A close-up, high-resolution portrait of Jeffrey Epstein, showing his eyes, nose, and a full beard. The image is the background for the text overlay.

NO SUCH THING AS A 'CHILD PROSTITUTE'

Revelations of Jeffrey Epstein's
criminal enterprise bring new
awareness to the plight of
sexually exploited girls

BY CARRIE N. BAKER

Convicted sex offender and accused child sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein was found unresponsive in his jail cell at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in downtown Manhattan in the early morning hours of Aug. 10. He was later pronounced dead.

Jennifer Araoz, who alleges Epstein raped her when she was 15, seethed with anger when she heard the news. “We have to live with the scars of his actions for the rest of our lives, while he will never face the consequences of the crimes he committed, the pain and trauma he caused so many people,” she said in a statement. “Epstein is gone, but justice must still be served. I hope the authorities will pursue and prosecute his accomplices and enablers, and ensure redress for his victims.”

According to Araoz, she was just 14 years old in 2001 when a woman approached her outside of her performing arts high school in New York City and befriended her. The woman asked Araoz about her life and her dreams. Araoz shared that she had lost her father to AIDS two years before; her family struggled financially, living on food stamps; and she dreamed of becoming a Broadway actress. The woman told Araoz she knew a man who could help her. That man was Jeffrey Epstein.

“She was saying he’s very powerful, he’s very wealthy, he’s a great guy,” Araoz told NBC News. “He’s almost like a fatherly figure to her, which had meaning for me at that time because I was maybe longing for that.”

The woman brought Araoz to meet Epstein, who showed interest in her life. He offered her help in her career and told her he donated money to AIDS charities. When she left, Epstein’s secretary gave Araoz \$300 in cash. Epstein gave the woman who brought Araoz to Epstein a brand-new digital camera. Araoz returned several times with the woman and Epstein gave Araoz \$300 each time.

After about a month, she felt comfortable going alone to visit him, which is when he asked her to give him a massage in her underwear. “I felt almost obligated because of the money he was giving me,” she told NBC. She visited him once or twice a week during her freshman year in high school, receiving \$300 for each massage, during which he would “play with himself.”

Meanwhile, Epstein complimented Araoz and promised to help her with her acting career. And he continued to give her \$300 for each visit—money the 14-year-old desperately needed. But then early in her sophomore year, during a massage, Epstein grabbed her and forced her to have sex. After the rape, she never returned to see Epstein and she dropped out of the nearby high school so she wouldn’t have to walk by his home or see him or his recruiter. She abandoned her dream of pursuing a career in performing arts.

Araoz is one of dozens, maybe hundreds, of girls in New York, Florida and elsewhere whom Epstein allegedly exploited. In 2007 federal prosecutors in Miami prepared a 53-page indictment against Epstein for sexually exploiting dozens of girls, but gave him a plea deal for two counts of prostitution, one with a minor, for which he served 13 months in a work release program and

was required to register as a sex offender. Prosecutors then concealed the deal from the victims. The U.S. attorney in Miami, Alex Acosta, who later became President Donald Trump’s secretary of labor, defended his decision to give Epstein a lenient plea deal by blaming the victims, implying they were uncooperative witnesses, although an attorney for seven of the girls said that the prosecutors intimidated them.

But finally, in June of this year, the U.S. Attorney in Manhattan, Geoffrey S. Berman, indicted Epstein for conspiracy and sex trafficking of minor girls, which under federal law is defined to include recruiting or obtaining someone under the age of 18 for a commercial sex act. A federal court denied Epstein bail. The arrest of Epstein followed a November 2018 investigative report by Julie K. Brown of the *Miami Herald* alleging that he had abused more than 80 girls. After his indictment, more than a dozen new victims came forward and unsealed documents allege that Epstein also forced girls to perform sex acts with a number of prominent men, whom, some speculate, he may have proceeded to blackmail.

