. Refusal carried consequences—loss of community, loss of access, loss of safety. Boundaries were not shattered all at once; they were slowly **worn down through normalization, repetition, and the unspoken demand** to remain desirable and available.

# Strip Clubs

Strip clubs are commonly dismissed as entertainment, yet they function as frequent entry points into deeper exploitation. For many, this is not an endpoint — it is a doorway.

Women may enter to pay for school, support families, or escape abusive homes. The environment normalizes sexual commodification while introducing pressures that blur boundaries.

As boundaries erode and external pressure increases, women are often introduced to in-club or off-club buyers, transactional relationships, or commercial sexual access that extends beyond the club environment.

Women here may be:

- Paying their way through school
- Supporting children or extended family
- Escaping abusive homes
- Drawn by the promise of fast money

**Strip clubs are often entry points, not endpoints, creating pipelines into other forms of exploitation.**

## *Different Strip Club Environments*

Many people assume strip clubs resemble what they've seen in movies or tourist destinations—large, polished venues in cities like Las Vegas. While those environments exist, they represent only a portion of the industry.

In reality, strip clubs operate across a wide range of contexts, including small towns and mid-sized cities. These environments often look nothing like the high-end image people expect, and fewer resources, less oversight, and greater financial instability shape the vulnerabilities present.

Outreach experience consistently shows that effective engagement must adapt to the environment. The risks, pressures, and trust barriers in one type of club may look very different from those in another. Recognizing this variation is not about ranking harm, but about understanding that exploitation adapts to context—and outreach must do the same.

# Survival Sex

Survival sex involves exchanging sex for basic needs:

- Food
- Shelter
- Transportation
- Protection
- A place to sleep

This includes:

- Youth experiencing homelessness
- Women fleeing domestic violence
- LGBTQ+ individuals rejected by families
- People recently released from incarceration

Studies of youth homelessness show that **up to 50% of youth experiencing homelessness engage in survival sex** in order to meet basic needs.<sup>4</sup>

In outreach settings, survival sex is most often disclosed not as a decision freely made, but as a last-resort response.

Survival sex is not about desire. It's about **staying alive**.




# Trading Sex for Drugs

One of the most criminalized populations, women trading sex for drugs are often:

- Managing untreated trauma
- Have a history of childhood abuse
- Battling addiction that predates prostitution

Criminalization deepens vulnerability rather than addressing harm.

**Addiction does not negate exploitation. It often deepens it.**



Addiction does not negate  
exploitation. It often deepens  
it.

# Massage Parlors & Illicit Spas

Often racialized and misunderstood, many women in these spaces are immigrants or undocumented, facing language barriers, isolation, and control through debt, housing, or threats.

Their invisibility does not mean safety.

These spaces rely on:

- Isolation
- Debt
- Fear

Outreach experience inside illicit massage parlors consistently reveals environments shaped by isolation, surveillance, and restricted autonomy. Many women encountered in these settings report limited freedom of movement, language barriers, and forms of coercion that are not immediately visible to outsiders.

## Brothels

Brothels are fixed locations where sexual access is sold to multiple buyers, often under highly structured and controlled conditions. While commonly associated with legalized prostitution in certain regions, brothels also operate illegally and covertly in many communities.

Unlike illicit massage parlors, which often rely on isolation and language barriers, brothels may involve more overt scheduling, quotas, and monitoring. Control is frequently maintained through financial pressure, housing dependency, or rules that limit autonomy rather than physical restraint.

Because brothels are often hidden in plain sight—operating within residential spaces or under rotating appointment systems—they are frequently misunderstood or overlooked. Women in these environments may appear to consent while experiencing a limited ability to leave without a high personal cost.

Outreach and field observations consistently show brothels operating through structured control rather than overt force, making exploitation less visible but no less real.

## Trafficking (Adults)

The most recognized—and most misunderstood—category.

