

FROM VICTIM TO SURVIVOR, FROM SURVIVOR TO LEADER:

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP
PROGRAMMING AND OPPORTUNITIES
FOR COMMERCIALLY SEXUALLY EXPLOITED
AND TRAFFICKED YOUNG WOMEN & GIRLS

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Founder/Executive Director

Since we've come from not
having the power to do what
we want or say what we want,
they show us that there is a
chance to be a leader at our
age, as a youth - Isabella


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It's basically like we fell, and by us falling, we fell into the life, like a different life, a different us, and by us coming to GEMS they are picking us up, slowly but surely, and they're just making us like gems, shiny and stronger than ever.

– Patrice

Introduction

>> GEMS HISTORY AS A SURVIVOR-LED ORGANIZATION

In 1997, at the age of 22 I came to the US as a missionary, and a survivor of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking, to work with adult women exiting the sex industry. Six months after my arrival, I was selected to attend the First International Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth in Victoria, BC. With a group of youth survivors, I co-drafted the Summit's Declaration and Agenda for Action which I was later able to co-present at the United Nations and which was ratified by 120 countries. One of the core tenets of the Agenda for Action stated "The voices and experiences of sexually exploited children and youth must be heard and be central to the development and implementation of action. We must be empowered to help ourselves". Inspired by the youth summit and building upon this core philosophy of survivor leadership, I founded GEMS less than a year later on my kitchen table.

Founding an organization at the age of 23 was challenging. Founding an organization as a CSEC survivor was even tougher. I fought hard to overcome people's perceptions of me, the assumptions people made, the stereotypes that they would often verbalize. Ten years later, despite the small steps of progress that we've taken on this issue, many of the same perceptions, assumptions and stereotypes still remain. Now however, they are directed at the young women and girls that we serve at GEMS.

Stigmatized by their histories of sexual exploitation, gender, race, age and class, sexually exploited young women are rarely viewed as potential or current leaders and must fight multiple layers of prejudice to be viewed out of the 'box' of deeply ingrained stereotypes. In urban centers like New York, commercially sexually exploited youth are frequently girls and young women of color from low income communities, who are perceived as inherently 'loose', unredeemable and hopeless. These young women are often not just absent from public debate, but actively denigrated and seen as complicit in their abuse.

CHALLENGES TO YOUTH LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE FIELD

In recent years however, we've begun to see a small but growing movement that addresses these girls and young women as victims of commercial sexual exploitation and domestic trafficking. Yet even within the field, there is frequently a sense of CSEC victims as perpetual victims. There is often language used in reference to 'rescuing victims' from commercial

sexual exploitation and trafficking. While in many cases this has a very real and literal meaning, when applied to on-going programming, it does not allow for the growth and ultimate empowerment of sexually exploited young women and girls.

One program that specializes in serving CSEC victims steadfastly refuses to employ adult survivors as it believes that they will never really be 'ready' to support others. A therapist who has worked with CSEC victims recently told me that she believed that they were irreparably damaged. These attitudes are only marginally different than the message that sexually exploited/trafficked girls have heard from their pimps, their buyers, their communities and society at large: 'Once a ho, always a ho,' and 'You can't turn a ho into a housewife.'

It is sadly the sense of being without real hope, without a sense of possibility, without a belief in their inherent ability to grow and change that keeps so many girls and young women trapped in the commercial sex industry. If there is an underlying belief that, even out of 'the life' that survivors are destined to be limited by their past experiences, it is perhaps not surprising that many girls and young women do not engage in programming that confines them to permanent victim-hood.

Without dismissing the reality, enormity and severity of the trauma that commercially sexually exploited/domestically trafficked girls and young women experience, it is vital for the field to begin to address not only the myriad practical, physical and psychological needs but to also address the need for positive youth development programming, leadership development and the creation of authentic leadership opportunities for girls and young women as they move from victim to survivor.

Survivor leadership, the empowerment of commercially sexually exploited girls and young women and youth-led advocacy has been at the heart of GEMS since its inception, perhaps primarily based in the early years on my own experiences as a survivor leader, but in later years based on the abundance of research on strengths-based youth development and leadership development for youth that exists and that has been proven to be effective. Incorporating what we inherently believed about the capacity and potential of young women and girls to be powerful leaders in their own lives and in society as a whole within a broader framework of youth leadership programming has always been an integral component of GEMS.

GEMS LEADERSHIP PROGRAMMING AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Today, GEMS is the largest provider of victims of commercial sexual exploitation and domestic trafficking in the country, serving almost 250 girls ages 12 - 21 last year through intensive services including residential services, case management, support groups, work readiness and youth leadership programming and over 1500 youth and adults through outreach and public education. In a trauma-informed model, GEMS focuses on developing survivors as leaders and authorities in their own lives, in the organization and in the movement to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Over the last 9 years, GEMS members have spoken at national and local conferences, testified at city council hearings and legislative briefings in Albany and DC, been featured on radio, television and in print media about commercial sexual exploitation advocating for others. In 2003, based on my experiences at the International Youth Summit in 1998, GEMS organized the First US Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth, 'Breaking the Silence'. GEMS members developed the theme and content of the conference, served as summit organizers and facilitators. The culmination of the four-day summit was advocacy on Capitol Hill which resulted in the first legislative youth-led briefing on commercial sexual exploitation six months later. Another outcome of the summit was the first youth-produced 23 minute documentary on commercial sexual exploitation also entitled 'Breaking the Silence' which has been shown to youth and adult audiences nationally and was featured at the

youth component of the Tribeca Film Festival.

In addition to their advocacy and public awareness work, GEMS youth leaders provide education and intervention to at-risk girls and have organized and led a girls conference, written and distributed a monthly newsletter to detention facilities, developed a youth-produced video on the issue of commercial sexual exploitation, created a art/poetry book to educate others about the issue, and created prevention curricula for youth in facilities. Currently GEMS employs 9 young women as outreach workers and administrative support, creating and leading workshops for youth in facilities as well as sustaining systems in the office.