Shortly after Epstein’s death, Berman vowed that his office would continue its investigation into Epstein’s coconspirators, and he urged other victims to speak up. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio tweeted, “Jeffrey Epstein may have escaped his day in court, but if the wealthy predators involved in his sex ring think they just got away with it, they’re WRONG.” Still, it’s unclear whom Berman would be targeting in this investigation: Epstein’s employees, the female victims he used to recruit other victims or the men who raped these girls.

Meanwhile, many of the victims are now bringing civil suits against Epstein’s estate and his coconspirators. On Aug. 14, Araoz filed one of the first lawsuits under New York



Rights4Girls executive director Yasmin Vafa speaks on Capitol Hill (top left). She's part of a feminist campaign that since the late 1990s has worked to strengthen laws against child sex trafficking in the U.S. These activists have had to fight to redefine survivors of the child sex trade as victims rather than criminals.

their experiences as teenagers, and the criminal prosecution of Jeffrey Epstein—despite his millions of dollars and political connections—is a hopeful sign that prosecutors are finally taking this issue seriously.

Child sex trafficking in the U.S. is a “pervasive phenomenon” that is underreported, says Dr. Kimberly McGrath of Citrus Health Network in Florida, who works with young people in the child welfare system. While there are no firm numbers of how many kids are victims of this crime, in Florida alone there were more than 2,000 reports of commercial sexual exploitation of minors to the statewide hotline last fiscal year.

“We’ve come a long way in terms of our collective understanding and awareness around domestic child sex trafficking,” says Yasmin Vafa, co-founder and executive director of Rights4Girls, a Washington D.C.-based human rights organization working to end gender-based violence in the U.S. “It wasn’t until 2005 that our federal laws even recognized the fact that American citizens could in fact be victims of sex trafficking. Before that these crimes were dismissed and written off as child or juvenile prostitution. Oftentimes there was a lot of victim blaming. And girls in many cases were criminalized for being survivors of sexual violence.”

Leading advocate Rachel Lloyd agrees. When she arrived in New York from England in 1997 to work with adult women incarcerated for prostitution, she was shocked to find that some of those imprisoned at Rikers Island were underage girls. Over time, she noticed the girls were becoming younger and younger—some only 11 years old. She founded Girls



State’s new Child Victims Act, which extends the time that victims of child sex abuse may bring civil cases against alleged abusers. She is suing his longtime associate Ghislaine Maxwell and three unnamed female household staff members, including the woman who recruited her.

“Today is my first step towards reclaiming my power,” Araoz said during a call with reporters after the suit was filed. “Jeffrey Epstein and his network of enablers stole from me. They robbed me of my youth, my identity, my innocence and my self-worth. For too long, they escaped accountability. I am here today because I intend to change that.”

NINE YEARS AGO, I WROTE A FEATURE STORY FOR *MS.*, “JAILING Girls for Men’s Crimes,” about the feminist campaign to raise awareness and strengthen laws against the commercial sexual exploitation of girls. Since then, we’ve come a long way. Many women are now speaking out about

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—JENNIFER RODRIGUEZ

Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS) to help these children, and she pushed for better laws.

Lloyd and other activists, many of them survivors of the sex trade themselves, fought to redefine girls as victims rather than criminals. When Congress was considering legislation in the late 1990s, they fought for a broad definition of sex trafficking that included sexually exploited young people.

Originally passed by Congress in 2000, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act defines sex trafficking as the “recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision or obtaining, patronizing or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.” If the person is an adult, there must be “force, fraud or coercion,” but not if she is a minor. When passing the act, some members of Congress had in mind children in Southeast Asia, but activists in the U.S. leveraged this legal definition to pressure states to reform how they treated sexually exploited young people. Activists pushed states to pass “safe harbor laws” that would require police to direct minors found in prostitution toward social services rather than the criminal justice system.

