Decision by top court ‘devastates’ former prostitute

While some celebrated the Supreme Court’s decision Friday to strike down Canada’s prostitution laws, others worried it could leave already vulnerable people even more exposed.

LUCAS OLENIUK / TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

Anti-sex trade activist and former prostitute Bridget Perrier, pictured in 2012, worries that the Supreme Court of Canada's decision Friday could leave already vulnerable people even more exposed.

By: **Jennifer Quinn** News reporter, Published on Fri Dec 20 2013 to Mystar

As Teri Jean Bedford cracked her whip in Ottawa and declared victory, Bridget Perrier cried in Toronto: Big, wrenching sobs. A former prostitute who now works with Sextrade 101, which calls itself “Toronto’s only sex trade survivors and abolitionist organization,” Perrier said she was “devastated” by the Supreme Court’s decision Friday to strike down Canada’s laws against the buying and selling of sex by prostitutes.

“No little girl one day aspires to service a multitude of different men,” Perrier said. “No little girl is inspired to do that. I’ll tell you — my hopes and dreams and aspirations went down the toilet the first time I turned a trick.”

While proponents of the change celebrated, others — like Perrier — worried it could leave already vulnerable people even more exposed. The crux of their concern is the belief that the majority of those in the sex trade are not really choosing to sell their bodies, but are being exploited for profit.

“That would be our experience,” said Bruce Rivers, the executive director of Toronto’s Covenant House, where 30 per cent of their 3,000 clients report having worked in the sex trade for survival. “Our experience is not that it’s typically been about choice. It may start as something that looks like that, but it turns south very quickly.”

Before Friday's decision, the situation was that prostitution is not illegal in Canada, but most of the public activities around it were. Lawyers for Bedford and other sex workers argued those laws infringed on their rights, endangering their safety by driving their trade underground.

Parliament now has a year to craft a constitutionally acceptable set of laws.

Jolene Heida, who runs an outreach program for sex workers at All Saints Community Church in downtown Toronto, said she had heard from women in the community who were "overjoyed" about the decision. Some who had left the trade were even wondering if they might be able to have previous prostitution-related offences removed from their criminal records, she said.

"That was the first question. 'What does this mean for me?'" she said.

But Heida was more cautious about the decision.

"We don't want women to be criminalized, but how is it going to help the women who are in this and not by choice?" Heida said

Chanelle Gallant, a spokeswoman for Maggie's: The Toronto Sex Workers Action Project, hailed the decision as a historic victory — a win for equality, safety and justice.

Gallant said it is the sex workers who have been most marginalized who will benefit most from the change in law, saying it's an "absolute myth" that only those in the sex trade by choice will see change.

"Right now, someone who's in a situation where they're being exploited has no recourse," she said. The change provides a "situation where a sex worker may be able to access safety and justice, may be able to access help."

Inside the world of human sex trafficking

Victims often don't fit the stereotype: they could be from a middle-class suburban family, being sold online. They could be your daughter.

By: **Jennifer Quinn** News reporter, **Robert Cribb** Foreign, Published on Sat Oct 05 2013

She poses on a bed, wearing pink lingerie and staring into the camera. "I'm young, I'm willing and I'm waiting for you," reads the pitch in the online ad. "I love to please."

Any suggestion of glamour vanishes quickly inside the seamy Scarborough hotel.

The hallways are fetid; it's unlikely the rooms will be any better.

Brianne answers the knock, expecting to see the anonymous man with whom she negotiated sex-for-money over email about an hour earlier.

Instead, two police officers step inside the room — floral polyester bedspread, stained carpet — where the tattered beige curtains are drawn and a filmy camisole is draped over the lampshade in a sad attempt at atmosphere.

"We're not here to arrest you," the officer says to Brianne. "We're here to help you."

Women who are victims of human trafficking don't fit the profile you might imagine. Women like Brianne.

Many, like her, are more likely from a middle-class family in Richmond Hill or Mississauga than a poverty-stricken village in Romania or Moldova. And they're more likely to be sold online than on a street corner.

As difficult as it may be to believe, these girls could be your daughter, says Det. Mark Benallick, who heads the Special Victims Unit, part of the Toronto Police Sex Crimes Squad. The unit deals almost exclusively with sex workers.

"What begins as a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship progresses to increasing control, until these women are treated as slaves," Benallick says. "These pimps have the ability to spot vulnerable girls in a crowd at a bus station or on a downtown street and instantly know which ones can be manipulated with promises of affection."

'I'm still a child'

Brianne — not her real name — knows she could probably use some help. She has been on the move since she was 11, when her parents divorced and she left home.