THE WHITE PAPER PROJECT

Over the years, we've worked hard to develop our leadership programming to address the evolving needs of the organization, and more importantly the girls and young women. As staff, we believed we have learned, and continue to learn, some lessons about what worked and what didn't, what supports were needed and our work had constantly reaffirmed our belief that youth/survivor leadership programming and opportunities were not just important but rather critical for true youth development and growth and for the larger movement against commercial sexual exploitation/domestic trafficking. Instead of producing a report chronicling our learnings and opinions, we felt it was critical to hear directly from youth survivors of CSEC and domestic trafficking about their experiences with leadership at GEMS, how they viewed these experiences, what they felt they'd learned and what they needed in order to feel supported in their development.

As staff, we stepped back from the process, ensured that the girls and young women maintained a degree of anonymity through the interview process and worked with a PhD candidate volunteer who trained young women in interviewing and supported them through the process. As a former youth leader and now adult survivor, I compiled the quotes and qualitative data to ensure that the resulting document was survivor-led and survivor informed.

>> METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

Participants included 11 commercially sexual exploited youth who were all current GEMS members. Three participants were of Hispanic origin, one was Caucasian, and seven were African American. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24. Four participants were also members of the research team, and they conducted all of the interviews. Research team members received a one-hour training in qualitative research, which included a section on research ethics, including informed consent and the rights of research subjects, an overview of qualitative research methods, and tips on conducting interviews by a GEMS volunteer who is a doctoral student with a background in research. Members of the research team interviewed each other to pilot the instrument (see appendix A), and were given feedback by other members of the research team. Piloting of the instrument resulted in adding three additional questions to the interview form. Once these first four interviews were transcribed, the research team reviewed the transcripts and provided additional feedback, such as how and where to get subjects to elaborate and when to ask for clarification in responses.

PROCEDURE

Subjects signed up for interviews at the GEMS office, and were given a stipend and a movie ticket for their participation. Interviews ranged from fifteen to forty minutes depending on

the number of leadership programs participants took part in and how much they had to say about their experience. Prior to each interview, informed consent was provided to each participant, both verbally and in writing, and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research process or interview itself. Some subjects opted to skip certain questions, but none of the individuals who signed up for an interview declined to participate. All procedures were reviewed and approved by GEMS staff.

DATA ANALYSIS

Once the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed by a GEMS volunteer and each subject was given a pseudonym. The transcriptions were then reviewed by three members of the research team and coded for themes. A total of 52 themes emerged, of which, 25 overlapped. The research team then discussed the overlapping themes, as well as any theme they felt was important that other members hadn't identified. From these, the research team combined themes that were related, such as "voice" and "expressing myself" and "communication" or "self-esteem" and "confidence." After this discussion, the research team identified ten core themes: confidence/self-esteem; knowledge; being positive; expression/communication; making a difference; relationships; moving forward; strength and resilience; open-minded/non-judgmental; and skills.

The results of the interviews were perhaps not surprising to us at GEMS; we have always been convinced of the incredible strength, intelligence, and leadership qualities of the young women and girls we serve. However, there was such a wealth of insight, humor, thoughtful reflection and honest assessment in the voices of the young women that it was hard to not just publish an unedited transcript of the interviews and challenging to edit anything out. However, I've done my best to provide a basic framework for the young women's voices and have ultimately just let them speak, clearly and loudly for themselves....

The Importance of Youth Leadership Programming

Overall, the young women felt strongly that youth leadership programming was a vital part of GEMS programming and ultimately their own growth and development. The young women spoke clearly to the feelings of hopelessness and disempowerment that commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking creates and the need for strengths-based programming that supports their leadership potential:

I think they are an integral part cause most girls when they get here, they're kind of lost and if you're able to commit yourself to coming to something once a week, and you can actually physically be there and enjoy it, I think it says a lot and speaks a lot for the girls who come cause sometimes that might be the most consistent thing they have going on.

-Emme

Coming out of the life is very like depressing, you know, you feel like you really don't have anything. You feel like what you say is never heard and you're feeling all these things at one time. So coming to GEMS and having a voice and voicing your opinions, and you're expressing your feelings and building your confidence, amongst other things, is recognizing that every girl shouldn't go through that experience.

- Hannah

Girls that come to GEMS are usually coming from feeling like shit day in and day out, like they're not important enough to do anything, like all they deserve is just tragedy and stuff, and someone telling them what to do. And I feel that that is an important

part because it gives them the opportunity to see something different and feel something different, and feel important, and feel like they can do this on their own and they don't need nobody. Cause if they didn't have that GEMS would help but girls would still feel like 'alright you're trying to help me but I still feel like shit and I'm going back cause this is all I know and this is all I deserve.' Youth leadership helped girls realize that there is more than somebody telling them what to do and that they don't have to settle for that and that they can do it on their own.

-Isabella

My experience in youth leadership was, it was something new, something positive. It was something that I wasn't really used to because it was so much empowerment, it was all female, and you know, I had a voice, and I had skills that I never thought I had.

-Alison



Graduating from the 20-week Youth Leadership Program gave girls a strong sense of accomplishment and pride:

When I finished youth leadership, yeah, I felt like a leader cause I felt like I finally finished something. And being that that was the first thing I finished, I just felt really proud, like I just felt good. I felt really good to know that I finished something and I didn't need to go out and sell my body for anything. I did something I wanted to do rather than doing something someone told me to do.

–Yvette

Just because its like a real big deal to graduate from youth leadership because they put you through a lot to make it that far, so once you do it says a lot to other girls, it gives them something to strive for.

- Emme



However, the young women contextualized youth leadership not only as a weekly group but as consistent messaging that they received throughout all their services and programming.

To love yourself, to think more of yourself, to see yourself as more valuable than what you see your-

self as, and try to just put you up to a higher standard, to let you know that you could do it, despite everything that's going on.

–Patrice

They give us the message that girls is worth more than what they're going through. There's no price on a female, they have their whole lives ahead of them to get you know a new path, and make a new path for themselves.

–Indira

Being around positivity, empowerment, it kind of just stuck with me to always think that of myself, that I'm worthy. So that's what I learned.