In 2008 Lloyd was behind one of the nation’s first successful campaigns for a safe harbor law in New York. Today more than 20 states provide immunity from criminal prosecution for exploited children. In 2018 Pennsylvania passed a safe harbor law, but in June of this year Texas Gov. Greg Abbott (R) vetoed a bill decriminalizing prostitution for youths under 17. This patchwork of state laws leaves many kids vulnerable to criminal prosecution for behavior related to their exploitation and without the help they need to recover from the trauma of sex trafficking.

Through their “No Such Thing” campaign, Vafa and Rights4Girls

Jennifer Rodriguez, executive director of the Youth Law Center, says girls in the U.S. are still being arrested for men’s crimes.

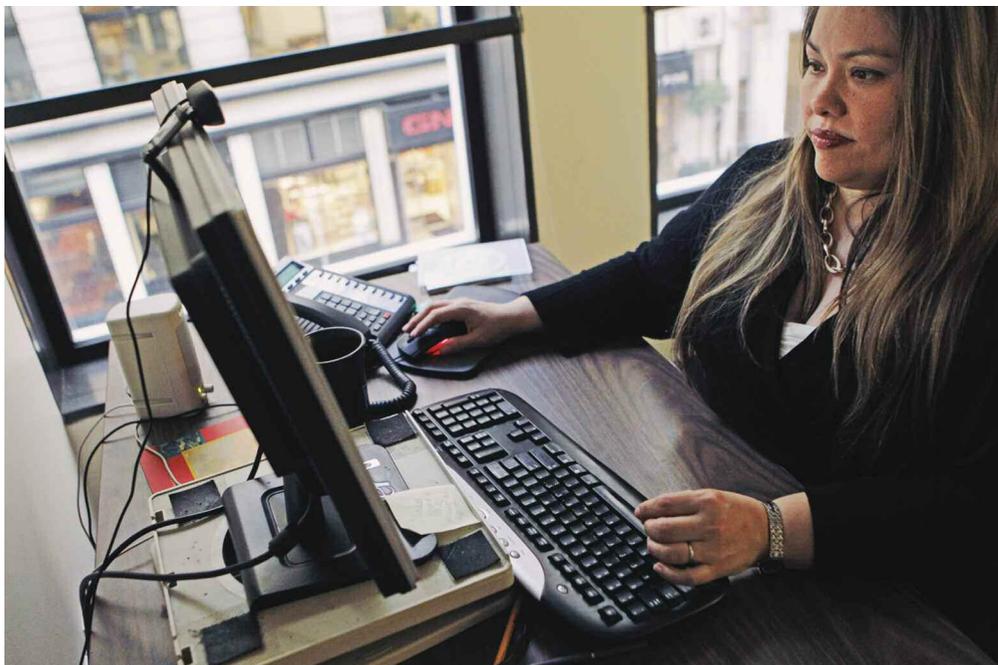
have worked hard to shift the victim-blaming narrative and policies that allow girls to be criminalized for their victimization and let abusers get away with exploiting them. The organization wants “to make it unequivocally clear that there is no such thing as a child prostitute,” Vafa says. “What we are actually describing are victims and survivors of child sex trafficking and serial child rape.” The campaign, she says, “interrogates the oxymoron of the ‘child prostitute’ both in our language and in our laws, to make clear that if a child is not old enough to legally consent to sex and if our federal laws define them as victims of human trafficking, then how is it that we are criminalizing and incarcerating these young women and girls for prostitution offenses?” As part of the campaign, Rights4Girls petitioned the Associated Press to stop calling trafficked girls “child prostitutes” in news stories.

In 2015 Congress passed a law encouraging all states to adopt safe harbor laws. The same year, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution stating that “there is no such thing as a ‘child prostitute.’” The resolution insisted that “children trafficked for sex in the United States should not be treated or regarded as child prostitutes” but rather as “victims or survivors of rape and sex trafficking.” The resolution concluded emphatically, “Children in the United States are not for sale.” In April of 2016, the Associated Press announced that it would no longer use the term “child prostitute.”

