Competing Discourses about Youth Sexual Exploitation in Canadian News Media

Elizabeth M. Saewyc, PhD, RN, FSAHM, Bonnie B. Miller, BA(hons), Robert Rivers, MA, Jennifer Matthews, MSc., Carla Hilario, MSN, and Pam Hirakata, PhD

Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

Abstract

Media holds the power to create, maintain, or break down stigmatizing attitudes, which affect policies, funding, and services. To understand how Canadian news media depicts the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth, we examined 835 Canadian newspaper articles from 1989–2008 using a mixed methods critical discourse analysis approach, comparing representations to existing research about sexually exploited youth. Despite research evidence that equal rates of boys and girls experience exploitation, Canadian news media depicted exploited youth predominantly as heterosexual girls, and described them alternately as victims or workers in a trade, often both in the same story. News media mentioned exploiters far less often than victims, and portrayed them almost exclusively as male, most often called ‘customers’ or ‘consumers,’ and occasionally ‘predators’; in contrast, research has documented the majority of sexually exploited boys report female exploiters. Few news stories over the past two decades portrayed the diversity of victims, perpetrators, and venues of exploitation reported in research. The focus on victims but not exploiters helps perpetuate stereotypes of sexual exploitation as business or a ‘victimless crime,’ maintains the status quo, and blurs responsibility for protecting youth under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Health care providers and researchers can be advocates for accuracy in media coverage about sexual exploitation; news reporters and editors should focus on exploiters more than victims, draw on existing research evidence to avoid perpetuating stereotypes, and use accurate terms, such as commercial sexual exploitation, rather than terms related to business or trade.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) came into force in 1990 and is currently signed and ratified by 194 of 196 member nations, including Canada. Article 34 asserts that children should be protected from all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation including, “coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity; exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices; exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). Canada ratified the UN convention in 1991, which has led to an entire generation having grown up under these policies and recommendations (UNICEF, 2007). In 2000, the UN introduced an additional optional

protocol, ratified by Canada in 2005, which focuses on the “Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography” (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2000). Article 2 of the Second Optional Protocol provides definitions for the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography. Section 153(1) of the Criminal Code of Canada defines sexual exploitation as the betrayal of trust between an adult and a youth up to age 18 through invitation of direct or indirect sexual touching (Department of Justice Canada, 1985a, 1985b). The British Columbia Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) defines sexual exploitation as “a form of sexual abuse that occurs when a child engages in a sexual activity, usually through manipulation or coercion, in exchange for money, drugs, food, shelter or other considerations.” (2007, p. 24).

Sexually exploited youth follow multiple pathways to exploitation, and face significant life challenges and health issues resulting from exploitation and the stigma associated with it. The variety of terms used in the research literature for explaining sexual exploitation is a testament to the complexity of the issue. These include but are not limited to: sexual victimization (Gidycz, Orchowski, King & Rich, 2008), sexual abuse (Senn, Carey & Vanable, 2008), child or juvenile prostitution (Yates et al., 1991), trading sex, survival sex (Chettiar et al., 2010; Kidd & Kral, 2002; Tyler, 2009), and sex work (Mehrabadi et al., 2008; Stoltz, et al., 2007). This paper uses *commercial sexual exploitation* to describe the issue, recognizing that it encompasses any exchange of sexual activity with a child or youth for money, food, transportation, drugs, housing, or any other good or service.

In the largest study of sexually exploited youth in Canada to date, five surveys conducted among 1,845 vulnerable youth aged 12 – 25 years living in British Columbia provide evidence about some of the factors associated with increased risk of sexual exploitation (Saewyc, MacKay, Anderson, & Drozda, 2008). Gender is not a factor in vulnerability to sexual exploitation: boys and girls are equally represented in populations of commercially sexually exploited youth (Saewyc et al., 2008; Saewyc et al., 2006; Walls & Bell, 2011) and among those who exchange sex for drugs in schools (Homma, Nicholson, & Saewyc, 2011). Sexual orientation, on the contrary, has been associated with greater risk of exploitation (Saewyc et al., 2008; Saewyc et al., 2006; Yates et al., 1991). Adolescent females enrolled in the Montreal Street Youth Cohort, for example, were more likely to report sexual exploitation over the course of the study if they had a female sex partner, although there were very few youth who fit into this category (Weber, Boivin, Blais, Haley & Roy, 2004). Similarly, both male and female sexual minority street-involved youth in British Columbia were two to five times more likely to be sexually exploited compared to heterosexual youth (Saewyc et al., 2008). In a recent US national population health study of homeless youth, those who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender were significantly more likely than heterosexual youth to report sexual exploitation (Walls & Bell, 2011).