–Alison



What was clear from the interviews, and from the themes that they decided upon was that in order for specific youth leadership programming to be effective, survivors not only needed consistent messaging about their potential, their value and their worth but a safe, non-judgmental place within which to grow, the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills, particularly in building healthy relationships and learning effective communication skills. The young women talked at length about the direct relationship between these supports and their increased sense of self-worth and confidence, a vital component of their healing and recovery. Once they gained confidence, the young women felt strongly about 'giving back' and supporting and educating others and they needed concrete opportunities within which to explore and practice their leadership skills. These opportunities opened up additional possibilities to them and they began to see themselves truly moving forward with healthy and productive futures.

What Survivors Need to Grow: THE TRANSITION FROM VICTIM TO SURVIVOR, SURVIVOR TO LEADER

>> SURVIVORS NEED THE OPPORTU- NITY TO GROW AND LEARN IN A SUPPORTIVE, NON-JUDGMENTAL SPACE

CSEC survivors are accustomed to be being judged and stigmatized by their families, communities, institutions, traditional service providers, and society at large. All youth need a space in which they feel accepted and supported as they are, however for CSEC survivors their sense of shame and unworthiness due to their victimization is so strong, that a truly non-judgmental environment in the first critical step in supporting them in their transitions. The concept of feeling valued and accepted came up over and over again in the young women's interviews:

This is just a way where nobody judges you, where everybody comes together and tries to hear each other and people aren't pointing at you going "ew, ew, ew," at least this way you can let your feelings out and express yourself in a safe environment.
-Yvette

I mean this is place to be yourself at. And if you

can't be yourself anywhere else, when you come here you know you can be yourself because nobody judges you. -Isabella

They allow you to be yourself, they tell you to be yourself.
-Simone

It was important for the girls to know that wherever they were at in their lives and recovery, they would still be supported:

I've always been welcomed, you know, even if I went back into the life and people knew about it, I'm still accepted the same way. But I'm in the life anymore and I haven't been, but it's just something that people make judgments about and at GEMS there is no judgment in the air, and also, it's just a friendly space. People come to GEMS and hang out.
-Alison

Cause if I wasn't comfortable anywhere else, I would be comfortable at GEMS cause nobody does judge you or look down on you for what you done in the past or what you might continue to do. There's like no judgment here whatsoever.
-Hannah

GEMS is just that type of program that you could leave for a long time and they'll still welcome you back with open arms,
-Yvette

I would say that I fell, I got back up, I fell, I got

back up, I fell I got back up, I'm still growing, I'm not going to say my experience is done at GEMS, I'll still have a lot to learn, I'm a baby at GEMS, I'm like a toddler, I went from a newborn to a toddler.
–Patrice

It was also important for girls to be around other survivors and experience peer support:

It was comfortable because I was around girls that was in the life also so I didn't feel uncomfortable, and I mean it was just mad cool because like I didn't feel funny, I didn't feel like I was around a bunch of square chicks.
–Anna

We're all different, but like we all have the same situation so we all can relate to each other and all be able to comfort each other.
–Isabella

Seeing their peers grow and succeed was cited by several young women as an inspirational factor that supported them in their own development:

I think of the groups and the fact that you know, I seen people going through the same experience I've gone through and they just have brushed it off and keep going, and that also made me want to keep going.
–Jessica

You just see so many young females coming here, getting past their past experiences and moving forward and doing just great things.
–Yvette

The opportunity to have a space where they could relax and be themselves without fear of judgment or shame was a critical factor for the young women's engagement and participation in programming. Overall, it was clear from the interviews that the young women felt loved, cared for and supported at GEMS:

Like some people know what proper love and care is, and I know because of GEMS, and I get that every single time I come here.
–Holly

Recognizing that progress and recovery from trauma is rarely linear enabled girls to participate in programming regardless of where they were at in their journeys. In fact, the ability to come to a safe place when they were still being commercially sexually exploited was of critical importance to the girls interviewed. As a survivor-led program, girls and young women knew that they had a safe place without any stigma, yet it was also important to note that all staff were seen as warm and welcoming:

Yeah because in the back of my mind I always think about, you know, the different kinds of qualities that all the different female staff have at GEMS. I take a little out of everybody.
–Alison

The staff are so welcoming and when you come in they hug you and you know this is a positive environment and you can say whatever you like
–Jessica

>> SURVIVORS NEED THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS

Through youth leadership programming, girls were educated about the issue of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking through a psycho-educational group. They

learned to reframe their experiences from 'being a prostitute' to being 'commercially sexually exploited/trafficked' and learned that the concept of 'making a choice' was inaccurate based on their age, their circumstances and the fact that they had been recruited, coerced, bought and sold by adult men. They explored how the media perpetuates sexual exploitation, how race, class and gender impact them, and how the larger political systems and institutions address the issue.

Understanding CSEC in a broader context, and having the language and information to reframe their experiences empowered the girls to recognize their victimization and to process it in a global socio-political context. This education began to remove the sense of shame that they carried so heavily. Realizing that the blame and responsibility did not lie on them freed them to think critically about their experiences and work on their healing and recovery:

I learned that there was a lot of things that I didn't know about before going there. They opened my eyes to a lot of issues, racism a bunch of things that we talked about were very educational.
–Emme

Now when I see certain things in the media, I like recognize what it really is.
–Holly

You'll see how the media and everyone else in the world view sexual exploitation, like where it's at

in our society, the importance of it, the scale of it...you'll see how it changes how you think as a person, you know, how it changes how you talk, and it helps you with your public speaking.
– Patrice

The message that GEMS gave us is basically that we're worth more, that we deserve more, that we can get more, that sexual exploitation is wrong you know. –Simone

I got to see how like the world really portrays women and the struggle that sometimes you have to through just to be who you really are. Because of youth leadership it opened my mind up to want to learn more about some women's rights and other things so I just feel like I'm totally more educated about certain stuff now. And personally I was able to see that love shouldn't come from a man, it should come from within. –Holly

Because in society, because we've been sexually exploited they see us as why we did it, you're a whore, you're a stripper, and the place I've gotten to is where we're actually victims and the way I behaved it was a reaction towards the people, it was a reaction towards the way people treated me. It wasn't like oh I wanted to do it or I was born to be a whore, it was a reaction. –Jessica

Youth leadership programming empowered girls to feel that they could take action against commercial sexual exploitation:

I can stand up and speak my mind and protest about sexual exploitation and what it's doing to the young girls and our society and what effect media, men and public officers of society also have to do with it. –Patrice

Once you go to youth leadership and you gain some self-esteem and you learn how to be a leader you can actually step back and say "that was wrong, and I wasn't at fault,

it wasn't my fault and you able to go against it, you're able to go against it and talk to people and put the word out.