Three years later, she was in rehab for alcohol abuse. There, Brianne met a man — 30 years older and now the father of her child — who would groom her and force her to earn a living in hotel rooms like this.

In the corner sits a ratty stuffed toy. Brianne says it belongs to her toddler, who was taken from her by child protection authorities. Now she sleeps with it.

"It's sad. They (the pimps) find the vulnerabilities of these girls and use it against them. It's exploiting weakness." – Det. Mark Benallick, head of the Special Victims Unit, part of the Toronto Police Sex Crimes Squad.

"I'm still a child," Brianne says, admitting that she moves the floppy-eared dog off the bed when she has a client because they think it's "creepy." "I can't drink . . . I can't buy alcohol," she says. "But I feel, like, 50 years old."

Brianne is 18 now — old enough that police can't prevent her from working as a prostitute. She's legally an adult, but not old enough to do many of the other things that comes with being grown-up, like buying her own booze.

On the day Detective Constable Aaron Akeson, an officer with the Special Victims Unit, meets Brianne, she has already had four "dates." It's not even 8 p.m. She's made $310.

Brianne's family wants her to come home to Barrie, where she grew up. She misses her son, and takes solace in encouraging text messages from friends who know what she's doing and are desperate for her to get out — "When I see (Brianne), I see a girl with endless possibility."

Where friends see possibility, her pimp sees a commodity. Detectives see another victim of human trafficking.

Most people think of human trafficking as an international problem, but people don't need to be moved across borders, or even across the street, to be trafficked.

The Criminal Code says if someone "exercises control, direction or influence over the movements of a person, for the purpose of exploiting them or facilitating their exploitation," that is trafficking, and they could face 14 years in jail.

But human trafficking in Canada reaches well beyond prostitution. In 2010, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police began laying charges in one of the country's biggest-ever human trafficking rings, centred on an extended Hungarian Roma family living in Hamilton that lured their victims to Canada with the promise of good jobs.

Upon arrival, the Hungarian newcomers, all claiming refugee status as they were coached to do, had their passports, welfare payments and bank accounts seized and were forced to work in construction for virtually no pay. Canada's National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking, launched last year, says "it is often described as a modern form of slavery."

Low self-esteem

The mantra for those who work with women who have been trafficked — those who are trafficked for commercial sex are mainly women — is "force, fraud, coercion." If those elements are present, in a relationship with a pimp, for example, then legally it is a case of human trafficking.

Michele Anderson agrees. The girls she works with at Covenant House in downtown Toronto share common traits: "They're vulnerable. There's low self-esteem, they're disconnected from the family, they're not doing so well at school, they're disengaged from a positive peer network."

And then, she says, they meet someone.

"A man who pays attention to them. Compliments them. Tells them that they're pretty. Offers to take them for dinner. Spends money on them. Buys them makeup. Takes them shopping to buy clothes. And very quickly will say to the youth, 'You're my girlfriend. You're my best girl. And I'm your boyfriend,' " Anderson says. "She will believe it."

"She's been looking for approval, she's been looking for someone maybe to take care of her, she's been looking for attention."

The man will likely introduce drugs into the relationship and the girl may not have to pay for them at first. But eventually, Anderson says, the bill comes due and she is asked, then told, to do certain things. Pretty quickly, any pretence is gone, and the girl is working in the sex trade.

That is exactly what happened to Layla, which is not her real name, but the name she asks the Star to use. She is now 24 and studying social work. Next up is nursing school. But when she was 16, and living in Brampton, she met a man.

"I thought he was my boyfriend," she says, simply. Almost a decade later, she still refers to him — two decades her senior — as her ex. "He was very nice at first, of course."

But then it changed: he moved her from Brampton to Georgetown. He fed her drugs. And the sexual demands started: he asked her to have a threesome with his friends, then to have sex with him in front of other people.

"He would get drugs or money," she says. "And I would never see it."

He kept her isolated from her family. When she tried to leave to visit her father one morning, he dragged her from the car. If she tried to get away, he pursued her.

“I would leave in the middle of the night, and he would chase me, and throw me over his shoulder and drag me back to the house,” she says. “Or he would lock me in a room.”

Despite what she has been through, Layla is warm and friendly. She is in therapy, doing volunteer work in the community. She understands this man harmed her, yet she still can’t call him what he was: a pimp.

“I look at him as an ex-boyfriend. I accept that he exploited me. But pimp — it’s such a big word,” she says. “I’m sure I’ll come to that some day, but I’m not there yet.”

