

EYES WIDE SHUT Sarah's Story

My name is Sarah and from the age of 10 to 12 I was groomed by a gang of men in the UK. The men made friends with me and they seemed to like me. My own parents were not able to raise me, so from the age of three I lived with different families, but I never felt that anyone truly cared about me. I was alone and vulnerable, so I easily became the gang's next victim.

The gang owned an old shop where they illegally sold cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. I started buying cigarettes and then alcohol. I usually didn't have to pay for things - because I was their friend. For two years the men seemed to be the nicest, most 'real' friends that I had. They bought me gifts when I was sad and sometimes they gave me drugs. That was when I became dependent on drugs.

Then one day, when I was 12, everything changed. The gang called me to their shop, but this time there were no smiles, no friendly faces. The men were angry. They told me that I owed them money for everything - even the gifts they had given me. They said I had to pay them £75,000. When I told them I didn't have that kind of cash, they showed me photos of my family and friends just going about their daily lives. These photos had been taken secretly. I then realized the men had been secretly watching people who were special to me.

The gang said if I didn't pay them back in the way that they wanted, they would shoot me. They told me that I belonged to them and until my debt was paid off, I had to work for them. First, they made me deliver drugs to different places. I was so scared, and after two weeks I refused to do it. They became violent and held me at gunpoint. They said they would now sell my body every day until the debt had been paid off. They also said that if I went to the police, I would be sent to prison. They threatened to give evidence to the police that I was selling drugs. My childhood was over.

I was sold every day to many different men. I would have a minimum of seven clients a day, but that would usually go up to around 12 to 16. The trafficking gang completely controlled my life - every minute of the day. Even while on my Year 8 school trip to France, my traffickers arranged for me to work at night while I was there.

Throughout those years nobody noticed what was happening to me. I became a very angry teenager and I would get in a lot of trouble all of the time. But nobody wanted to find out why. No one cared that a 14-year-old was working on the streets at 2 am. No one asked why a 15-year-old was going into hotel rooms with older men, or why a child was hardly ever in school, and, when she did go - she was exhausted. It took seven years for me to be seen. Seven years of torture, control and hell.

People should have seen what was happening to me. I was in school, I had a social worker, I had a foster family, the police knew me - but not one person could see what was right in front of them. Thankfully, I was finally rescued by a police officer who saw what was really happening, and I was so lucky to have the support of Snowdrop, an organisation that helps survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. Without their support I would not be here today. For once I was seen, heard, held and protected.

If eyes had been open and questions had been asked, my childhood would not have been stolen by the most poisonous of men, and I would not be living with the lifelong effects of those terrible seven years that I should never have experienced.

This narrative has been adapted for educational purposes. The original narrative was recorded at Trust Conference, the Thomson Reuters Foundation's flagship event. The NO Project does not own the rights to this narrative.