- Isabella

Not only did this new framework of understanding CSEC equip survivors to educate people in a formal sense, it also provided them with the tools to be able to share their knowledge with others in their lives and not feel ashamed of their victimization:

Not being embarrassed talking about the issue, and having more knowledge about the issue and myself, and being able to educate people about the issue and about the things that I learned.

-Anna

There's a lot of other girls that are going through it, that you're not the only girl by yourself, and you could share that information with people. The more you learn about it, even though you've experienced it, you learn more information from other girls and other people, staff and stuff. And you could talk to other people at school and parents, and it's just easier to describe it because you have a better idea of what's going on with it.- Emme

Youth leadership group also trained the girls in practical skills such as group facilitation, public speaking and

organizing to communicate what they'd learned:

Public speaking, how to begin a group and how to start talking about a topic, not just coming at people and talking and having them not be interested, how to get people interested and having clear facts, talking clearly, patience....

When you just coming into GEMS and you're a CSEC [victim] you don't really know how to speak up for yourself, you think you shouldn't, that you're not supposed to, that you don't have a right to. After going through the whole youth leadership and all the other groups, and just going through the whole process of GEMS, at the end, when you finally got all your skills where you are a CSEC survivor, you speak up for yourself, you talk clearly, because you know the right words to use, you know the right tone to use, and if ever you do have to speak in front of somebody that's important, you'll know the right words to use, you'll know how to conduct yourself. And it teaches you how to speak to other girls who have been in the same situation you've been in.

-Patrice

It helped me learn how to take control over my own life again, how to look at people and present things, how to talk to people and how to carry myself when I go to these facilities and take care of groups and things.

-Yvette

Learning to be assertive, learning good communication skills and facilitating groups, that's what I learned

-Anna

Probably speech cause they're real big on teaching you how to talk publicly and that's something that I need a lot of work on. Because lets say you want to go to school or get a job, some of those things that you practice can be used outside of GEMS or in regular life.

-Emme

I learned how to run a group through GEMS; I learned how to take responsibility, even if it

wasn't me who did something. I also learned how to work as a team. I also learned to work with people I don't get along with. And I also learned self-control.

– Patrice

All of the young women felt strongly that they'd learned good communication skills which empowered them to speak up for themselves and developing a great ability to fully express themselves. For girls and young women who've been taught to stay silent and have doubted the power of their own voice, this emerged from the interviews as a critical skill for their growth and progress:

Before I used to be a very passive person, and I think I get that because when I was in the life I wasn't allowed to have an opinion, so like I wasn't like really up on like defending myself and things like that. But then I went to youth leadership, and you know, there's a difference between being aggressive and being able to express yourself, do what you gotta do, and you say it and they hear it, you feel me?

–Anna

I feel is very important, especially for a person who came out of the life for the simple fact that I was so traumatized that I couldn't tell the different between reality and the

life. Like I couldn't tell the difference between when a person was trying to talk to me and be nice, and when a person was just trying to get something out of me, I couldn't tell the difference so I would have my guard up all the time. And going through youth leadership I learned how to cope with those feelings and use them to my advantage. If I felt offended in a way I would be able to speak my mind instead of just bowing my head down not looking at the person and just walking away scared or something.

–Yvette

I learned how to voice my opinions in a correct manner, to respect others even when I don't agree with them, how to do a presentation, how to work with others, a lot of important stuff. A lot of times, especially when you're coming from that life, you don't know, you don't want to depend on other people, so it's important that you know how to work with others because for a long time, like to this day, I really don't like working with other people, but I can do it.

–Holly

GEMS is big on helping people learn to communicate efficiently.

–Emme

Young women also spoke of learning to apply their advocacy skills to advocating for themselves in various systems:

I just learned how to take steps to either speak to a supervisor speak to a manager, speak to a higher person above and if that doesn't work go someplace else. And I feel that that's helped me in my own life because you know I am an ACS case since I was 9, and I stay on my social workers like white on rice, I follow them to the agencies, I find out how long is their visits for at certain places, I make them come to my house if I can't go to the agency. I just stay on top of them because I know my rights as a, you know, young girl in ACS.

–Yvette

The girls also felt that GEMS programming, particularly

supported them in developing healthier relationships, with family members, with intimate relationships, with their peers and co-workers:

When I'm in school or even when I'm in relationships, like relationships meaning my home relationships and guys I date. I recognize that even though I was born a girl, the stereotypical role was placed on me and I don't have to embrace it, like that's not me. I can do anything that I want to do, I'm not going to dress the way you want me to dress, I'm not going to do all that, like it just stops because of GEMS.
-Holly

When me and them [other members] didn't get along, I used a lot of GEMS skills so we wouldn't have an altercation, and we didn't. I remember that I was in the office and part of working at GEMS is teaching, ... I also learned that when you work with people, you're not always going to like them but if you want to get the job done and be successful, you have to work with them. It's got to be a team effort, and also there's no "I" in team.
-Patrice

I definitely care, like I'm able to embrace having girls and women as like my friends. I was able to have better relationships

basically, because before I felt like I wasn't able to trust girls, like they were so conniving, but now they're great.
-Holly

Relationships, I could talk more, I could speak up for myself. I won't just let things happen.
-Patrice