Skilled traffickers

Jolene Stowell, who runs an outreach program for sex workers at All Saints Community Church, is working with nearly two dozen women who have been trafficked — even if it’s not a word they recognize.

“Nobody has ever walked in here before and said, ‘I’ve been trafficked,’ ” Stowell says, as Layla nods. But the women she works with eventually understand that they have been exploited — even if it takes time to arrive at that realization.

She agrees with Anderson that the women who end up as victims of trafficking are vulnerable. But when asked, by Layla, what characteristic the trafficking victims she has worked with have in common, Stowell pauses.
“There really isn’t *one*,” she says. “People ask that a lot, because they want to understand it and prevent it. They assume there’s something wrong with you. But it’s the skill of the trafficker.”

Forget the stereotype of the velvet-clad pimp: these are shrewd entrepreneurs with a sophisticated understanding of complex grooming techniques designed to gradually assert control. The most exploitative are like psychology PhDs without letters after their names.
Professional pimps openly peddle their secrets of success in books that are steady sellers on Amazon, with titles like *The Pimp Game: Instructional Guide* and*Pimpology: The 48 Laws of the Game*.
“Prey on the weak,” explains *Pimpology* author Ken Ivy, a veteran American pimp, noting accurately that most young women vulnerable to exploitation “have low self-esteem” and often are victims of some kind of trauma or abuse.

“A pimp looks for that weakness,” he advises. “Weakness is the best trait a person can find in someone they want to control.”

Life-changing moment

Tara Riley was 13 and changing subways at the Yonge-Bloor station when she heard someone — a grown man, 23 years her senior — shouting to her. Turning back to speak with him would change her life.

“At that time, I was like, ‘What? I’m fat, I’m ugly, I have red, curly hair, and you’re calling to me?’” Riley, now 40, recalls. “And I went up, and I spoke to him, and I gave him my number, and that’s how it all began.”

Riley grew up in an affluent home in the Beaches. She even had her own telephone line — which made it easy for her exploiter to court her, and which is why, as a mother herself now, she pays close attention to her daughters’ cellphones.

Riley's experience is different from that of Layla and Brianne. While she was exploited — beaten, raped, her jaw broken by the man she thought she loved — she didn't do sex work, though he tried to force her. The voice of her beloved great-grandmother echoed in her head: "Don't do this."

Instead, she found other ways to survive by doing things for him, and keeping the rent paid and the fridge stocked. She stole. She'd run scams on the street. She'd work the phones, setting up dates for other girls he was pimping.

"I'm sure that I lured other girls without knowing it," Riley says. "And that devastates me."

She now works in harm reduction, is a lioness of a mother, and wanted her name used in this story because, she said, she is reclaiming her history as her own.

In Toronto, the Special Victims Unit is focused on helping women out of prostitution and into safety. Rather than arrests and charges, as was once the protocol, they now try to educate and assist, urging women to help prosecute their pimps. Other jurisdictions, such as London, Ont., are carefully watching their work, and setting up their own units.

Since January, 2012, Benallick and his team have worked on 32 investigations with elements of human trafficking, most of them still before the courts. (They've also investigated 27 incidents where sex trade workers said they were physically or sexually assaulted. Police are certain these are under-reported offences.)

RCMP figures show 46 convictions in human trafficking cases since 2005, involving offences such as procuring, living off the avails of prostitution and assault. Another 86 human trafficking cases are currently before the courts. The majority are domestic trafficking for sexual services along with five international human trafficking for forced labour.

But police investigators all agree the statistics fail to paint an accurate portrait of the problem. Human sex trafficking is a dramatically under-reported crime, they say, largely because of the reluctance of victims to come forward.

The isolation that comes with Internet-based sex work adds to that weakness.

On the streets, prostitutes can look out for each other, jot down the licence plates of johns, and maybe even feel safer under the watchful eye of their pimp, hovering nearby.

Working online, all they may have is a cell number or an email address, and no one to watch their backs — or report their absence when they don't come back.
On New York's Long Island, the skeletal remains of four women who had been advertising sex for sale on Craigslist — which has since eliminated the category — were found last year. And in suburban Vancouver, the deaths of two women who both worked in the sex trade and advertised online are being investigated by homicide detectives.

Brianne says she has tried to get out of the business for a while, get her high school equivalency, and make something of herself. But a tumultuous relationship with her father drove her from his house with her young child last year.

And with no financial support from the child's father, she ended up having to surrender her baby to Children's Aid. Shortly after, her profile returned to backpages.com, where she distinguishes her services with discounted rates — $60 for "full service."

