

Abortion and Child Sexual Exploitation: Abortion as a Tool of Traffickers and Abusers

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Sexual Exploitation of children is one of the most despised crimes in America gaining attention from both the right and left wings of the political spectrum and gaining traction in recent years. Overall, there seems to be an uptick in both public and political interest in putting an end to sexual abuse, particularly when it comes to children spurred on by the recent exposure of abusers like Harvey Weinstein, a well-known figure in Hollywood, and Jeffery Epstein, a businessman who was caught heading a child sex trafficking ring. In all these examples public outrage was aimed not only at the abusers themselves, but also at those who knew and did nothing. The public was not only outraged that someone could do such a thing, but that others could know and not only do nothing, but in some cases aid the perpetrators in their abuse. However, while there has been a growing call from the public to expose these perpetrators and enablers wherever they lie, there has been little attention given to perhaps one of the largest enablers of sexual abuse. This enabler is no one person, but an industry whose practice helps conceal evidence of crimes, keep victims complicit, and prolong a victim's entrapment in a cycle of abuse. There is significant evidence for the connection between this industry and sexual abuse, and yet many of those who strongly call for the end of sexual exploitation through movements like MeToo and Times Up are also some its strongest supporters. I am, of course, referring to the abortion industry. This article sets aside the political argument surrounding the morality of abortion and aims instead to comment on the connection between abortion and sexual exploitation, particularly in relation to children, who's very involvement in sexual acts is deemed exploitation. This article compiles existing research and expert commentary on the matter to make a determination on the nature of the abortion industry's involvement and judge whether they are ultimately doing more harm or good.

To truly grasp the extent to which abortion is entangled in the world of child sex abuse, there must first be an understanding of the characteristics of abusers and how they control their victim. According to work by Winters and Jeglic, over half of abusers of this kind use a process commonly known as grooming to "strategically manipulate the victim, their family, and the community to hide their deviant intentions and avoid detection."¹ Grooming occurs in multiple stages, consisting of selecting a victim that is already vulnerable and gaining access to that victim and then developing trust with the child and their family, followed by desensitizing the child to touch.² The part of this process that most pertains to the topic at hand is the gaining of trust. During this stage, the abuser establishes themselves as a trusted figure in the child's life. They will not only gain the child's trust by showing them attention through playing games and befriending them, but in some cases, they even establish trust with the family so the child to feels safer around them.³ This grooming process occurs before the abuse even starts, meaning that by the time the abuse starts, the abuser already has the child at least somewhat under his control.

Unfortunately, the conditioning process does not stop when the abuse starts. Rather, it continues to intensify throughout the entire period of abuse. Joan Reid's work in her paper "Entrapment and Enmeshment Schemes Used by Sex Traffickers" helps explain how abusers keep their victims under their influence as the abuse continues. She discusses a phenomenon called trauma bonding characterized by a power imbalance in which the victim is made to feel

¹ Georgia M. Winters and Elizabeth L. Jeglic, "Stages of Sexual Grooming: Recognizing Potentially Predatory Behaviors of Child Molesters," *Deviant Behavior* 38, no. 6 (2017): 724.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 726.

small and helpless as well as abuse alternating with positive or neutral interactions.⁴ She also specifies that these tactics are particularly effective with children who because of their young age and lack of maturity are especially susceptible to exploitation and manipulation and that these tactics are similar among both traffickers and other child sexual abusers.⁵ The information presented in these two studies paints a picture of the mental state of the child victim and helps contribute to an understanding of how abortion evolves from and contributes to this state. A child that has been groomed and conditioned to default to their abuser is far more likely to follow the word of their abuser when pushed to have an abortion or default to abortion in fear of that abuser. In this way, abortion is a product of the abuse, however, what is much more concerning is how abortion contributes to the abuse.

It is important to recognize that abortion is not simply a product of abuse, but is an important tool, along with pregnancy itself, for abusers to keep their victims under their control and avoid detection. In Reid's study, multiple child sex trafficking survivors were interviewed and several instances of traffickers taking advantage of pregnancy or children to control the girls were described. Some of the tactics described included leveraging a victim's child to make her more compliant, such as setting quotas for seeing her child, threatening to sell the child or give it up for adoption, or beatings that risk the life of their unborn child.⁶ In the testimony given by the survivors, even just the threat of abortion was a significant tactic of abusers for keeping girls in line.⁷ Furthermore, it has been noted in another study that pregnancy can further Stockholm syndrome by intensifying the victim's emotional bond to their abuser, which is the ultimate goal of the trauma their abuser inflicts upon them.⁸ Yet another paper examining the correlation between abortion and violence against women comments that victims of sex trafficking are at an increased health risk because of the multiple abortions that they are subjected to, which sometimes occurs late in pregnancy due to pregnancy fetishes that are in high demand.⁹ After these abortions, they are often forced to return to sex work days after with the cost added to their debt to their abuser.¹⁰