[I learned] To, always do what I am supposed to do, like if they give me a task to finish it, to be responsible, to love myself, to put myself before others, guys especially.
-Jessica



SURVIVORS NEED THE OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD THEIR CONFIDENCE/SELF-ESTEEM

A sense of control, volition, and self-confidence are methodically stripped away by pimps/traffickers who utilize fear, violence and mind-control techniques to keep girls loyal and compliant. Building confidence and self-esteem can be a long process for traumatized girls, yet citing a variety of strengths-based support services and leadership development the girls and young women interviewed spoke of their increased confidence and sense of self-worth:

A CSEC survivor usually doesn't have, doesn't feel like there's movement, somebody's always putting them down, telling them their ugly or whatever. So coming out of the life it's important for them to learn skills because if they can see that, if they always feel this way they're not going to make any changes, they're going to think that that's all they deserve and that's all they're gonna go for. So once they learn good communication skills, and have confidence.... then they'll learn and they'll see a better way of life and something more for themselves.
-Isabella

I learned that confidence is not just about walking out the door and holding your head up high, its about being confident talking to others about issues you believe in or anything and you know, being able to speak about it and not feel any kind of way about it, sorry about it. Saying

what you gotta say, saying it and believing in yourself.
-Alison

It helped me like I said get back into that role of being able to talk to somebody face to face. That was really hard for me after I came out of the life. That was the main thing because I was scared to look at a girl's face, or a man's face. Like it was just weird for me, I couldn't do it.
- Yvette

I think a survivor has you know, already brought down, beaten to the lowest point that she probably can be, and I think that these skills or qualities are already in her but it's been kind of been deterred. Like you know how if you put someone down you can't grow or progress or whatever, but I think youth leadership brings it out of a survivor- Alison

I learned about myself, I learned a whole lot about myself, I learned that I don't have to put myself through this anymore, I learned that I don't have to trade myself for something that you can't put no price on. I also learned how to be a role model for somebody else. And I also learned that I'm a better than that. - Indira

I think it's positive be-

cause you know what, from learning to assert myself in youth leadership and stuff, I don't take crap from people. Ain't no man gonna walk all over me no more cause I will let him know. I will let him know. - Anna

I've learned to be gutsy and not be afraid, to have confidence, and if you do it once and you don't like it you don't have to do it again, but at least you did it and you tried. - Alison

I didn't have no confidence, like no confidence. I used to think of myself like I was depressed all the time, like just depressed, like living in the past. And Rachel's group and youth leadership taught me how to just leave the past at the past and live the future cause I'm here. - Jessica

The young women translated their new-found sense of self-worth into practice; applying their skills and confidence into 'real-world' application:

I used to have no self-esteem like at all. Like I want to look for a job but if the restaurant looked fancy I wouldn't walk in there because I didn't have self-confidence, and GEMS gave me a lot of self-confidence. And it also gave me the position to be a leader and I can help other girls feel the way that I do now. - Jessica

When I started going to _____{facility to do outreach}... they didn't like us coming there. The staff was just kind of like weirded out about GEMS so when I started going there I just presented myself very professional, you know, if I had any problems I went to a supervisor and I spoke to a supervisor and everything. And you know, after a while everything just fell into place, they started realizing I wasn't going anywhere and that the girls really liked me, that I was there to help them and teach them the right things... - Yvette

You can't just go and try to fight CSEC when you still feel bad about yourself because you're going to be like 'there's no point'. Once you've

learned some self-esteem, you are able to see the difference of girls who are commercially sexually exploited than when you was in there, cause when you was in there you don't see it that way, you don't know what it is, you just don't know, you're so confused. -Hannah

**>> SURVIVORS
NEED THE
OPPORTUNITY
TO DISCOVER THEIR OWN
STRENGTH & RESILIENCE**

CSEC survivors are often told, and generally believe, that their victimization was a result of being 'weak'. Discovering their own inherent strength and recognizing their resilience even in the face of extreme trauma was an important part of their recovery and provided them with a new self-concept. Programming needed to be crafted to support them in learning about themselves in a new way:

The messages aren't always direct. We do projects and stuff, they allow us to do it on our own, and like, they allow us to build up our own strengths to become a leader.... - Isabella

I learned that I could accomplish a lot more than I expected myself to, and I learned that I can depend on people, all the time I have to depend on myself

and take - Yvette

I've basically just learned like, how to just, how to be me, how to find myself. I found myself in youth leadership and the different strengths I had inside me, and how I can use them, basically empowerment and just being a leader and how much that makes me feel better- Isabella

My experience in fellowship [a paid leadership training] made me evolve as a person and as a woman... it was strong and it just got stronger and better. I just grew cause I was grown up. To me I felt like I blossomed... - Alison

I'm very, very, very strong. Because you know, everybody goes through stuff but some people go through worse things and some people don't. And me, hearing what other people's experience and what I've gone through, I know that I'm very strong because some people let it get a hold of them as their future and I have been able to just brush it off and not let it take a hold of me, I'm living my life. - Jessica

I learned that I've always had the will and the power to do something and be somebody but I just couldn't find it, but now I've found it. - Isabella

I learned that there are so many girls who go through so much in this world and it takes a strong person to get through a lot of things that they go through, so I learned that I'm stronger than I thought I was as far as when I was younger and I was getting into a lot of things. - Yvette

**>> SURVIVORS NEED THE
OPPORTUNITY TO IMPACT
OTHERS & MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

As girls developed a strong sense of their own strength and resilience, they began to view themselves as survivors who could have an impact on others and on the world around them. They needed concrete and authentic opportunities

to put their new-found sense of leadership into practice. There were myriad ways that the girls interviewed felt that they had made an impact, from outreach and peer counseling to advocacy and public education.