She claims she has no pimp — Brianne knows he's really who the officers would like to arrest — but can't hide how she lives.

“I was moved here last month,” she says, catching herself. “I mean, I decided to move here.”

Had she been under 16 — even a day under 16 — the officers could have forced her into protective care. Girls between the ages of 16 and 18 fall into a grey area: they can’t be allowed to continue to work, but there are no social services for them, so often they go back to their “boyfriends,” the same ones who take the money they make selling themselves.

‘They’re alone’

The explosion of online sex trafficking is fraught with dangers, say the veterans of the more traditional street trade.

“They don’t know what they are doing,” says Trixie, a petite blond who says she is 50 and has been working the streets on and off since she was 19.

She’s at work on a desolate stretch of Carlton St., near Jarvis St., at 3 a.m. on a rainy night.

“Here, you’re safer, you’re more in control,” she says. “They don’t have any guidance, they’re alone.”

Patricia Elkerton, who co-ordinates a street outreach program called Project 417, which operates out of a downtown Salvation Army centre, says she worries about the younger girls getting into the online prostitution world.

“In any level of prostitution there is violence, there is risk, but when it comes to online, there are real problems with the isolation,” she says. “On the street you have the option of turning a man down if you want to. Online, someone shows up at your room, you are now trapped with that individual.”

Elkerton also says that online prostitution makes it easier for pimps to traffic underage girls who would be more noticeable on the street.

“It allows younger and younger girls to be more vulnerable,” she says. “It’s far more anonymous for the pimps and more difficult to track.”

Arranging a meeting

Outside Brianne’s hotel, Benallick’s eyes scan three parked black cars with men staring back at him.

“This place is a nest of pimps. They’re watching us there. And there,” he says, gesturing to the cars. “It’s sad. They find the vulnerabilities of these girls and use it against them. It’s exploiting weakness.”

The evening began in the team’s office at police headquarters. Two of Benallick’s officers — Akeson and Detective Constable Peter Brady — scanned profiles on backpages.com looking for women who appeared particularly young.

When they identify a possible target, Brady picks up the squad’s shared cellphone — it’s so old it doesn’t even have predictive text — and sends a message. This time, it’s to a woman who calls herself “Alexis Fox,” a “Super Hot Russian brunette, clean and discreet.”

Is she available? Brady texts (slowly). The response — probably via an untraceable pay-as-you-go phone — comes in seconds: “Hour or half-hour?”

Half-hour, Brady replies. A meeting is arranged at the upscale InterContinental Hotel two hours later, giving the team time to get in place.

Ninety minutes later, they're standing on Bloor St. W. on a sultry summer evening. The officers see Alexis emerge from a cab, wearing short pink shorts and a low-cut tank top. Hanging from her mouth is a lollipop. Her long brown hair is in a ponytail.

A few moments later, a text appears on the police phone: "Come to room 327."

The squad troops through the lush lobby and up to the third floor. As officers enter the room, Alexis starts yelling — she doesn't sound Russian — and calls a friend. More likely, the officers say, it was her pimp.

"The cops came to my room," she screams into her phone. "They tricked me. I'm scared and I don't know what to do."

Benallick asks her who she's speaking with.

"It doesn't matter," she says, crying. "I'm 18. I'm old enough to be doing this. Get out. And don't cause any problems downstairs (with hotel management) either."

The officers check her ID and confirm her age. They then make their pitch about getting out of the game, and offer her their business cards and brochures describing the help available to her. She rejects them all.

In the lobby, Benallick asks hotel management for details on who rented the room. It was booked by a man an hour earlier and paid in cash, he's told. Rooms here start at more than $200 a night.

Alexis wasn't frightened of being arrested, Benallick surmises. She was scared because "she's worried about the billable hours."

"She told (her pimp) she has a date and she isn't going to get paid. She's going to be blamed for the cops coming, for not getting the money. It's the first call she made," he says, as the team leaves the hotel for their next "date."

"That's the power they have on these women."

Shining a light into the dark world of sexual exploitation in Toronto


By Jessica Smith Cross Metro Toronto

Jolene Stowell, head of the PROS program, in front of the drop-in centre she runs.

One of the girls on the video says she grew-up in an upper-class family in the Beaches and met her future pimp at the Bloor-Yonge subway station, on her way home from Canada's Wonderland.

"I was going down the stairs and he called to me, like so many of these men do," she tells the camera. She's volunteered to put her face on camera, but most of her hair is covered in a knit hat and her body is hidden in a baggy grey sweatshirt. "To me now that would be so unflattering, but at 14 it was, 'Wow, attention, this person wants to talk to me.' "

The video, called "This is my story," was created by the PROS (Providing Resources, Offering Support) program at All Saints Community Church. In it, four youth tell their stories of being trafficked in the sex trade. Their backgrounds are mixed in terms of race, gender and income.