One study conducted by Laura Lederer and Christopher Wetzel found a significant correlation between abortion and sex trafficking with 55.2% of responding survivors having at least one reported abortion and 29.9% reporting multiple.¹¹ Taking this information as well as previous studies into account, Lederer and Wetzel remark that "The prevalence of forced abortions is an especially disturbing trend in sex trafficking."¹² In their examination of health care settings visited by victims, it was found that over a quarter (29.6%) of them visited well known abortion provider Planned Parenthood.¹³ One victim who identified Planned Parenthood

⁴ Joan A. Reid, "Entrapment and Enmeshment Schemes Used by Sex Traffickers," *Sexual Abuse* 28, no. 6 (2016): 505.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 492 and 504.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 503

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Julia M. Geynisman-Tan et al., "All the Darkness We Don't See," *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 216, no. 2 (2017): 136.

⁹ Catherine T. Coyle et al., "The Relationship of Abortion and Violence Against Women: Violence Prevention Strategies and Research Needs," *Issues in Law & Medicine* 30, no. 2 (2015): 115.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Laura J. Lederer and Christopher A. Wetzel, "The Health Consequences of Sex Trafficking and Their Implications for Identifying Victims in Healthcare Facilities," *Annals of Health Law* 23, no. 1 (2014): 73.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 77.

as the cite of at least one of her six abortions remarked that it was “because they didn’t ask questions.”¹⁴ The study concluded that “clinics and other abortion providers should be especially attentive to warning signs particularly with regard to younger patients” especially considering that 52.9% of responding survivors indicated at least partial, if not total, coercion in regards to at least one of their abortions.¹⁵

The research conducted by Lederer and Wetzel was groundbreaking in sex trafficking research spurring continuing research on the exact signs health professionals should be aware of. One study notes multiple pregnancies or abortions and a poor obstetric history as well as a number of physical and behavioral signs as well as signs in the patient’s history as being potential signs of trafficking or sexual abuse.¹⁶ Another study specifically focused on child sexual abuse noted that “many unwanted pregnancies, forced abortions, [and] adverse effects from poor or repeated abortions” were all signs professionals should be aware of. While extensive research has shown the connection between abortion and child sexual exploitation as well as the signs healthcare professionals, especially abortion providers, should be aware of, whether they are following this advice is a different story. In order to answer that question, a look must be taken at the behavior of these organizations to determine whether or not they are complying with legal reporting standards and taking seriously their unique position to aid victims of sexual abuse.

Unfortunately, from what can be gathered from investigative reporting, these clinics are not only neglecting their positions, but are enabling or aiding in the abuse. Live Action, one of the country’s largest pro-life organizations, details shocking undercover investigations inside well-known abortion provider Planned Parenthood as well as interviews with former employees and those who have come in close contact with the organization. Altogether, the many series and investigations reveal an unsettling trend of the organization ushering young girls through exploitation in multiple stages. The offenses begin with an examination of Planned Parenthood’s federally funded sex education program. Undercover investigators posing as girls as young as 15 secretly recorded conversations in multiple Planned Parenthood clinics across the country, initiating the conversation by saying her and her boyfriend were looking to experiment sexually and he had mentioned the book *50 Shades of Grey*, which depicts a BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance, and submission, sadochism and masochism) relationship.¹⁷ In every location, the Planned Parenthood employee proceeds to explain BDSM in depth, give the girl they believe to be 15 years old coaching on how to implement aspects of BDSM into her sexual relationship, coach her how to get sex toys, and recommend she read the book *50 Shades of Grey* and watch porn as educational resources.¹⁸ At each of the clinics employees told the girl that any kind of sexual activity was perfectly acceptable as long as she consented, never asking any questions about how old her boyfriend is, details about their relationship, or giving any advice on how to avoid pregnancy.¹⁹ Drawing from the previously discussed works by Winters and Jeglic, the advice given by Planned Parenthood employees plays right in to the grooming processes of sexual abusers, particularly in relation to the desensitizing of touch and abuse in which an

¹⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹⁵ Ibid., 82.

¹⁶ Geynisman-Tan et al., “Darkness”, 137.

