

Teen girls are swapping sex for ... just about anything

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Heather spent her teen years on Protection Island in Nanaimo, B.C. Blond and sun-kissed, the daughter of a geologist father and biologist mother grew up on Narnia books. But at 16, Heather was recounting another story. By 14, she was routinely blacking out on drugs, having sex with multiple partners at her house and partying with "Navy guys." At the start of Grade 9, she was sleeping with a 21-year-old drug dealer and heroin addict. Soon after, she was recruited to trade sex for clothes and drugs.

It sounds like an overblown cautionary tale for parents, but teen prostitution is an emerging middle-class phenomenon in Canada, says journalist and documentary filmmaker Sharlene Azam in her new book *Oral Sex Is the New Goodnight Kiss* (which is accompanied by a DVD).

One prostitution ring saw more than 15 girls aged 12 to 16 from several Edmonton middle and high schools offering their bodies to older men who gambled in a townhouse; another involved 15-year-old high-school girls charging college guys \$20 for oral sex in Kelowna, B.C. In Surrey, B.C., pimps recruited 12-year-olds at their local mall.

Over four years, Ms. Azam tracked her subjects down through news stories, reaching them through school principals, counsellors and their arresting officers. The book is a series of interviews with the girls, their mothers, vice cops and pimps, as well as brazen teenaged women who recruit more inexperienced girls into prostitution from their communities.

Internet Links

- [The New Good Night Kiss](#) 



The author argues that father absenteeism, ineffectual sexual education classes, Internet porn and a hypersexual, "poisonous culture" that promises status through the accumulation of luxury goods are to blame.

Ms. Azam, who splits her time between Vancouver and Los Angeles, spoke to The Globe and Mail about the book.



How did you gain such access to these girls?

Typically I would meet a girl at school, at her [guidance] counsellor's office. I would tell her what I was doing and give her my number. It depended on where she was in her story. I always got parents involved early. Once I found one girl at a school who was maybe trading sex or having oral sex at school in the bathroom, she then would introduce me to a couple of friends who were doing the same thing.

How does it go from some oral sex in a high-school bathroom stall to joining a

prostitution ring?

It snowballs very quickly after being bullied or disappointed in love. Some of the girls I met just thought they were being sweet, generous girls by giving a blowjob to a guy, and then they're the go-to girls for anything sexual. And then a recruiter will say to them, "You can make \$50." Once she gets \$50 for something that in her mind only took two or three minutes, even if she was disgusted by the guy, she is addicted to that money.

You describe "luxury fever" as something that compels these girls to prostitute themselves.

They all feel this pressure to be able to go to the mall and buy something. Brands are so important now. It matters that you have money to burn.

Nearly all of the girls were living with single moms. What role do absent fathers play?

They're completely absent. And in a way, so are their mothers. What I saw a lot of was poor judgment. The mothers were so busy with their own lives. A lot of them were involved in their own romances. They just bury their heads because they don't know what to do.

You also point to the Web, teen dating sites like Nextopia, guys quietly setting up late night dates through MSN chat, and Yahoo.com and Craigslist.com linking to underage "cam girls" who advertise their services and then link to online gift registries like Wishlist, Amazon and Felicite.

Once a girl sees something like sending a couple of nude photos [in exchange for] a CD as benign, it snowballs very quickly for them. [For instance] with sexting, young boys are becoming the new pornographers, but the girls are also taking photos of themselves.

All of the girls talk about feeling 'empowered' by male attention, however dubious or short-lived it was. For example, Heather talks about experiencing 'personal power' when she made men 'make noises' during oral sex.

She really began to believe that being a sexual object was her identity. She became divorced from her body. Anything she could do to get attention made her feel good and powerful, even if she didn't know the guys' names.

You write that none of the girls, not even the recruiters, are willing to call what they do prostitution, even when cash is exchanged. They say 'hooking up' and 'one-night stands.'

It's become so twisted in their minds. [There was the] notion of 'I can be any kind of woman I want to be, including a prostitute.'

Is sex education failing?

Sex ed can't always do the job it's intended to because it just isn't current enough. If you don't know where to start you should probably start by talking to a public health nurse. They're informed and a little more progressive around what kids are doing because they see the diseases and statistics and they talk to kids, as opposed to a teacher doing a sex ed class who may be more uncomfortable. I guess you can learn by these parents' example, learn what not to do. It's not something you can recover from: Your family is destroyed.

How do the guys fit in?

Parents have a responsibility to teach boys not to use girls. But how do you do that? If you're just starting to look at what your kids are watching and trying to make them media literate at 12, it's kind of too late. Parents [can't] really keep up with the amount of sexual content their kids are seeing, and they don't really understand how deeply their kids are affected. You actually have to talk about sex. You have to clarify values and know what healthy sexuality is, versus porn sex. They need some way to critique their own experience against what people are telling them. They see something and mimic it at a party. [The boys] have this idea of what sexy is and it's a total fabrication. It has nothing to do with the girls that they know, but it's really influencing how they treat girls. They will have an inability to relate to a girl in a normal, healthy relationship. Girls have no expectations for their relationships — there's no 'the ideal relationship would include trust, friendship and not being coerced or manipulated.'

You write that Heather, now 19, emerged after seeing a therapist. But she told you, 'I still shift between not really valuing my body, not minding if I'm with more than one guy and freaking out if a guy even touches me.' How is it affecting intimacy later on in their lives?

This is going to be a huge problem. Right now, they're just too young to reflect on what it means to be in a bathroom giving oral sex to four or five boys. The girls always felt they could also have sex without any

consequences or hook up without caring, the way they feel boys do. It's a badge for them but they always regret it. There's always a feeling of emptiness.

What's next for these girls?

Heather will probably be okay and will be one of those few lucky girls who can chalk this up to a wild youth. Her parents had enough money that they could try many treatment [options]. But for the girls whose one parent isn't very involved, like a father, and whose mother is very busy, after the interview with the cops and a little bit of intervention by a social worker, that's it. You just have to be okay, because there's nothing else.

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