According to Lloyd, there are no girls arrested for prostitution at Rikers Island today because New York City has adopted an explicit policy against arresting minors found in prostitution. But many girls elsewhere still experience arrest and punitive treatment, says Jennifer Rodriguez of the Washington D.C.-based Youth Law Center, which works to improve the lives of young people in foster care and the juvenile justice system. And many adults who exploit them still get away with it.

According to Vafa, Epstein “fits the profile of the typical sex buyer ... successful, fairly affluent, white, middle-aged men.” Wealthy white men like Epstein, with expensive lawyers and political connections, are rarely held accountable for exploiting and abusing girls and women. Instead, most men prosecuted for sex trafficking are poor, young black men.

“If you’ve got money, you can hide in all kinds of ways,” Lloyd says. “Maybe



“What we see in cases like this is how victim status is discretionary and reflects whose suffering and what suffering is deemed worthy of attention. Far too often people exploit those who they know others will not believe. It’s not that these young people are voiceless, it’s that people do not listen to them.”

—ALEXANDRA LUTNICK

not everybody’s got an island, but you do live in a gated mansion, and you’ve got a driver, and you’ve got staff to clean up after you, and give the gifts so you’re not giving actual cash. You can put all kinds of layers between you and any visibility.”

While Epstein was unusually wealthy, his methods were similar to that of most traffickers, who groom their victims with gifts, attention and affection. While Epstein was luring them with his mansion, a private plane and hundreds of dollars, men with less money lure girls with a hot meal or a shoulder to cry on, Lloyd says. “The levels might change, but the underlying intent of control and manipulation is exactly the same.”

And often, as in the cases of former gymnastics physician Larry Nassar and R&B singer R. Kelly, people surrounding these powerful men not only fail to intervene but even facilitate their crimes, like the woman who recruited Araoz, or Epstein’s secretary, who paid her. Rodriguez asks, “How did all of the other people who were aware, or got a sense, or a vibe, or a piece of information, how did they not feel like it was their responsibility to keep these girls safe and do something?” Even police and prosecutors like Acosta, who gave Epstein the lenient plea deal, fail to hold men who exploit girls accountable for their crimes.

“The fact that the plea deal was concealed from over 30 of his victims shows how the criminal justice system can be yet another exploiter of these young people,” says Alexandra Lutnick, author of *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: Beyond Victims and Villains*. “It takes a lot of bravery to come forward, as these young people did, and talk about what happened to them. When we do not listen to young people, we send the message that they do not have the same rights as other people; we reinforce the message that they are disposable. This also sends a message to people like Epstein that these young people are easy targets because no one cares about them.”

The power disparity between the perpetrators and their victims is an important reason why men are able to get away with exploiting girls. These men target vulnerable girls and manipulate their weaknesses, including their longing for adult care and protection. These young people are often “marginally housed or homeless, in foster care and not getting their needs met, living in abusive and violent homes with parents or guardians [or are] young people who may be housed but have none of their other basic needs provided for,” Lutnick says. Many have histories of previous sexual abuse or other trauma, which perpetrators exploit. And unlike most of the girls alleged to have been targeted by Epstein, they are disproportionately girls of color (although boys also experience commercial sexual exploitation).

“They are the ones who fall through the cracks,” Vafa says, “the ones who are not likely to be missed if they are missing from school or missing from home or foster care placements, and they are also the girls that when they come forward are the least likely to be believed because of their marginalization.”

And often, “these are young people who are not considered ‘good victims,’” Lutnick says. “What we see in cases like this is how victim status is discre-

tionary and reflects whose suffering and what suffering is deemed worthy of attention. Far too often people exploit those who they know others will not believe. It’s not that these young people are voiceless, it’s that people do not listen to them.”