¹⁷ “SexEd: Planned Parenthood’s Dangerous Sex Advice for Kids,” Investigations, Live Action, last modified 2022, <https://www.plannedparenthoodexposed.com/sexed/>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

offender conditions a victim to think the kind of touch they are receiving is normal and acceptable.²⁰

The investigations only continue to worsen the picture of Planned Parenthood's attitude toward child sexual abuse. Another Live Action undercover investigation depicts undercover investigators posing as girls between the ages of 13 and 15 entering Planned Parenthood locations in Indiana, Arizona, Tennessee, Alabama, Wisconsin, and an abortion clinic in Louisville, Kentucky seeking an abortion to hide her relationship with an older man (between the ages of 27 and 31 depending on location) from her parents.²¹ In every undercover operation, the employees reassured the girl that they would not report her or tell her parents, coached her on how to obtain a judicial bypass to obtain an abortion, offered advice on which procedure would be best concealed from her parents, and in some cases coached her to lie to a judge or travel to a surrounding state without parental consent laws.²² In yet another investigation, the evidence continues to mount, this time exposing Planned Parenthood employees agreeing to aid a sex trafficking ring involving children as young as 14 and 15 years old, advising the undercover investigator posing as a pimp where to bring the girls for abortions, how to coach the girls to avoid detection, asks for as little information as possible to avoid mandatory reporting laws, and sometimes even giving advice about how girls can work while recovering from an abortion.²³

Following these undercover operations, Live Action compiled a documentary style video covering the public reactions as well as Planned Parenthood's response. As expected, there was an immediate public and political outrage and even state level criminal investigations following the reporting with Planned Parenthood issuing a statement claiming that all the events were reported by staff after investigators left; however, the statement failed to identify all states in which undercover operations took place and Live Action Freedom of Information Act requests only revealed documentation of a report in one state.²⁴ Planned Parenthood also publicly touted retraining of staff to report suspected child sexual abuse, but testimony from a former Planned Parenthood clinic manager reveals that this training consisted of nothing more than training staff how to recognize when they are being recorded, not instruction on reporting.²⁵ Live Action later produced a full documentary style video series detailing how Planned Parenthood aids abusers. The series detailed documented court cases where Planned Parenthood failed to report suspicious activity resulting in the continuation of abuse, such as the case of George Savannah, Timothy David Smith, and Edgar Ramierez who all continued to rape their daughters for years after the organization failed to report their abortions, John Haller who continued to avoid detection for his abuse of a 13 year old he coached, and even a case where a counselor intentionally miscoded a rape as a consensual encounter to avoid the hassle of reporting.²⁶ The series also included

²⁰ Winters & Jelgic, "Stages of Sexual Grooming", 726-727.

²¹ "Sexual Abuse Cover Up," Videos, Live Action, last modified 2022, <https://www.liveaction.org/what-we-do/investigations/sexual-abuse-cover-up/>.

²² Ibid.

²³ "Child Sex Trafficking Cover Up," Videos, Live Action, last modified 2022, <https://www.liveaction.org/what-we-do/investigations/child-sex-trafficking-cover-up/>.

²⁴ Live Action, "Planned Parenthood Lies about Training Staff to Report Sex Traffickers" (documentary), January 17, 2017, 5:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phocsMQsFC4>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Exposed: Planned Parenthood's Cover-Up of Child Sex Abuse," Videos, Live Action, last modified 2022, <https://www.liveaction.org/what-we-do/investigations/aidingabusers/>.

interviews with former employees who all spoke of how reporting was discouraged by management and corporate who shared a sentiment that they could not stop the abuse even if they reported it, but that they were better off just giving the girl an abortion.²⁷

One would certainly hope that an organization like Planned Parenthood would care just as much as the public about exposing and expelling corruption within their organization, but testimony from prosecutor Brian Hurley paints a different picture. Hurley brought charges against Planned Parenthood in two different cases on behalf of girls who received abortions at Planned Parenthood, who failed to report the abuse, resulting in years of continued abuse.²⁸ Hurley testified that the organization hired the best lawyers in the country and fought every aspect of the cases the entire way through, viewing the charges as a direct attack on the right to abortion.²⁹

While these examples of abortion providers passing up their unique opportunities to save child victims from sexual abuse are horrific, what is even more concerning is that the abortion industry is moving in a direction that will eliminate the opportunity all together with the onset of mail order abortion pills. On December 16, 2021, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that it was permanently removing the in person dispensement requirement for Mifeprex, a two-step pill regiment that induces an abortion at home.³⁰ This made permanent a temporary suspension of the requirement during the COVID-19 pandemic.³¹ Patients can now legally obtain the medication through mail after a tele-health consultation up to 70 days into pregnancy.³² The decision has been heavily criticized given the health risks, like excessive bleeding, associated with the medication as well as the 24 deaths known of tied to the medication.³³ While the decision only makes the dispensement of the drug legal up to 70 days after a tele-health appointment with a health professional, there are already numerous online resources stretching these rules, such as Planned Parenthood, who advertises on their website that they provide the pills up to 77 days.³⁴ This is extremely concerning given the extraordinary growth that occurs in this stage of pregnancy and how quickly medical circumstances change. According to the Cleveland Clinic, there is rapid developmental growth in this period, and by the end of this month the fetus has all of its organs and physical features.³⁵ There are also websites such as Plan C Pills, which is funded by the National Women's Health Network, a 501(c)3, that guide women to online pharmacies like the infamous AidAccess that ship women abortion pills

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Food and Drug Administration (FDA), "Questions and Answers on Mifeprex," Postmarket Drug Safety Information for Patients and Providers, last modified December 16, 2021.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Melanie Israel, "Chemical Abortion: A Review," *The Heritage Foundation*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/life/report/chemical-abortion-review>.