All of the girls felt that they had been able to utilize their leadership skills in supporting or educating one of their peers:

I mean, there was one time where one of the girls was really, really, really upset about a certain situation and I decided to stand up and talk to her throughout the group and made her feel comfortable and understanding, and help her try to find other ways into handling her situation. And she took my advice and went on and did it and you know, actually was overcoming the situation. It made me feel good, like I love helping people. GEMS and other people have helped me and it made me feel good and I like helping other people as much as I can. It makes me feel better as a person.
- Isabella

One time we was having a group about sex, like sexual behavior and whatever, and one of the girls, she was like she didn't care if her man was dating somebody else, like having sex with somebody else...I told her, well do you understand that you could get something from her

cause even though they're using a condom...so like a bubble went up over her head and she understood, it was kind of cool. It made me confident that even though sometimes I feel that I don't know much, I do know a lot. - Jessica

I've supported various members at different times, that's why I'm here at GEMS, and you know, everybody has a different level of recovery. Some girls are still in the game and some girls have been out of the game for a long time, but at the same time we still go through the same every day issues. So just given the fact that I've moved all my life and I've been out of the game for a long time, but I can definitely give inside advice and help girls you know, in different areas of their life - Hannah

I always end up being the one to sit and talk to them and call different programs and see what's available and how can we get in there, and what's our way of working about it, and what can we do, and you know, always helping them and making them feel good about themselves and letting them know, "you know this is not the end, this is just the beginning." Like this is not where you're life is gonna end, this basically the start of a new, turning a new leaf over and starting something new and trying to make yourself better. - Isabella

Okay, for example, no names given, one of the girls, one of the members she got very upset one day and said something, something pertaining to doing it again, you know, going back to the life. Basically me and a few other members of GEMS sat with her and spoke with her. Basically we told her that that's a bad idea, you know, that she's worth more than that, that take it one step at a time that everybody been there where she's at, you know, so just take it one step at a time and achieve everything you want to do in life...- Simone

It just helped me help other people. It helped me want to help other people because at one point I felt like the world was gonna end, like I couldn't be nobody because of stuff I did.

And I want people to understand that it's not the end, you can do whatever you want, and even though society might see you one way, we at GEMS see you another way. It [GEMS] helped me to leave the life, go outside and be proud of who I am. - Jessica

Some of the young women spoke of the power of utilizing their experiences in educating others on the issue of commercial sexual exploitation:

When I was at _____ University and I was talking there and everything, they didn't even know that that stuff was happening here. When I told them they were making faces like, wow it wasn't just happening across the water somewhere. It felt good to, you know, open peoples eyes to this thing that is happening here. - Anna

Going to Albany was a great experience because I was able to talk about everything I've learned and been through and try and get others to understand why sexual exploitation is a real problem. - Holly

Far from feeling too damaged to support and educate others, the young women felt empowered by helping and teaching their peers, legislators, and the general public. They felt that their experiences and

stories were valuable tools that equipped them to make an impact on those around them. One young woman spoke of learning how to share her experiences in a healthy way:

One specific skill I learned is that even though you been through what you been through ...you have to be able to learn to talk about your story in a way where it doesn't affect you personally, like traumatizing yourself all over again you know. But at the same time it's good to tap into certain feelings and emotions because it is real, and it's a real issue and it did happen to me, but at the same time you can't tap into every single emotion. - Hannah

The concept of survivor leadership was reinforced by their participation in a survivor-led program where they could clearly see survivors in authentic leadership roles:

Like going upstate, go with Rachel on trips, like public speaking, like if we could just go to one, that kind of empowers us to see our director up there you know, speaking about something that we've all been involved in...- Patrice

The girls also talked about their youth employment experiences at GEMS, particularly in providing outreach and facilitating workshops to at-risk girls in facilities:

Outreach has been a great experience, I've met so many different young females and I've been, and that's like my passion, to help the girls go through what they're going through as peacefully as possible, and when they can talk to me and share their feelings with me it just makes me feel very like, it makes me feel good that I know they feel better after they speak to me.- Yvette

I do see myself as a leader. I mean basically because now that I do outreach I go out and go to different ACS' and I talk and try to prevent girls who are at risk or whatever. I feel like that's a leadership role, and if you don't have it in you to be a leader then you can't do that, because if you so busy like trying to follow somebody else, how can you go and try to see somebody else through that that at that point

is still following other people? You can't. - Isabella

I started...running the art group myself for a few months and I feel like that helped a lot of girls express themselves cause I told them they didn't have to draw everything perfectly, they didn't have to do everything perfect, just you know, show how you feel. And a lot of girls started really getting into it, started getting really creative with it, and I feel like that was my impact, they started opening up more. - Yvette

Conclusion

Programming for commercially sexually exploited and domestically trafficked children and youth must move beyond the framework of crisis care and adopt the lessons that we have learned from the larger youth development movement. All children and youth need and deserve the opportunity to be viewed from a strengths-based perspective, to be provided with the space and opportunity to develop concrete skills and abilities and to be empowered to engage in authentic leadership roles.

The active participation of youth is essential to re-energizing and sustaining the civic spirit of communities. Through skills development in the areas of collaboration and leadership, and the application of these capacities to meaningful roles in the community, youth can play a fundamental role in addressing the social issues that are destined to impact their lives and those of future generations. (Kothari, 1996 as quoted from Hancock, 1994, p.141)

Not only is the larger CSEC movement richer and better informed by ensuring that survivors are an integral part of advocacy, education, programming and peer support, the young women themselves are continuously empowered through their ability to inspire and support others. Creating real opportunities for youth leadership for CSEC survivors is vital for their ongoing growth and development and critical for the field to move forward.

An important lesson is that youth leadership looks different for different people. For some it may be public speaking, for others it may be the opportunity to serve as a 'big sister' to other girls in the program, yet others may want to make an impact through sharing their creative talents, therefore there must be multiple avenues and opportunities for girls and young women to share their skills and knowledge and to experience concrete ways of 'making a difference'.

It's also important to note that many of the avenues for

'making a difference' were paid positions that provided viable economic opportunities for young women to practice and develop their leadership skills. This taught the young women that their time and talents were valued and should be compensated and supported them in developing economic independence.

