

LOVERBOYS

THE STORIES BEHIND THE LOVERBOY PHENOMENON



CONTENTS

The story of Nora,
victim of a loverboy

Julie De Ceuster: "The
loverboys
phenomenon is not an
issue worth of
attention in Belgium"

Rapper Sevi: "That
whole pimp hype gives
hip-hop a bad name"

Foreword by Patsy Sorensen,
Director of Payoke

Welcome, dear reader,

From day one Payoke was confronted with young women who end up prostituting themselves under the eyes of their boyfriend. This is not a classic form of prostitution. It concerns vulnerable teenagers who are deeply in love and are ready to do anything for the "great love of their life".

Victims of loverboys have low self-esteem, even though they often feel confident about their relationship. Many of them have a history of sexual abuse in their childhood. Their parents are usually hard-working people who are hardly ever or never at home.

All of a sudden, a handsome boy or man comes along and breaks the cycle of loneliness with loads of attention and gifts. The girls fall in love and lose their heart to these men and also their mind.



In this info magazine you will find the moving testimony of Nora, a Belgian victim of loverboys from Antwerp, who was exploited for twelve years in prostitution. She describes how the perpetrators work and the vicious circle victims get caught in. Payoke is very proud of Nora. She has grown into a confident woman and will soon start working as a trainer for Belgian police officers to help them recognize loverboys and their victims.

It is not easy for victims to reach out for help. They do not want to be labeled as an 'ordinary' prostitute. In seven months former Payoke street worker Julie De Ceuster saved 22 girls and one boy from the grip of their loverboys. Then she tried to set up a secure shelter, but her plans were met with blindness and lack of interest by the police, aid workers and politicians alike. Since then it has become eerily quiet around the loverboys issue.

With this prevention campaign, Payoke wants to put the topic of loverboys back on the agenda and start a discussion about the lack of support services for their victims. Is there a place for them? Why is there still not a secure shelter for them in our country?

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Payoke vzw
Leguit 4
2000 Antwerpen
03 201 16 90
email: admin@payoke.be



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MISSING GIRLS EXPLOITED BY LOVERBOY

The public prosecutor demanded thirty months jail and a 5,500 euros fine for Ryas W. (35). The 'loverboy' from Deurne cajoled a 16-year-old girl from the Netherlands into prostitution in our country.

At the end of July 2011, Tatiana B. from the Netherlands was reported missing. Tatiana B. did not want to go into institutional care and fled her country. In Antwerp she met loverboy Ryas W. (35) He showed interest and willingness to help and took her to his apartment in Deurne. In Deurne the young victim pretended to be an adult to work as an escort.

The public prosecutor demanded for loverboy Ryas W. a prison sentence of 30 months and a fine of 5.500 euro. "The accused used the big age difference at his advantage to abuse the young victim ', according to the prosecutor, "He was only after big money."(HN, 7/05/13)

LOVERBOY DISAPPEARS WITH 16 YEAR_OLD GIRL

A 23-year-old man from Turnhout with a criminal background of drugs and incitement to prostitution, has disappeared without a trace with a 16-year-old girl from Limburg since Tuesday.

Sofie P. had told a friend she wanted to run away. He warned her parents, who immediately contacted the police. The parents barely knew of the existence of their daughter's friend. They had never seen him.

"Shortly after their disappearance we learned from an ex-girlfriend of his that he had forced her into prostitution. Hence, a loverboy.

Sofie is a shy girl, the perfect victim for such a guy. He must have turned her completely crazy, otherwise she would never do such a thing. "(GvA, 5/10/12)

BOY WHO EXPLOITED GIRLFRIEND IN PROSTITUTION RECEIVES SUSPENDED PRISON SENTENCE

On Monday the Correctional Court of Antwerp sentenced 19-year-old Abdelhalim M. to one year imprisonment with suspension. The loverboy had manipulated a 15-year-old girl from Borgerhout to such an extent that she prostituted herself for him through the dating sites of TMF and VT4.

A second defendant, who helped arrange the prostitution business, was sentenced to twelve months with conditional discharge.

Abdelhalim M. met the girl over the Christmas period of 2005 on chat. The adolescent fell madly in love with him. She gave him the money that she stole from her parents and grandparents for him to buy all kinds of luxury goods. He threatened to end their relationship if she would not keep on giving him money. When her boyfriend wanted to buy a car she started to prostitute herself.

The second defendant, Said E.H., offered his sister's apartment in Merksem for the appointments. The customers were found through the dating sites of TMF and VT4. She would have six customers a day, and had to charge them 150 euros per hour. Said received 30 percent of her earnings, the rest ended up in the pockets of Abdelhalim. In total, she handed them some 2.700 euros.