Ethnicity is also associated with increased risk of sexual exploitation (Edinburgh, Saewyc, Thao, & Levitt, 2006; Tyler, 2009; Walls & Bell, 2011). In British Columbia, interviews with key Aboriginal informants indicated that Aboriginal youth were over-represented among sexually exploited youth (BC Ministries of Child and Families, Attorney General, and Health, 2000; Sethi, 2007). In their study of sexual exploitation among 762 street-involved adolescents in BC, Saewyc and colleagues did not find Aboriginal youth were more

likely to be exploited; however, since 54% of their survey participants were Aboriginal, although Aboriginal youth comprise less than 6% of the general population, they concluded Aboriginal young people were over-represented among street youth, and therefore among sexually exploited youth. Based on interviews with Canadian grassroots organizations working with sexually exploited youth, Aboriginal youth are likely to be trafficked for sexual exploitation within Canada, following a rotational pattern of cities (Sethi, 2007). Walls and Bell suggested these ethnic vulnerabilities may be due to fewer opportunities or lower socioeconomic status of racial minority youth (2011). Sethi (2007) suggested that Aboriginal youth are over-represented due to effects of colonization and residential schools, leading to poverty, isolation, drug abuse, and gang involvement, all of which also contribute to higher rates of sexual exploitation.

Sexually exploited youth often come from home environments that are sexually and/or physically abusive (Bagley, 1999; Schissel & Fedec, 1999; Senn, Carey & Venable, 2008). Youth who experience sexual abuse by family members are more likely to be sexually exploited (Saewyc et al., 2008). In a meta-analysis of studies published about child sexual abuse, a strong link was found between child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation (Senn, Carey & Venable, 2008). In two recent studies from the United States, including one national population health survey, exploited youth were frequently homeless or street-involved (Tyler, 2009; Walls & Bell, 2011). In BC, more than 1 in 3 street-involved and marginalized youth have been sexually exploited (Saewyc et al.). Among street-involved youth under 18, only 20% were living at home when they were first sexually exploited, and for the majority of street-involved youth, sexual exploitation occurred after leaving home or becoming street-involved (Saewyc et al.).

Many researchers have examined the link between sexual exploitation and substance use. Based on narratives of 58 sexually exploited youth in Toronto, Kidd and Liborio (2011) suggested that substance abuse can be both a pathway to sexual exploitation and a coping mechanism for the trauma of sexual exploitation. Saewyc et al. (2008) also found that sexually exploited street-involved youth in BC were significantly more likely to have used heroin, cocaine, and amphetamines compared to non-exploited youth. In qualitative interviews with 29 street youth in Ontario, sexually exploited youth spoke of substance abuse as a “slow suicide” (Kidd & Kral, 2002). These two risk trajectories, sexual exploitation and substance abuse, greatly increase the odds that youth will contract HIV or Hepatitis C (Haley, Roy, Leclerc, Boudreau & Boivin, 2004; Kidd & Liborio, 2011; Mehrabadi et al., 2008; Tubman, Langer & Calderon, 2001).

Stigmatization of sexually exploited youth can lead to isolation and lack of access to support. Some youth have internalized this stigma, leading them to form an identity that is tied to their victimization (Holger-Ambrose, Edinburgh, Langmade, & Saewyc, 2013). Sexual exploitation has been associated with suicidal ideation and internalizing behavior problems, including anxiety and depression, as reported in a prospective study of college women (Gidycz et al., 2008). The result of stigma and criminalization of sexually exploited youth is that those most in need of services are also most likely to hide their activities (Benoit, Jansson, Millar, & Phillips, 2005; Pheterson, 1990; Pheterson, 1993).