Youth survivors also need to see other survivors in leadership roles. Seeing their peers in leadership positions creates a healthy form of peer-pressure and provides support to young women. It's critical that youth see adult survivors in leadership roles, particularly in programs that are designed to serve them. The leadership of survivors in the fight against commercial sexual exploitation in the US is unquestionable. In addition to GEMS, survivor-led programs across the country have been leading the way in services, advocacy and training for many years including the pioneering SAGE in San Francisco and Breaking Free in Minnesota and Dignity House in Arizona and newer programs such as Veronica's Voice in Kansas.

Clearly survivors are able to take on leadership roles and excel in them. However we must not simply limit the role of CSEC survivors to only being in 'the field'. As a survivor-leader, my hope is to see youth survivor-leaders go on to achieve in the field of politics, arts, science and business; anywhere, in fact, they choose. Empowering youth survivors with knowledge, skills and self-confidence and supporting opportunities for them to put their skills into action ensures that youth survivors are equipped with transferrable skills for a competitive economy and the confidence to

participate and thrive in our society.

In creating safe and non-judgmental places for them to grow and heal, in building their knowledge and skills and supporting them in asserting themselves and developing healthy relationships, empowering them to develop their confidence and self-worth and discover their inherent strength and resilience and in ensuring that there are multiple, authentic avenues for making a difference in the world, we are able to address their final and perhaps most critical need:



SURVIVORS NEED THE OPPORTUNITY TO MOVE FORWARD

The ability to conceive of a healthy, bright, fulfilling future for yourself impacts not only your present but how you view your past. For girls and young women who have experienced such immense trauma and pain, for whom a happy and healthy future seemed an impossibility, the need to be able to envision themselves moving forward, creating a new life, accomplishing and achieving, loving and being loved, being an important part of the world and making an impact on that world is so vitally important and an indication of real healing and recovery.

In five years...

**...in college trying to become a social worker,
- Isabella**

In 5 years, if I'm still a part of GEMS, I'd like to be a full time staff. But if not I would still like to be helping girls out, maybe run a group or just be here to be supportive in some way and show my face once in a while....- Emme

In 5 years I'm going to have my bachelor's degree, in what I do not know, but I have a feeling it's going to be somewhere in sociology, or social work.... - Hannah

I see myself, 5 years, I'm working on my masters in 5 years and I'm in a positive period of my life, probably have a relationship, a long term relationship, and have my own house, and be working, most likely here....- Jessica

Five years, hopefully I'll have my associates degree or probably bachelors, it depends on if I switch, working for a non-for-profit program, similar to this if not this one, working with people in care, in ACS care or just girls that's been through the same thing I went through. - Simone

Although many of the young women did seem themselves taking a leadership role in the non-profit field and continuing to support other young women who had experienced commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking, others had different leadership goals:

I see myself still working. I'm a mother so my daughter would be in school so I see myself being a better mom, you know, and probably finishing my bachelor's in art. - Alison

Being a photographer somewhere that's not here, [New York]...- Anna

Honestly, in 5 years I will want Rachel to come to me and ask me to come speak to the girls. That would mean a lot to me. I see myself probably working at a good job, I see myself even being in the construction field...And so yes, I want Rachel to bring me back because I'll probably be working at Con Edison or a good company

in construction and I want the girls to see me in my construction outfit, and whatever, I'm like, I'm a person who went through GEMS, like you know, anybody can go through this and you could turn out just like me. - Patrice

If young women and girls who have experienced unimaginable trauma can view themselves and their futures as full of promise and potential, it is incumbent upon us to not set limits upon them or their leadership abilities and to provide the safety, support and opportunities to help them realize their inherent strength and value.

Just to stand proud and not to care what the society thinks because we know who we are. And if everything was gravy, if everything was great we know we would not have gone out there and done the stuff we did. It was because it was a reaction to the situation we were in, and GEMS gave me all of this stuff that I have in my brain. That it's okay, that life is not going end, that I can be whatever I want, I can be the president if I want. - Jessica

Appendix A

Interview Questions for GEMS Participants

*Note: where ____ is, insert the name of the leadership program the interviewee participated in.

Background Questions:

How old are you?
How long have you been coming to GEMS?

What was the pathway you took at GEMS to develop and refine your leadership skills? For example, you might have started in the Youth Leadership Group, then got involved in Media, and later on worked your way up to a fellowship.

General Questions:

What does leadership mean to you?

What was your experience like in ____
_(each of these programs)?

What qualities do you think are important in a leader?

How comfortable were you participating in ____? Could you be yourself? Why or why not?

What messages about leadership do you think GEMS conveys to girls who participate in the program? How are these messages conveyed? Did these messages resonate with you?

How long were you involved in ____?
How often did you attend? If you stopped attending, why?

What leadership skills have you learned through GEMS?

What did you learn about leadership as a result of participating in ____ (these programs)?

Before participating in GEMS leadership programs, did you consider yourself a role model/leader? Why or why not?

What did you learn about yourself? About others?

Was ____ (this program) helpful to you? Why or why not?

Leadership Programs*

(Research tip: if the interviewee has participated in many different programs, run through the list of questions in this section addressing one program at a time)

Was there a specific time or situation in ____ where you think you made a real impact? What was it like?

What leadership programs have you participated in? (Advocacy, Media, Youth Leadership Groups, Albany trips, Outreach, Fellowships/Youth Employment) Can you describe them?

What specific skills did you develop by participating in ____ (these programs)? Why are they important for a CSEC survivor to have?

Do you see yourself as a leader/role model now (since you started coming to ____)? Why or why not? If yes, in what ways?

Interview Questions for GEMS Participants

Based on your experience in _____, would you recommend joining _____ for girls who are new to GEMS? What advice or suggestions would you give them?

What would you change about _____ (these programs) if you could (i.e., things you might add or do away with)? Why?

What type of leadership programs would you like to see GEMS offer in the future? How would this type of program be helpful?

Applying Leadership Skills

How will the leadership skills you learned at GEMS help you in the fight against the commercial sexual exploitation of youth?

Can you think of a situation at GEMS where you were able to apply the leadership skills you learned to support another girl or resolve a conflict? If yes, can you describe how these skills helped you navigate the situation?