Under U.S. federal law, human trafficking is defined by “**force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of exploitation**,” a standard language used in policy and grant funding.<sup>5</sup>

Trafficking involves:

- Force
- Fraud
- Coercion

But coercion doesn’t always look violent.  
Sometimes it looks like:

- A boyfriend
- A place to stay
- Protection
- Love
- Belonging

Many trafficked women encountered through outreach do not initially identify as victims. Psychological coercion, dependency, and normalization often obscure recognition of exploitation long after control has been established.

# Child Sex Trafficking

Child sex trafficking is often misunderstood as rare, extreme, or separate from other forms of exploitation. In reality, it is one of the **most common and least recognized** forms of trafficking—and it frequently occurs in plain sight.

**Any minor involved in commercial sex is trafficked.**

There is no such thing as a child choosing prostitution.

Children are trafficked through:

- Family members or caregivers
- Romantic partners or “boyfriends”
- Online grooming and social media
- Runaway and homeless pathways
- Informal networks that trade access for money, drugs, or housing

Force is not always physical.

More often, children are controlled through:

- Manipulation
- Threats
- Emotional dependency
- Isolation
- Basic needs being withheld or promised

Many children who are trafficked do not identify as victims at the time. They may believe they are helping their family, maintaining a relationship, or doing what is required to survive.

This misunderstanding often leads to mislabeling trafficked children as:

- “Delinquent”
- “Promiscuous”
- “Runaways”
- “High-risk youth”

**These labels obscure exploitation and delay protection.**

## *A Connection Between Child Exploitation & Adult Prostitution*

While not every adult in prostitution was trafficked as a child, **early sexual exploitation dramatically increases vulnerability** to later coercive systems.

Children who experience trafficking often grow up with:

- Normalized boundary violations
- Disrupted attachment and trust
- Trauma that shapes survival strategies
- Limited access to education or stable support

When these children age out of systems without adequate care, many encounter adult exploitation not as a sudden fall—but as a continuation of what was already familiar.

This is not a failure of resilience.  
It is the outcome of unmet protection.

## *Why This Matters for Communities and Volunteers*

Understanding child sex trafficking changes how communities respond.

It calls for:

- Early intervention rather than punishment
- Protection instead of prosecution
- Trauma-informed care rather than behavioral control
- Long-term support, not short-term rescue narratives

Communities that understand child trafficking are better equipped to:

- Recognize warning signs
- Respond appropriately
- Support survivors across the lifespan

Prevention is not only about stopping harm—it is about **creating environments where exploitation cannot take root.**

## *A Clarifying Truth*

Children do not consent.

Children are not criminals.

Children are not commodities.

They are entitled to safety, protection, and care.

Many of the women that communities encounter in adult exploitation were once children who were not protected when it mattered most.

## Survival After Incarceration

Women exiting incarceration face housing and employment barriers that increase vulnerability to exploitation. It's a critical pipeline.

Women leaving jail or prison often face:

- Employment discrimination
- Housing instability
- Parole restrictions
- Lack of identification or resources

Prostitution becomes one of the few immediate options for survival.

# The Single Mother in the Suburbs

One of the most overlooked demographics is the single mother living outside public stereotypes of exploitation. This demographic is often overlooked precisely because it doesn't match public assumptions—*it's functioning*.

She may be:

- Recently divorced
- Escaping domestic violence
- Without childcare or family support
- One emergency away from collapse

What people assume:

- Exploitation looks chaotic
- It happens “over there”
- It involves obvious crisis
- It would be noticeable

What actually happens:

- Survival is quiet
- Appearances are maintained
- Routines stay intact
- Harm happens privately
- Women are highly motivated to stay invisible

In my own experience, it looked like a single mother living in a suburban neighborhood—getting the child to school, paying bills, maintaining routines, and doing everything possible to keep life steady. From the outside, there were no obvious signs of instability. Inside, the pressure was constant.

Survival required careful calculation. Decisions were made quietly, often alone, with the goal of protecting the child and preserving some sense of normalcy. There was no room for public unraveling. Vulnerability had to remain hidden.