The words used by empirical research and popular media hold significant power to create, maintain, or break down stigma. The term *commercial sexual exploitation* is based on the understanding that children and youth are victims of abuse which they have not chosen within an illegal “business” and which results in negative health outcomes. Terms such as teen prostitute, juvenile delinquent, or sex worker imply voluntary participation or consent to engage in prostitution (Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2010; Sethi, 2007). Through the deliberate or inadvertent use of particular terms, popular media may seem to legitimize exploitation and further stigmatize sexually exploited children and youth as willing agents (‘prostitutes,’ ‘hookers,’ or ‘sex trade workers’) in an economic market where they trade services for financial compensation (Walker, 2002; Weatherall & Priestley, 2001). On the contrary, a youth victimization lens considers these same relationships as sexual abuse, where childhood and adolescence is corrupted or ruined by the abuse (Kitzinger, 1997).

Critical Analysis of Media Discourses of Youth Sexual Exploitation

The news media wield the power of words to catch the attention of the community, and their word choices can create or challenge stereotypes about young people who have experienced exploitation (Walker, 2006). News media can draw public attention to the issues and raise awareness about the complex situations exploited teens are trying to survive; or, they can tell the stories in ways that sensationalize the issues, minimize the exploitation, and further stigmatize the teens who experience this abuse (Fairclough, 2001b). This control over language practices and meaning structures diminishes marginalized peoples’ participation in discourse concerning them, and constructs stigmatizing beliefs as popular discourse (Van Dijk, 1988a; Van Dijk, 1988b). This is not a trivial power; the news media help shape community attitudes and understanding, and this in turn can affect policies, funding, and the existence of services (Walker, 2006).

Media actively shapes subject focus, debate, and communications strategies for issues such as sexual exploitation (Dorfman, 2003). So how accurately do news media across Canada depict the lives and issues facing sexually exploited youth in our country? Our study sought to answer this question by examining newspaper stories throughout Canada and comparing them to existing research about sexually exploited youth, focusing on what is depicted, how those stories are told, what language is used, and who is missing from the depictions in news media. Our research about street-involved and incarcerated youth in British Columbia, Canada provides one of the largest studies of sexually exploited youth in Canada (Saewyc et al., 2008), to compare to the dominant media discourse on sexual exploitation. The purpose of this study was to identify the extent to which empirical findings contradict or affirm dominant media representations of sexual exploitation.

Methods

Data Sources

News articles in national, regional, and local newspapers published between 1989 and 2008 in Canada were retrieved using the Canadian Newsstand Complete index. The terms related to sexual exploitation that were used for this search are outlined in Table 1. All search terms were combined with variations of the word “youth” (adolescent, teenager, teen, adolescence,

children, child). We considered the search complete when the articles that we had already identified began to reappear and we reached data saturation. Articles with duplicate content but published in different papers across the country were included as separate articles; these articles were understood to represent a unique media exposure for a particular geography, as well as to reflect a larger audience and wider distribution for a key story.

More than 900 articles were retrieved in our search, but upon examining each article's content, we identified a number of news stories that did not refer to sexual exploitation of children or youth as it is defined in law and in this paper. For example, we excluded articles that were solely about adults engaged in commercial sex work, or about "prostitution laws" focused on adults. We also omitted articles that may have used the term "sexual exploitation" but actually described incest, or a sexual relationship between an adolescent who was older than the legal age of sexual consent and an adult where there was no exchange of sex for money or other consideration, but rather, an abusive sexual relationship. We also excluded articles reporting on the polygamy case in Bountiful, BC, as the use of the term was primarily related to adults, or to adolescents involved in "marriages" older than the legal age of sexual consent. Thus, a total of 835 Canadian newspaper articles published between 1989 and 2008 were retained for our discourse analysis.

Mixed Methods: Content and Critical Discourse Analysis

A mixed methods approach was used in this large study of Canadian news articles: quantitative content analysis guided the coding of our data, and critical discourse analysis informed the interpretation of the coded variables and text-based narratives. Content analysis is a method of information extraction in media and communications studies in which quantifiable data on content from many types of texts and sources is collected (Manhanello & Blake, 2010). Critical discourse analysis examines context and process in the interpretation of text, with the intent to uncover multiple discourses on a particular topic; in this case, the sexual exploitation of youth was the focus of the discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992). This method acknowledges the discursive nature of power relations, which mediate the relationship between text and society; it posits discourse as a vehicle for social action. Texts were viewed as social actions that normalize identities, and both inform and are informed by sociopolitical structures. Critical discourse analysis enables researchers, service providers, and marginalized youth to recognize structures and forces of power that operate through language and communication in order to challenge, counter, and rewrite sexual exploitation discourses from an experiential perspective (Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, & Benoit, 2006).

