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Honors Reading Seminar

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Lovely Little Girls

Rachel Lloyd’s *Girls Like Us* is a memoir concerning the problem of sex trafficking. As she recounts her own story and the stories of girls that she has worked with in the sex industry over the years, she brings to light how relevant and dire the situation truly is. Hundreds of thousands of girls are constantly being bought for sex across the country. Law enforcement gives little help to these girls because, although they are underage children, they are not seen as victims. They are seen as low-life criminals. After reading this book, I feel like my eyes have been opened. I did not realize how serious the problems of sexual exploitation of children and victim-blaming have become. The multiple flaws in the criminal justice system work against the girls in need instead of for them like it should. Furthermore, our frequently intolerant culture has no sympathy for them because of their ethnicity, social class, gender, and a variety of other factors.

When I looked in a thesaurus for synonyms for the word “abuse,” one of the results was “prostitution” (Abuse, n.d.). Needless to say, I was appalled. People don’t understand what kind of horrific things sexually exploited girls and women in prostitution go through. To call it abuse is a major understatement. Rachel Lloyd told stories of girls who ended up in the hospital with stitches and staples in their heads, broken jaws, or broken noses, because of how brutally they were assaulted by their “boyfriends” (113). People do not recognize the sociopathic, controlling, abusive side of pimps. Most find it easier to sympathize with pimps (the perpetrators) than the prostitutes (the victims) because pimps are seen as businessmen. Our culture praises men for having multiple women and being sexually dominant. However, the moment a woman starts to show a little skin and embrace her sexuality, the woman is looked down on and considered obscene. These mindsets predispose girls in “the life” for failure.

Consequently, much of the prejudice against these girls stems from our culture’s general lack of respect for different ethnicities, genders, or social classes. Girls that fall into human trafficking tend to come from poor families where abuse, neglect, and emotional manipulation are not uncommon. These types of girls are exposed to unhealthy relationships with the paternal figures in their lives. When they meet their pimps and get punched in the head for “misbehaving,” they think that it is normal (200). The higher-income population does not realize what kind of privileges they have. I myself, for example, take numerous aspects of my life for granted. I have two parents that love each other and love me. Many of the girls growing up in “the life” do not even have one. I never knew what it meant to go hungry. Children are forced to sell their bodies to make a controlling and frequently drug-addled “adult figure” consider providing for them.

Additionally, nearly all of the girls that Rachel Lloyd met while working with minors in the sex trafficking industry were girls of color from families who were low on the socioeconomic ladder. Problems in these areas can be traced back to the era of slavery, a time when people of color were maltreated and discriminated against. Over the years, equality and acceptance among the races has become more of a norm. There are no more segregated facilities, and everyone can vote. Nevertheless, it is disheartening to think that race and class still have such a major impact on the victim-blaming of these girls.

In light of reading this book, I decided to do a little more extensive research on the issue of underage sexual exploitation. I discovered some interesting information: despite the fact that federal law classifies children under the age of 18 as “victims,” children who have been sexually trafficked are still treated as criminals (Gummow, 2013). In her article about child sex trafficking, Judie Gummow quotes attorney Kate Mogulescu saying, “Our criminal justice system is deeply flawed…It has always been the state versus the trafficking victim,” (Gummow, 2013). Lloyd’s book outlined a few of the many flaws in America’s justice system. Originally intended to fight for and defend the victims, the justice system has become a nemesis for some of the people that need protecting the most.

Lloyd talked about what happened when the girls went to the police when they had been raped or abused. Several times, the police arrested the girls for prostitution instead of going after the pimps controlling and abusing them. Girls were locked up for the sexual exploitation that was “their fault” whilst the pimps and johns responsible for the rape and countless wrongdoings walked free. In the section of her book where she reflects on her interactions with the police, Lloyd writes, “[Keisha] doesn’t understand why she is the one in jail while her pimp is out, doesn’t understand why she, who’s been beaten and forced to make money for him, is being treated as the criminal,” (137). Moreover, when the girls finished their sentences in whatever jail or correctional facility they were shipped off to, they went right back to the streets. Everyone was stuck with the “once a criminal, always a criminal” mentality. This mindset contributed to the lack of rehabilitation for the girls. The girls simply served their time and left. Without any kind of therapy, the girls did not learn anything from being incarcerated other than to stay away from the police.

On the off chance that a girl was given the chance to testify against her pimp, she rarely won her case. No one had any sympathy for these 12, 13, 14-year-old children; the criminal justice system did not see or treat them as children. They were seen as dirty or loose or bad (129). Their voices were not legitimized because of who they were, where they came from, and what “heinous crime” they had knowingly committed. It took years of fighting an unforgiving system for Rachel Lloyd and the people in her Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS) to see any kind of legitimate protective effort from the government start to form. They fought ceaselessly for the language of the bill they were trying to pass to start painting the girls as victims instead of as criminals.

All things considered, it is clear that the problem of underage sexual exploitation is a much bigger issue than people initially conceive. Children are being manipulated and abused in appalling ways. Yet, no one helps them because they are judged and seen as dirty prostitutes. These girls, these human beings are victims and should be treated as such. Today’s children shape the future and getting stuck in “the life” with no hope of help or rescue keeps them from living up to their full potential. A girl is not going to believe she can amount to anything if she is controlled by a pimp, looked down on and shamed by society, and shut down by a system that is supposed to protect her. A flawed justice system and racial and cultural biases do not a healthy, youth-fostering society make.

Works Cited

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