Can you talk about other areas of your life where the leadership skills you've developed at GEMS can or will help you achieve a goal or be more effective? (i.e., work, school, relationships with friends/family, parenting, etc.)

Are there places besides GEMS where you feel you've been able to develop your leadership skills or take a leadership role? Can you tell me about them?

Concluding Questions

In your opinion, are leadership programs an integral part of the GEMS experience? Why or why not?

Since coming to GEMS, where do you see yourself in 5 years? Do you think that participating in _____ will help you reach these goals? Why or why not?

Lastly, is there anything you think I should know about leadership training at GEMS, or your experience, that I haven't asked about?

Overall, how would you sum up your experience at GEMS?

Appendix B

About GEMS Programming

GEMS provides a spectrum of continuous and comprehensive services to address young women's needs and to provide long-term, consistent support throughout young women's transition and development. The service continuum begins with Prevention and Outreach, initially identifying victims and ensuring they are aware of service options. This takes place through both Street Outreach provided three nights per week to known prostitution locations in New York City and Facility Outreach conducted by former GEMS members weekly at six juvenile detention facilities, group homes and residential centers. Facility outreach also serves the purpose of potentially preventing commercial sexual exploitation through a peer-led education model that raises awareness amongst high risk youth about the realities of the sex industry. In addition to the outreach team, a current GEMS member creates a newsletter for girls in facilities, with articles written by current members and girls in the facilities.

The second stage of the continuum consists of Direct Intervention with sexually exploited young women and covers a vast range of services including GEMS Court Advocacy and Alternative to Incarceration/ Detention programming, Supportive Service Program including mental health assessment, counseling, health care, psychiatric care, goal planning, acquiring identification or benefits, assistance with educational needs,

family intervention and assistance in obtaining employment. GEMS Court Advocacy Coordinators provide advocacy for girls in the Family Court and Criminal Court systems as well as provide supportive services.

Housing is also a vital part of direct services to sexually exploited youth, the vast majority of whom are runaways and homeless, therefore GEMS' Transitional Independent Living Program provides housing (up to 18 months) for young women ages 16-21 who meet specific criteria.

GEMS Youth Development programming addresses young women's developmental, social and emotional needs through strengths based programming and a firm commitment to youth empowerment. This component of the program provides Recreational, Educational and Therapeutic Groups including health education, poetry, art therapy, creative writing, grief and loss therapy, yoga and relaxation, healing and recovery, cooking and drama to build young women's creative expression and sense of community. Members meet to provide staff with ideas about the kinds of groups they would like to see offered and as a result the groups offered change each semester. The Youth Leadership Program trains young women on the issue of sexual exploitation, domestic violence and youth incarceration and equips them with public speaking, peer counseling, organizing and advocacy skills. Youth Leaders are afforded multiple opportunities to develop their skills through outreach, public speaking events, advocacy, and media work. The Educational Initiatives Program provides incentives for members who take the next step in their education, including registering for a GED, high school, college or vocational program, and completing semesters and graduating. GEMS offers on-site tutoring and college bound clinics to support members.

GEMS recognizes that addressing the issue of sexual exploitation in a vacuum will not suffice. Providing direct services to sexually exploited youth through this continuum is vital, but insufficient. Commercial sexual exploitation is intrinsically linked to racism, poverty, gender-based violence, and the criminalization of youth. All these factors

must be an integral part of any discussion, advocacy work or direct service programming that involves sexual exploitation. Clearly, tackling these huge social justice issues is a daunting task, yet imperative. GEMS builds on its work providing services through changing public perception and the laws that affect sexually exploited youth. The final step in truly addressing sexual exploitation must change current policies and laws that criminalize sexually exploited youth and begin the work of social change by treating them, by law, all as victims.

Local & National Advocacy

Changing public perception is vital to affecting change in the lives of at risk young women in New York City. Therefore, GEMS has been in the forefront of advocacy and public education of the issue of sexual exploitation against children. GEMS worked with the Correctional Association's Juvenile Justice Coalition to introduce the Safe Harbor Act into New York State legislation. The Safe Harbor Act would remedy the contradiction in the current penal code between a 'child prostitute' and a victim of statutory rape. The new law would make it impossible for young people under the age of 16 to be charged with an act of prostitution, treating the young women instead as victims and providing them with emergency and long-term services they need to exit 'the life'. The bill, was sponsored by both democratic and republican leaders and garnered widespread bi-partisan support. In 2006 and 2007, the bill was introduced in both Senate and the Assembly. Much of this support was generated after a compelling GEMS-sponsored legislative briefing was

presented by GEMS youth leaders. Although the bill was blocked in both 2006 and 2007, youth leaders along with the support of GEMS staff was successful in changing the perception of children and sexual exploitation, many legislators who had previously been opposed to the bill joined as co-sponsors after hearing the young women's compelling testimonies. The Act was reintroduced in 2008. In 2006, GEMS lobbied for and won legislative and mayoral recognition of April 20th as the New York State Day to End Child Sexual Exploitation, the first such acknowledgement in the country. In 2008, GEMS celebrates the Third Annual END CSEC Day with the presentation of this white paper and a screening of Very Young Girls in addition to a Rally at City Hall.

Public Education

In addition to advocacy and organizing work, GEMS increases public awareness and understanding by providing seminars and trainings for social service providers, clergy, law enforcement officers and concerned members of the public. Trainings and workshops are designed to: bring a human face to issues of sexual exploitation; address stereotypes of the young women involved; train youth workers in creating effective, gender-specific programming; assist service providers and professionals who come into contact with at risk youth in identifying signs of exploitation, intervening effectively with 'hard-to-reach' clients, and assist young women in transition from 'the life'. Recipients of such trainings include Administration for Children's Services, Office of Children and Family Services, University of Illinois Law School, New York Foundling, Covenant House, Kings County Child Psychiatric Unit, John Hopkins University, Youth Advocates Program International, Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center, University of California, The Salvation Army, Jewish Child Care Association, the NYC Department of Probation, and Legal Aid Juvenile Rights Division.

For more information about GEMS

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