Coding was conducted using the software NVivo version 8, which allowed us to examine the frequency of terms within the data. A codebook was developed to ensure consistency in coding across the large number of news articles, and to help categorize data for both quantitative and qualitative analyses. We identified the following primary categorical codes: geographic region, date, size/type of newspaper, type of story (whether an individual episode, a policy or law change, research, or event to raise awareness), genders of exploited youth and perpetrators, age of victims, venue(s) of exploitation, sexual orientation of victims, level of choice attributed to victims, and what victims traded sex for (i.e., money,

drugs, shelter, food, clothing, transportation, or gifts or other commodities), as well as extraneous factors leading to exploitation.

Analyses first involved identifying the frequencies of articles in which various terms or content were present, noting particularly when the preponderance of news articles did not include some key information or made statements that was contradicted in the existing research. We then examined individual articles and types of articles for the tone and word choices they used to describe sexual exploitation, victims and perpetrators, contexts of exploitation and reasons for the phenomenon, and considered the extent to which these reflected potential stereotyping, were affirmed or countered by the research evidence, or offered a value-laden perspective on the situation that might influence public perceptions. Finally, we considered the full set of articles from the most recent 10 years in exploring how the repetition of various elements across many of the stories and the choice of details included or excluded in the news articles might shape the discourse about sexual exploitation, especially in ways that contradicted or ignored key findings from the research evidence.

Findings

The number of articles published within this period increased dramatically from 109 articles in the first decade (1989–1999) to 726 articles published between 2000 and 2008 (see Figure 1). The largest number of articles was published in the year 2000, with 152 (18.2%) stories covering youth sexual exploitation. This may have been due in part to the series of media company mergers that occurred during that year, which consolidated newspapers and other media, and created greater availability of articles through the news wires. Figure 2 shows the proportion of articles by province and territory; most stories were published in British Columbia (41.4%), Ontario (27.3%), and Alberta (10.9%). Nearly half (47.8%) of the articles were published in large newspapers such as *The Province*, the *Globe and Mail*, and the *Calgary Herald*, which achieve an average circulation of 200,000 to one million copies per week.

Sexually Exploited Youth: “Victim” or “Worker”?

The Canadian news articles in our sample described sexual exploitation in varying ways, in terms of the sexual exchange itself as well as the characteristics of those who are exploited and the perpetrators of sexual exploitation. Sexually exploited adolescents were commonly described as “children,” or the more casual or patronizing “kids,” in nearly half of the articles (46.2%); as “youth” or “young” in 42.5% of the articles; and as “underage” in 7.4%. They were described less commonly as “victims” (in 21.3%), although just 16.5% of articles explicitly used the term “exploited” or “exploitation” to describe them as victims. However, they were also labeled as “workers” in 13.8% of the stories, while the word “prostitute(s)” was explicitly mentioned in 33.2% of the stories. In some articles, they even used slang terms for sex workers, such as “hooker,” although this was less common after 2000.

Some stories positioned exploited youth as victims of sexual abuse:

Girls as young as 11 work the streets, and to call them prostitutes is to trivialize what's really going on. It's sexual abuse of children, nothing less. (*The Province*, Vancouver, BC; Nov 9, 1997, A50).

A 16-year-old girl is the latest victim of child prostitution in Peel region, a growing problem in Toronto's western suburbs. (*National Post*, Toronto, ON; Feb 28, 2005, A9)

In many of the news articles, as in the excerpts above, the image of the sexually exploited victim was framed as very young and female. They were called "girl(s)" in 14.8% of the articles. A competing discourse in several of the news articles, however, framed the exploited youth as a willing participant, engaged in business or trade:

She talks frankly and with chilling detail about her life as a prostitute, about how she became a hooker at 13 and practiced her trade in Victoria and Calgary. (*The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, ON: Mar 9, 1998, A4).