This is why exploitation in these contexts is so often missed. When harm occurs behind closed doors and without visible chaos, it is easy to overlook. But the absence of disruption does not mean the absence of cost. It simply means the burden is being carried privately.

Prostitution did not enter my life because I lacked values or ambition. It entered because I lacked options and held unresolved complex trauma.

### *The Shared Reality*

**No woman grows up dreaming of selling access to her body to survive.**

Different pathways.

Different environments.

Different survival strategies.

But the same truth remains:

Prostitution is not a moral failure.

It is a systems failure.

Understanding the differences is not about categorizing women—it is about responding with dignity, nuance, and care.

Understanding this reality  
reshapes how communities  
respond—and why nuance,  
patience, and humility are  
necessary when engaging women  
whose lives do not look the way  
we expect.





# In Closing

It is easy to talk about prostitution in broad terms. It is much harder to understand it in practice.

What this guide illustrates is not a single pathway, but a pattern: women enter prostitution and commercial sexual exploitation through vastly different contexts, yet are shaped by many of the same constraints. Some experiences are visible and easily labeled. Others are quiet, relational, or hidden behind stability and routine.

## **All of them are real.**

This understanding matters because communities often respond based on assumptions rather than reality. And when exploitation is imagined as dramatic or extreme, women whose experiences fall outside those expectations are overlooked, misunderstood, or judged. When “choice” is treated as a sufficient explanation, the systems that narrow options remain unexamined.

It also matters because no single organization, outreach model, or approach reaches every woman. Different anti-exploitation organizations and ministries are designed to engage different environments, needs, and stages of readiness. Some focus on prevention, others on crisis response, long-term recovery, advocacy, or systems change. **Each model plays a role—and none is sufficient on its own.**

Ending exploitation requires cooperation rather than competition. It requires organizations, volunteers, and communities to recognize the value of approaches different from their own and to work together with humility and mutual respect. Unity does not mean uniformity; it means understanding how diverse efforts can complement one another in responding to complex realities.

Understanding the many pathways into prostitution does not provide simple answers. It gives something more useful: **clarity**. And with clarity comes the ability to respond with wisdom rather than assumption, and with care rather than control.

# References

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2. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Global Report on Trafficking in Persons. Provides international data on trafficking patterns, victim demographics, and forms of exploitation, including child sexual exploitation.
3. U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Human Trafficking Quick Facts. Defines human trafficking under U.S. law, including clarification that any commercial sex act involving a minor constitutes trafficking.
4. National Network for Youth (NN4Y). Runaway and Homeless Youth & Trafficking Risk. Summarizes research on survival sex and trafficking vulnerability among homeless and street-connected youth.
5. Public reporting and platform data on subscription-based adult content platforms. Used to contextualize the scale and growth of online sexual commerce.

Statistics are included sparingly to provide context, not to define individual experiences. Lived realities vary, but research consistently demonstrates that commercial sexual exploitation is shaped by systemic vulnerability rather than isolated choice.

# About the Author

**Kelsey Decker** is the Founder and Executive Director of **Morning Glory Global**, an outreach organization providing direct services and dignity-centered care to women in the sex trade and survivors of commercial sexual exploitation.

Drawing from decades of cumulative lived experience—including time spent in coercive environments and multiple forms of sexual exploitation—Kelsey brings a rare longitudinal perspective to conversations about vulnerability, consent, and survival. Her work bridges lived experience with field-based insight to help communities understand the realities women face without reducing them to stereotypes or simplified narratives.

Kelsey leads trainings, workshops, and outreach efforts focused on trauma-informed care, coercive control, and survivor-centered support. She regularly equips volunteers, faith communities, and organizations with practical frameworks to respond with wisdom, patience, and dignity.

# Call to Action

If this resource was helpful, you can learn more about Morning Glory Global's work—or support ongoing education and outreach—at [www.morninggloryglobal.com](http://www.morninggloryglobal.com).

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