When she found work through a customer at a massage parlor, she broke contact with Said. In revenge, he told the girl's mother what she was doing. On August 30 last year the mother pressed charges.

The court found sufficient evidence that Abdelhalim and Said were guilty of sexual exploitation and sexual assault against a minor. They admitted having had sex with the girl, but claimed they did not know that she was only 15. The court rejected the defense and found them guilty of flagrant abuse of the teenager's inexperience and vulnerability. (BvL, 11/06/07)

LOVERBOY FORCES RUNAWAY GIRL INTO PROSTITUTION

The Correctional Court of Tongeren sentenced a resident, a 26 year-old man from Peer, to twelve months in prison, half of which to be served, because he incited a minor from Bocholt to prostitution.

The girl was at the time thirteen-fourteen years old. The man threatened that he would hurt her or kidnap her if she wouldn't accept to work for him as a prostitute.

The judge considered the defendant also guilty of stalking because he repeatedly harassed the girl by telephone and stalked her on the way to and from school. The man denied all accusations. According to him the girl's parents had asked him to check on her and keep her safe.

The requests and threats, he maintained, were merely fabrications to 'test' her, he said.

The judge, however, considered the explanation preposterous and deprived the man of a number of liberties for ten years. (BvL, 15/02/08)

MISSING GIRL (16) IN THE HANDS OF A
LOVERBOY?

Els K. (16) from Limburg Kinrooi has gone missing since Thursday. The Dutch girl was last seen Thursday biking to school, but she never got there. The family is afraid she might be in the hands of a loverboy.

Investigators from the police of Maasland, staff from Child Focus and the Office of the Prosecutor's Counsellor of Tongeren have been looking for the girl for four days. The police in neighboring countries is also investigating, as Els might have crossed the border.

In the Netherlands, the story has been extensively covered in the newspaper. Els's story was also covered in the Missing Persons TV show. The website reports of more cases of young girls who are believed to be victims of loverboys. (Vandaag.be, 18.11.13)

*"Why do you always
want to be with your
family? Am I perhaps not
good enough for you? "*

*"I do not want you to see
those friends again. "*

*"You can make a lot of
money"*

"Come on, sniff a line."

*"I called you 20 times.
Why didn't you answer
the phone?"*

*"Sorry I hit you. You
know how much I love
you."*

TOGETHER WE'LL REACH THE TOP

a testimony by victim Nora



. I HAD NO
SELF-
RESPECT
ANYMORE.
BACK THEN I
DIDN'T EVEN
KNOW WHAT
THAT WORD
MEANT.

Nora (32) is a beautiful and intelligent woman with a great sense of humor. But behind her smile is a hideous story of drugs, violence and exploitation. For twelve years she was exploited as a prostitute by several loverboys. She has since completely cut loose from that environment and now wants to warn young people about the dangers of loverboys.

As a child Nora lived in a lavish mansion in Antwerp. Her parents, a hard-working couple, were hardly ever or never at home to look after her. For years, Nora was secretly abused by her grandfather. The abuse began when she was barely four years old and lasted until she turned twelve. It was an agony that played a major role in the exploitation she would experience again later in her life.

RUN AWAY TO SURVIVE

"My childhood was a nightmare," says Nora staring into space. "I've been through a lot of disgusting things." She talks about the abuse by her grandfather, but also about the bad relationship between her parents. "My mother cheated on my father, who turned a blind eye to keep the family together. As a child you learn to find such things normal."

"Your upbringing largely determines the standards and values you adopt later in life as an adult. For me that was heavy shit. The loneliness at home became too much to bear, and also the years of abuse by my grandfather kept haunting me. My subconscious could not handle that anymore. Everyone has a naturally built-in defense mechanism. If a situation becomes physically or psychologically unbearable, you have to make choices to survive. It's also possible that you make the wrong choice."

"I ran away from home and went to live in a cheap, run-down studio. I barely had any money and hung around the street more and more often. I searched for love and affection those things I hadn't had back home."

"I met Aziz H., a handsome Moroccan boy who sure had a lot of stuff to show off. He always drove by slowly in his luxury car when I was hanging out with my friends. Now I laugh at those men, but as a sixteen-year-old girl I was impressed. He had a nice apartment and gave me expensive gifts like perfume, jewelry, clothing, etc. At the time ostentation meant a lot to me. I fell in love and moved in with him. It was just like a fairy tale."