That first girl had low self-esteem, her pimp preyed on that when he flirted with her, not her friends, making her feel special and manipulating her until she ended up working for him as a child prostitute.

Another was homeless and needed a place to go. A third said her controlling boyfriend pressured her into it. The fourth was seeking refuge from an oppressive family.

PROS offers services to women and girls who have been victims of human trafficking, which, when it relates to sex work, is called commercial sexual exploitation. PROS runs a drop-in centre and the Toronto Police Service refers human trafficking victims to PROS for help.

Jolene Stowell, a social worker and head of the PROS program, is building a body of research about commercial sexual exploitation by conducting interviews with sex workers aged 16 to 26. So far, almost 100 have participated. The majority reported they were first "turned out" as prostitutes, when they were 12 to 14, she said.

"We identified that the school is the best place to reach these kids because a lot of youth are still at home—whether their home is with their family or they're in foster care, or whether they're living in a group home—they're still in school," said Stowell. "They're being lured and they're being groomed and they're becoming entrenched in commercial sexual exploitation and they're still going to school."

"I think kids have to know what they're looking for if they're going to stay away from it."

Toronto Catholic District School Board superintendent Rory McGuckin said the Toronto Police and PROS approached the board in November 2012, offering to educate students about human trafficking. The superintendents didn't think human trafficking was a problem in their schools, but agreed PROS would give a talk to its social workers.

However, shortly after the first meeting a parent came to the principal at St. Martin De Porres to say a student was involved in or threatened by human trafficking. So, in February the board asked PROS to make a presentation directly to the students, educating them about pimps and prostitution.

"The principal of the school did indicate that he thought it was a very beneficial presentation, given the urgency of the need at that point at that school," said McGuckin. "He felt it was well-timed and it really was at the level of the students in the classroom."

A spokesperson for the Toronto District School Board said its partnership with PROS is still in development.

Const. Jennifer Nantais co-ordinates the TPS school resource officer program and has been working with PROS to get their presentation before students. She said commercial sexual exploitation of young people is under-reported, but there are kids in the school system involved.

“I would think at almost any school there are kids at risk,” she said. “It’s not just priority neighbourhoods.”

“We know that for someone to exploit and abuse a youth, they have to have a way in,” said Stowell. “Often, young girls identify their trafficker as their boyfriend, as someone they care very much about, who grooms them into having sex for money.”

While there are many things that can make a young person vulnerable, such as poverty or homelessness, that doesn’t mean the kids are at fault, she said. Stowell likens the manipulation to an abusive relationship, but worse.

“Whatever he or she is missing, they fill that void and they create that dependency,” she said. “I hate to give pimps any credit, but they are skilled manipulators,” she added.

It’s typical for a pimp to cut off the youth from friends and family outside of the sex trade and surround them with other players, normalizing sex work.

The PROS presentation also explains the two “protective factors” that will make a young person less vulnerable to a pimp: a sense of community belonging and self-esteem.

“We can try and give them a heads up,” she said. “Here are the tricks that happen, here are the games that these guys will play. Then they can begin to recognize it—red flags going off.”

The girl on the video, said some of her friends picked up on something going wrong in her life and even told their parents, but no one stepped in to stop it. “In the community that I grew up in, it’s very hush. The lack of education about what goes on in Toronto. People always think sex trade, they think of Thailand or they think of the islands, or they think of the Congo, but it’s happening right here, in Toronto, every day.”

Quotes from video of young survivors of human trafficking:

“He would do really nice things for me, and take me out for dinner a lot, go away to Niagara Falls … That changed, rather quickly. I think because I had that false sense of love … I trusted him. He would say things like girls have it so easy, they could just to this to make money. And then it became, you could do this for me.” - *Young woman whose boyfriend pressured her into sex work*

“For me, street working and sex working was—I didn’t really have any value in myself, I didn’t see myself as having self worth or see myself as anything important. It was more about how to survive that night.” - *Young black man who grew up in dysfunctional family, living on the street at 16*

“It’s all about softening every kind of word. It’s like silver-tonguing everything, it’s all about charisma. It’s about wrapping your finger around someone. It’s so manipulating. I didn’t know what I was going to do, I think he was going to take the money and I just let him take it. It was really scary, I just didn’t know what he was going to do.” - *Young man who ran away his adoptive family at 14, was picked up on Church Street and became an escort.*