YOUTH PROSTITUTION A THRIVING INDUSTRY: JOHNS CONTINUE TO FEED SEX TRADE BUSINESS FOR YOUNG GIRLS. The idea of buying sex from children would make most people's stomach turn. Yet, it's a thriving industry that, as with all commerce, depends on supply and demand. (*North Shore News*, North Vancouver, BC: May 12, 2004, p. 3)

In these excerpts, characteristics of being young and female were once again present, but a marked difference was the implied individual agency attributed to the sexually exploited youth involved in a "business" or industry. In some news stories this agency is stated outright, not implied, as in the following quote:

"She was quite confident. When someone said why not be an escort, she didn't say no. She was a silent partner in her own exploitation," said Mr. Webster, who argued the woman was rebelling against her parents. (*National Post*, Don Mills, ON: Jun 13, 2008, A10)

In these and similar articles, victimization was largely replaced by a perspective that appears to blame youth for their sexual exploitation:

Kids have a little trouble at home, or they can't get money from their parents, and they run away... the kids rebel and say, 'Hey, I can make more money than mommy and daddy!' (*Calgary Herald*, Calgary, AB: Sep 29, 1993, A18).

In a number of the articles, these two discourses—victim and worker—were actually incorporated into the same story, often into the same paragraph, as, for example, in this article: "Children as young as 13 work as prostitutes in Calgary. They are not hookers, they are victims of child abuse." (*Calgary Herald*, Calgary, AB: Mar 02, 1996, A21). Even in recent years, news stories included language that described sexual exploitation of youth in terms of work, profession, or business:

HUNDREDS OF YOUNG GIRLS WORK WINNIPEG'S SEX TRADE...a local school trustee and the executive director of Ndinawe Youth Resource Centre...sees children every day who have been sexually exploited, she said. "The majority of people working the streets are under 18... You don't see a lot of older sexually

exploited women because they just don't live. It's a very unsafe profession." (*The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, ON: Feb 21, 2007, A1)

Gender of Exploited Youth

Just over half of the articles (55.7%) in the sample mentioned the gender of the sexually exploited youth. In our analysis, we also examined implied gender, for example, describing female advocates who were formerly sexually exploited, with no specific mention of the gender of exploited youth. In the majority of articles that mentioned gender, victims were explicitly (63.4%) or implicitly (6.7%) described solely as female, often as "girls." Males were the only focus of only 6.5% of articles, and were implicitly referred to in less than 0.5%. The idea that both boys and girls could be exploited was mentioned explicitly in 18.9% of articles, and implicitly in 3.9% of articles. Transgender youth were mentioned in only 1 article.

Thus, 93% of articles mentioned girls as victims of exploitation, and fewer than 30% mentioned boys. Yet findings from several studies, of both street-involved youth and general populations in Canada, the U.S., and even Norway, challenge the discourse that sexually exploited youth are mostly female. Among younger street-involved youth in Canada, 1 in 3 youth reported exploitation, and males and females were equally likely to be exploited (Saewyc, et al., 2008). Similarly, in a study of youth in school in rural eastern British Columbia, 2% of students reported trading sex for drugs, but there were equal rates of males and females (Nicholson, Homma & Saewyc, 2011); a study in Norway found similar rates of male and female students trading sex for money (Pedersen & Hegna, 2003), as did Walls and Bell (2011) in their US national study. Further, in another national U.S. study of adolescents, Edward, Iritani, and Hallfors, (2006) found more than two-thirds of those who traded sex for money, drugs or other goods were male.

Sexual orientation is virtually absent in Canadian media discourse about sexual exploitation, with mention of the sexual orientation of victims in only 14 articles (fewer than 2%): 9 of those mentioned gay youth only, and 5 talked about lesbian, gay and bisexual youth. In contrast, research among street-involved youth showed that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth experience disproportionate risk of sexual exploitation compared to heterosexual peers (Marshall, Shannon, Kerr, Zhang & Wood, 2010; Saewyc et al., 2008; Walls & Bell, 2011; Weber, Boivin, Blais, Haley & Roy, 2004; Yates et al., 1991). Thus, Canadian media stories seemed to primarily portray the image of the young, heterosexual female as both victim and willing 'worker' in the public discourse on sexual exploitation in Canada, but ignored the more complex reality of sexual minority males and females as victims of exploitation.

