

Trafficking of Native American Women for Prostitution in Minnesota: Some Preliminary Findings

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Minnesota Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition (MIWSAC) and Prostitution Research & Education (PRE) interviewed 105 Native American women who were prostituted and trafficked in Minnesota.

In this research study we asked the women to tell us about trafficking for prostitution, childhood neglect, and lifetime history of violence including racism. A full report on the women's responses including details about their experiences in foster and adoptive care, their encounters with the legal system, their use of community treatment and support, and their health problems, including psychological distress will be available soon. We hope that the needs assessment will have an impact on culturally and psychologically appropriate service delivery to trafficked Native American women.

We are in process of data entry, literature review, and analysis. The report will be available at www.prostitutionresearch.com. Contact Nicole Matthews (MIWSAC) at 651-646-4800 or Melissa Farley (PRE) at 415-922-4555.

We interviewed 105 women currently or recently prostituting in Minneapolis, Duluth, and Bemidji, Minnesota.

Their average age was 35 years old, ranging from 18 to 60 years.

The women described being used for sex by hundreds of men who bought or rented them. Two thirds of the women we interviewed had been used by up to 300 men. A third of the women had been used by between 400 and a thousand men for sex.

96% of the women had a history of current or previous homelessness.

95% of the women wanted to escape prostitution.

70% of the women they knew in prostitution had been lured, tricked or trafficked into it.

Like many of the women currently being interviewed for the MIWSAC/PRE study of trafficking of Native American women, Violet (name changed) had been raised in several foster homes. In one of the foster homes, missionary foster parents called Violet and her sisters "little savages" and frequently reminded them that they should be grateful to have a home.

Violet was sexually abused as a child by adult male relatives and family friends. Kidnapped at age 12 and trafficked to a midwest city, she was beaten, raped, forcibly addicted to drugs, and sold into prostitution. It was difficult to escape prostitution, and until she found support and services at Breaking Free (Minneapolis agency for women escaping prostitution) she was not able to get out. She now connects her own prostitution with a multigenerational history of injustice and abuse, including her mom's abuse in a boarding school, alcoholism of many family members, and family members' prostitution. Violet said that finding her cultural identity was part of the path of her escape from prostitution. This included learning her people's 'old ways' of praying and dancing. Following are some examples Native American women's descriptions of prostitution.

"Prostitution was an exchange for drugs and shelter."

"Prostitution is like suicide."

"The first time, I was 14. He was 40 years old. I went more toward older men because they weren't on top of me as long."

"It's like incest- no one wants to talk about it."

"As far as I'm concerned, all prostitution is rape."

"They [pimps, traffickers and their women helpers] don't tell you the down side: 'oh yeah, you'll feel this way and that way and probably kill yourself.' Women glamorize it to other women in order to hide their real feelings, to cover up what it's really like - 'yeah I got this fur coat (but you don't know what I did to get it.)' "

Following are examples of trafficking for prostitution of Native American women.

"My dad was very abusive to my mother and I ended up running away to Chicago. When I was 17 I was stranded in Chicago and had to get home to Wisconsin. I went to a party, there were lots of drugs, I got left there, and I was roaming around. A pimp was nice to me, he gave me this, gave me that. Then he took me to someone's place and he said this guy - age 40 - he's interested in you. Then he started hitting me after I said no. I was so scared I just did it. After that I kept doing it because I was afraid to get hit."

“I know a pimp - he preys on the weak and needy, the homeless. He looks for homeless women and he is not telling them what to expect [in prostitution].”

“I wouldn’t say there are pimps anymore. Now they’re all boyfriends.”

We asked the women about the role that their identity as Native American women played in their healing from prostitution. The women’s responses were eloquent and educational.

Of the 105 women we interviewed, 77% identified as *Native American only*.

23% of the women identified as *Multicultural* that is, they viewed themselves as Native American *and* either European American, African American, Filipina-American, Vietnamese-American, Mexican-American, or as Native American and Multicultural.

Below are a few comments from the women about the importance of a Native American cultural identity in their healing.

“Back then I was not connected to my cultural identity. I thought prostitution was normal living.”

“My auntie tried to help – she would talk to me, get me involved in women’s groups, took me to sweats.”

“In 2006 I was close to my Uncle Jim (name and date changed). He was a full blooded Sioux, his dad was a medicine man. He knew something was wrong. He said there’s another way, not just the way you are doing now. He gave me the shell. He gave me the sage, showed me how to pray with tobacco. A week later he passed away. It touched me a lot. When I feel my ultimate worst, I go in my room and sit there and pray.”

“I’m reunited with my birth mom. I’m the only kid that dances with my mom- she made me an outfit by hand.”

“Women like myself need someone they feel they can trust and come to without being judged by how they lived their life. We didn’t wake up and choose to become a whore or a hooker or a ho as they call us. We need someone to understand where we came from and how we lived and that half of us were raped, beat and made to sell our bodies. We need people with hearts.”