³⁴ Planned Parenthood, "When Can I Take the Abortion Pill?," *The Abortion Pill*, last modified 2022, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/abortion/the-abortion-pill>.

³⁵ Cleveland Clinic, "Stages of Growth Month-by-Month in Pregnancy," *Fetal Development: Stages of Growth*, last modified April 16, 2020, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/7247-fetal-development-stages-of-growth>.

from foreign pharmacies without significant medical consults, disregarding federal and state laws restricting the access of the pills.³⁶

These developments are extremely alarming in relation to child sexual exploitation. Not only does this remove the oversight of medical professionals, contributing to the danger that is often associated with abortions in situations of trafficking and sexual abuse, but it removes an important point of contact for victims that could potentially save them from their abuse. Given the evidence presented about the frequency of abortions and victim's contact with clinics, the removal of in person dispensement requirements eliminates one of the only opportunities for victims to be identified and rescued. Websites like Plan C and Aid Access are even more alarming given that they remove even the opportunity of recognizing victims through tele-health. Plan C is especially concerning in relation to child sexual abuse given that the bright colors and fun, lighthearted infographics seem to appeal directly to teenagers and tweens.³⁷

Given the undeniable connection between abortion and sexual exploitation and the role that it plays in prolonging abuse, it is not surprising that many directly blame the practice for enabling and aiding traffickers. Steven Wagner, human trafficking expert and former director of the Human Trafficking Program at the Department of Health and Human Services claims that "to provide abortions or regimes of contraception to a person currently being exploited for commercial sex might very well be a death sentence."³⁸ He explains that because of the dramatically increased mortality rate for those involved in human trafficking, "Helping a victim return to exploitation more quickly by terminating a pregnancy increases the odds of death."³⁹ He also notes that because victims of trafficking, particularly child victims, are under the control of their pimp or abuser, they are unable to make the decision to have an abortion on their own, and all abortions performed on victims of sex trafficking are by definition forced.⁴⁰

Victims of child sexual exploitation are conditioned by their abusers through a multi-stage grooming process through which they are manipulated into trusting their abuser and viewing the abuse they receive as normal. They are then kept compliant and entrapped in their abuse through a continuing process of emotional manipulation and abuse. Pregnancy provides an abuser with a unique way of controlling their victims by using their child as leverage and simply threatening abortion. Abortion provides an opportunity for abusers to cover their tracks, exert control, and return victims to work sooner. Forced abortions are a disturbingly common trend in sex trafficking and abuse, and despite the unique position they are in to recognize and rescue victims, abortion providers like Planned Parenthood not only ignore this opportunity but enable and aid abusers by quietly covering their tracks, failing to report suspicious behavior, breeding a culture where access to abortion is more important than rescuing victims from abuse, and contributing to grooming through subpar sexual education. Unfortunately, the abortion industry only continues to head in the wrong direction with the pushing of mail order abortions, where they continue to push legal boundaries, sometimes completely ignoring them.

Ultimately, while abortion does present a unique opportunity for victims to be identified and rescued, this is not happening in practice. Even if abortion providers were better about

³⁶ Plan C, National Women's Health Network, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://www.plancpills.org/> and AidAccess, last modified 2022, <https://aidaccess.org/en/>.

³⁷ National Women's Health Network. Plan C.

³⁸ Steven Wagner, "Kathleen Sebelius' Gruesome Moral Calculus," *National Catholic Register*, November 29, 2011, <https://www.ncregister.com/news/kathleen-sebelius-gruesome-moral-calculus>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

identifying victims and doing their duty of reporting abuse, the practice ultimately does more harm than good. Not only do the women and girls trapped in sexual abuse often face significant health problems from frequent or poorly performed abortions, but they simply provide an opportunity for them to become further entangled and entrapped in their abuse. The practice simply provides a way for their abusers to further their control, continue their abuse sooner, prolong their period of entrapment, and ultimately bring their death closer. Regardless of one's view on the morality of abortion as a whole, the relationship it has with sexual abuse is undeniable, and any serious advocate for ending sexual exploitation cannot justly advance the abortion industry's agenda without compromising the lives of victims of sexual abuse.

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