Sexual Exploiters

Nearly 3 in 4 articles mentioned those who exploit youth. Among these, terms used to describe exploiters include "pimp" or "pimps" (in 24.6% of the articles), and "john" or "johns" in 21.6%. In 11.9% of the articles, they are portrayed as predators:

We have a problem in this country, and in this world I believe, where there are people out there who are sexual predators and they go after our most vulnerable, which is our children, our youth... (*Leader Post*, Regina, SK: Mar 29, 2008, A1)

In 5.6% of articles, exploiters were portrayed as “customers,” or “consumers,” in 3.4% as “recruiters,” or as community members engaging in activities within a market-based society: “Their customers are members of the Greater Victoria community and attitudes must change...” (*Times-Colonist*, Victoria, BC: Nov 6, 1997, p.1). Similar percents of articles also described them as “pedophiles” (3.9%) or “offenders” (4.1%).

Using terms such as “customers” and “consumers” perpetuates a public understanding of sexual exploitation as work or business, rather than victimization. This type of discourse disregards Canadian law and erodes the awareness of prostitution of children and youth as a human rights violation. Even articles that used terms like exploiters or predators in describing pimps often also referred to customers, drawing some distinction between those who pay for the sexual exploitation and those who offer the exploited youth, as in the following: “...create mandatory and harsher penalties for pimps who prey on juvenile prostitutes. Customers are not expected to be targeted.” (*The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, ON: Dec 13, 1995, A1). Some articles combined the discourse of predators with that of customers, even in the same sentence: “I talked to the kids selling their bodies and watched the customers circling like wolves closing in on their prey.” (*The Province*, Vancouver, BC: Oct 9, 1994, A6).

Gender of Sexual Exploiters

The majority of Canadian news stories characterized exploiters as mostly males (76%). In contrast, research among younger street-involved and marginalized youth found that both males and females sexually exploit youth (Haley, Roy, Leclerc, Boudreau & Boivin, 2004; Saewyc et al., 2008). In a 9-city study of 762 street-involved youth age 12–18 in British Columbia, nearly 1 in 3 sexually exploited youth reported being exploited only by women, half reported only male exploiters, and 1 in 5 reported exploitation by both males and females (Saewyc et al., 2008). Indeed, the majority (79%) of sexually exploited young men reported trading sex for money or goods with women, and 58% exclusively with women. In a study of male street youth involved in sexual exploitation in Montreal, 32% reported only female clients, 41.3% reported only male clients, and 26.7% reported clients of both sexes. Of the 54.7% who reported ever having vaginal sex with female clients, 85.7% reported unprotected vaginal sex (Haley, Roy, Leclerc, Boudreau & Boivin, 2004).

Of greater concern is the extent to which descriptions of perpetrators, especially their gender, were missing from the sexual exploitation discourse altogether. Only 307 out of 835 or just over 1 in 3 Canadian media articles mentioned the gender of exploiters. In 63% of the stories on youth sexual exploitation, the exploiter was not described or characterized at all. The disproportionate mention of victims without mentioning their exploiters can potentially reinforce the notion of this as a “victimless crime”; it means less responsibility is placed on the purchasers for the continued problem of sexual exploitation in Canadian society, despite a growing amount of research about them (Lowman & Atchison, 2006).

Venues of Exploitation

Very few of the articles actually described where the exploitation takes place, and most of them used specialized terms specific to a type of exploitation rather than an actual location.

Over ten percent of articles in our sample described the type of exploitation as “trafficking,” 5.8% described it as “sex tourism,” and 2.9% as “street walking.” In contrast, a 2006 survey of street-involved youth in British Columbia found that 18% of street-involved sexually exploited youth reported being exploited on the street (Saewyc et al., 2008). “Trick pads,” which are hidden rooms or apartments run by gangs where youth are kept for exploitation, were reported as venues of sexual exploitation in 9% of the articles; this is similar to the 12% of youth surveyed in ‘It’s Not What You Think’ who report exploitation in trick pads. Hotels were described as venues of exploitation in 5% of media stories, but research findings suggest this is a more common venue for exploited youth, with 18% reporting being exploited in hotels.