And in a society that sexualizes girls and glamorizes prostitution, exploitation is normalized, Lloyd says. Men who go after young girls are often seen as normal, even “fun.” The same year Epstein allegedly raped Araoz, Trump praised his friend: “I’ve known Jeff for 15 years. Terrific guy. He’s a lot of fun to be with. It is even said that he likes beautiful women as much as I do, and many of them are on the younger side.”

The federal case against Epstein is a promising sign that society is beginning to hold men responsible for their sexual exploitation of girls. “The #MeToo movement has been really pivotal in terms of shaping the public consciousness and creating a collective culture of accountability that has demonstrated that no individual is above the law,” Vafa says. “This is why we have seen individuals like Bill Cosby, R. Kelly and now Jeffrey Epstein being held to account.”

But while accountability for men such as Epstein is important, it’s just as important, advocates say, to support exploited girls and to address the societal factors that make girls vulnerable to exploitation.

“Our society as a whole has not made a commitment to value the humanity, worth and dignity of children, and in particular girls, and to ensure that our daughters are safe and valued,” Rodriguez says. According to a report by Rights4Girls, a “sexual abuse to prison pipeline” has kept sexually abused girls from getting the help they need and makes them even more vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation.

While increased awareness and new policies have led to progress in identifying exploited girls through the criminal justice and foster care systems, still lacking are adequate

services for them, Vafa says. Often sexually exploited youth are placed in group homes without consistent, nurturing caregivers who are trained in how to treat their trauma.

An exception is McGrath's Chance Program in Florida, which offers specialized therapeutic foster care services that place young people individually with intensively trained foster parents who are supported by trained clinical staff available 24/7 and survivor youth peer mentors. McGrath says the program has served more than 200 exploited youths ages 12 to 17 since 2013. Advocates are fighting for more and better services like this.

Lloyd also argues for more attention to the root causes of girls' vulnerability to exploitation, such as poverty, failing schools, lack of affordable housing, unjust immigration policies, racism, gender inequity and misogyny. "Trafficking is the Trojan horse that gets us in the door to begin to address some of these deeper underlying issues."

A COSTA RESIGNED IN JULY AS labor secretary. With Epstein's death and the criminal case against him over, his victims may find some compensation through the civil lawsuits they are now filing against his estate. And the investigations into Epstein's conspirators are continuing.

"The powerful and wealthy enabled Epstein. The well-connected both participated in the sex trafficking ring and aided in its concealment and perpetuation," Araoz's attorney, Dan Kaiser, told NBC News. "They will now be held accountable."

In addition to the Manhattan U.S. attorney's continued investigation of Epstein's accomplices, Florida Rep. Lois Frankel (D) has called for a congressional inquiry. "The death of Jeffrey Epstein does not end the need for justice for his victims or the right of the public to know why a prolific child molester got a slap on the wrist instead of a long prison sentence,"

she said. "With the obvious end to criminal proceedings against Epstein, it is important that the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Reform begin its investigation immediately."

The Epstein case is a microcosm of how our culture tolerates men's abuse of women and girls as "boys will be boys" and then blames the victims afterward to justify excusing the abuse. Men (and boys) use their cultural, economic and political power to normalize the abuse and then to cover it up.

But could the full revelation of Epstein's criminal enterprise change things? Will the scandal surrounding the Acosta sweetheart deal give pause to other prosecuting attorneys around the country dealing with similar cases? Will Epstein's conspirators be revealed and charged? And will the wealthy and powerful men who assaulted the young girls under Epstein's control be revealed to the public and charged with child molestation and statutory rape?

After filing her civil lawsuit, Araoz declared her defiance in a *New York Times* op-ed: "I used to feel alone, walking into his mansion with the cameras pointing at me, but now I have the power of the law on my side. I will be seen. I will be heard. I will demand justice."

Women and girls are speaking out loud and clear about their experiences of abuse. Prosecutors and the public are now listening. Holding powerful perpetrators and their conspirators accountable is long overdue.

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—FLORIDA REP. LOIS FRANKEL (below)



AP PHOTO/ANDREW HARNIK