Discussion

News media is a structured sociocultural practice where writers and editors shape and interpret stories about people, places, and events for their readers. Media influence is recognized as actively shaping the focus of the debate and communication strategies for issues such as sexual exploitation (Dorfman 2003). Canadian print media typically depicted specific images of sexual exploitation, such as the older teenaged girl engaging in “street work.” Few stories described the range of victims, perpetrators, and venues of exploitation that experiential youth report. Few accurately portrayed sexual exploitation as a crime against children and youth, a violation of their rights under national and international law. Consequently, a stereotypical image of sexual exploitation is being perpetuated in Canadian society. This image may contribute to stigma, and reduce societal willingness to locate the source of the problem with those who exploit youth, and with the contexts that contribute to risk for exploitation, rather than with the young people who are being exploited.

Discourses are created through the exclusion as well as inclusion of specific information. For example, there was little discussion of exploitation faced by certain groups of youth, such as males or those who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual. The absence of this information in media coverage is problematic, because it adds to the invisibility of these victims. It makes it difficult for such exploited youth to recognize what is happening to them, or to expect their stories to be acknowledged and believed. Further, it potentially influences the availability of health and social service programs for sexually exploited boys and young men, or for sexual minority girls and young women, and makes it challenging to create services that will reach out to them, meet their specific needs, or to even see the need for services for such groups of sexually exploited youth.

The minimal presence of the exploiters in Canadian media discourse adds to the invisibility of the perpetrator. It promotes the continued perspective of youth sexual exploitation as a “choice” of immoral or criminal behavior on the part of children and youth, as “work” or a business with customers, and directs the responsibility for the exploitation away from the exploiters. The discourse in media stories ignored female exploiters, rendering this form of exploitation invisible, creating difficulties for police to even recognize exploitation by women. Indeed, programs such as “John School,” aimed at rehabilitating offenders, implicitly assume that all sexual offenders and exploiters are male.

The language used, whether sensational or denigrating, sympathetic or concerned, primarily centers the attention on victims in ways that can further stigmatize, objectify, and shame them. It does not focus the moral outrage or the onus of action on those who pay for sex or trade other goods or services for sex with minors, but focuses on changing the victims. While supporting victims and raising awareness to prevent further victimization are important points of action, where are the campaigns on raising awareness that children and teens should not be for sale? There have been very few of them, almost exclusively focused on girls (see, for example, the Minnesota Women's Foundation campaign, "MN girls are not for sale," documented at www.mngirlsnotforsale.org). Where are the legal remedies that make it possible for victims to come forward in safety, without risk of repercussion? How is it that sentences for those convicted of sexual exploitation appear to be less stringent than for those convicted of animal cruelty? We contend that the absence of focus on exploiters, rather than victims, maintains the status quo and a pool of available victims, especially since some of those who pay for sex from minors are powerful people within the legal system, such as judges, lawyers, and police officers.

Likewise, in our examination of two decades of news articles, we found very little shift in discourse. There was a fairly regular repeat, every few years, of stories that pointed out sexual exploitation is abuse; however, the competing discourse of youth as workers in a business, and exploiters as customers or consumers, remained persistent throughout, often in the same stories. Until reporters and editors consistently characterize sexual exploitation of children and youth as a violation of their rights, without recourse to terms from commerce and business, the two competing discourses will continue to blur the discussion about societal responsibility for Canada's treaty obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The current inconsistent discourse will continue to influence society's thinking and willingness to act on the issue of sexual exploitation of children and youth.

Limitations

There are several limitations to our study. We retrieved only print news media in our sample of Canadian media through an internet-based indexing source; television, radio, and online news sources may have had similar or very different coverage of these news stories. Media stories from other countries that could be viewed by Canadians may not have been included in our sample, unless they were re-published verbatim in a Canadian source. As well, each year, a growing numbers of newspapers digitize their back issues and add them to on-line indexes; were our search conducted across the same time range today, it would generate a number of additional articles, mostly from smaller local papers that have been added to the Canadian Newsstand Index since our search. Even so, the large number and broad range of stories in our study, and the key points from existing research that guided our analyses, created a large amount of data, and provided less opportunity for in-depth consideration of any one aspect of the stories. Further exploration of the different types of stories, regional variation in coverage and content, and consideration of headlines (which are usually created by a separate editor), are all areas we could not include in this paper, and may offer further insight into the discourse prevalent in Canadian society.

Recommendations

These findings lead to recommendations for future research, for health care practice, and for media. Future research must focus on sexual exploiters, in particular their characteristics and the ecological contexts that shape their behaviour. This research would better inform policies and programs to stop sexual exploitation at its “demand” side. Further research might also juxtapose historical events in Canada with sexual exploitation discourse, to better understand the history of language use and national/international human rights for children and youth. We need research to assist service providers and community members to find youth who are hard to reach, by comparing the locations of sexual exploitation that are focused on by media and those identified by research. It is also important to understand who says what about youth; police, lawyers, politicians, community organizations, and youth themselves all claim to speak for youth, and while all may have important elements to contribute to the discussion, ensuring youth have a voice about their own experiences and about what may help can offer important insights (Holger-Ambrose, Langmade, Edinburgh, & Saewyc, 2013). This would in turn help educate those groups who communicate to the public through the media.

Health care providers have the opportunity to be advocates for accuracy in media coverage about sexual exploitation. When speaking to the media, health care providers must be very careful to choose non-gendered pronouns, or include multiple genders, and use the term *commercial sexual exploitation*, so as not to perpetuate stereotypes. It is also important that health care providers not make assumptions about all victims of sexual exploitation based on the few individuals they have seen. They must recognize that their case studies represent only a narrow range of possible types of exploitation, so they should only speak from a place of personal experience, and respect those limitations on their understanding. Practitioners should consider the importance of research evidence in informing practice, as well as guiding the development, implementation, and evaluation of health services and programs for sexually exploited youth. Well-informed health care providers can develop innovative ways to help hard-to-reach youth, and make useful services available for support and healing.

Finally, news media should seriously consider changes to their practices, which are detrimental to sexually exploited youth. Journalists and editors must recognize that these youth are victims of abuse and trauma, and their articles should use language and describe the contexts in ways that demonstrate sensitivity to exploited youths’ nonconsensual situation. This recently occurred in Minnesota law, for example: As of August 1, 2011, the *Safe Harbors for Sexually Exploited Youth Law* replaced the phrase “juvenile prostitute” with “sexually exploited youth,” added the definition of sexually exploited youth to the child protection code, identified sexually exploited youth as children in need of protection and services (CHIPS), and specifically mentioned that a child who has been hired for or offered to be hired for sexual acts should not be considered under the term “delinquent child” (87th Legislature, 2011, 1st Special Session, Chapter 1, Article 4, www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/?key=58182). News media should use language and pronouns that reflect the equal risk of exploitation to both boys and girls, young men and young women, as well as transgender youth, so that all youth can access programs and services that are gender-sensitive or gender-

inclusive, without additional stigma for being male or transgender. News articles should also put the spotlight on exploiters, rather than portraying sexual exploitation as a victimless crime; exploiters are responsible for legitimizing sexual exploitation as a money-making enterprise. Finally, editors must take responsibility for rewriting sensational titles to more accurately reflect the experiences of victims of sexual exploitation rather than perpetuating stigma and stereotypes.

Words do matter, and can contribute further harm to children and youth who have already been exploited. In the competing discourses around the characterization of sexual exploitation in the news media in Canada, let us remember who may be affected by our choice of language. Let us choose to shift the discourse to more accurately reflect their lives, and their human rights.

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Figure 1.
Frequency of sexual exploitation news articles by year, 1989–2008

Figure 2. Geographic distribution of sexual exploitation news articles, 1989–2008

Note: Nunavut first became a province in 1999, halfway through the years included in the search

Table 1**Study Search Terms**

Sexual exploitation + youth (adolescent, teenager, teen, adolescence, children, child)
Child prostitution
Prostitution + youth (and all related youth terms)
Sex trade + youth (all related youth terms)
Sex work + youth (all related youth terms)
Brothels + youth (all related youth terms)
Trafficking + youth (all related youth terms)
Pornography + youth (all related youth terms)