"One day, out of the blue, he asked me to have paid sex with his uncle. We needed some money urgently, so I agreed. It was a whole bizarre experience to be a sixteen year-old girl standing naked in front of a man in his sixties. The memory of the years of abuse by my grandfather did not really help. It was a disgusting experience. At the time I was not doing drugs yet and completely sober. Still, I was kind of high, one strange state of mind in which you end up in an effort to survive. Paid sex was easy money, though. How else could I eat? I was sixteen and I had hardly earned any money as an intern. Aziz was unemployed. "

FINDING HAPPINESS TOGETHER

Little by little Nora was getting caught up in the nets of her loverboy. Without her realizing what was going on, he isolated her more and more from her friends and got her addicted to cocaine, a drug that he himself used on a regular basis. Based on accounts from other victims, Payoke has highlighted a common pattern in the way loverboys operate: gifts, love, drugs and, as a final step, initiation to prostitution.

Aziz told her " You can make a lot of money. You're beautiful, that will bring us a lot of money." "Aziz's brother had always tough stories about his past in the Antwerp prostitution scene. According to him everybody used to drive around in a Mercedes or in a Ferrari in the eighties. And even though that golden age was somehow gone, prostitution was still a booming business. His words sounded like music to my ears. I also wanted to live in luxury, with no worries about money and no headaches."

"My decision was made. I became a prostitute. I went to work in a prostitute club in Ghent and I immediately attracted a lot of customers. Since I earned a lot of money I moved with my friend into a lavish apartment. I wore nothing else but expensive designer clothes. The cocaine made the job bearable. The owners of that club have earned a lot of money thanks to me. They still make a lot of money today, at the expense of other naive girls entering the prostitution business. I have met many girls like that. I could not call them friends, as many were jealous because of my high income. Some girls working there had really nothing at all. I invited some of them to stay in my apartment with me and my friend. Aziz usually wanted to have sex with them. That obviously ruined our friendship. So you end up not having friends anymore."

PAYOKE HAS HIGHLIGHTED A COMMON PATTERN IN THE WAY LOVERBOYS OPERATE: GIFTS, LOVE, DRUGS AND, AS A FINAL STEP, INITIATION TO PROSTITUTION.

"It is very bizarre how you gradually lower your standards. I didn't judge him for sleeping with those girls because I myself worked in the sex industry. There were also customers who wanted a threesome, so how could I blame him? Whatever I did in my job became also the most natural thing in the world to do in my personal life. I had no self-respect anymore. Back then I didn't even know what the word meant. Aziz even gave me tips on the rates I had to charge my customers. It may sound odd, but I appreciated his 'advice'. I thought it was selfless help on his part. We were building something beautiful together. Together, we would reach the top."

COME ON, SNIFF A LINE

Nora earns a lot of money in prostitution. Loads of money. She does not see any problem in Aziz's being a joint holder on her bank account. After all, he is her great love. The Mercedes and BMW are under his name. But suddenly Nora starts noticing something unusual. More and more often large amounts of money disappear from her account and her questioning was not appreciated.

"I earned about seven hundred euros per night. Amazing, right? You have no more money worries", says Nora with a smile. "If I asked money for clothes or nails, he gave it to me. Aziz was not stupid you know. We both enjoyed our expensive lifestyle. He dressed like a real gangster: an expensive Rolex, a gold chain and a very expensive coat. In ten years we have spent hundreds of thousands euros on drugs, alcohol and parties. But our account was often inexplicably empty. When I asked him about it he got pissed off. I felt guilty then. If you wear only brand clothes and spend 250 euros per week on a pedicure, do you really have the right to complain about money?"

"The more I earned, the more Aziz began to change his behavior. He became jealous and looked at me as his property. I had no social life anymore and he was constantly watching me. I had three mobile phones: one for important customers, one for regular customers and one for my family. Aziz kept them all under his control. After the job at the club, I went to work in the Ghent window prostitution. Aziz had a friend who always hovered near my window, and who was also a pimp. That man really kept a good eye on me. Meanwhile, I started to seek refuge in my world of drugs more and more often, and sniffed about three to four grams of cocaine every night. Aziz deliberately gave me cocaine. "Come, sniff a line." he would say, "Let's relax."

"After work, we would go to a restaurant. Then we would drive to our dealer and then straight home to sniff. That routine has lasted for at least eight years. Day after day. That's horrible, isn't it? "

"Actually, he was not very smart. He came from a disadvantaged Moroccan family full of pimps, dealers and junkies. They all pretended that their lifestyle was the most normal thing in the world. His family and friends were aware of my work in prostitution, but I didn't know that. They never brought it up. Sometimes they even asked me what was my job. I answered that I worked at Belgacom. They all played a part. It was like being in a movie."

BLACK AND BLUE

Nora suspects that her friend is transferring a lot of money to his family. Her suspicions are difficult to confirm, though. Aziz leaves no electronic trail (money transfers), but every week he withdraws large amounts from her account. Nora's feelings for Aziz, in combination with a growing cocaine addiction, make her ignore all warning signs. Meanwhile, her friend is becoming more and more aggressive.



"In addition to sniffing cocaine, we also used to drink one or two bottles of vodka a day. Aziz then became unbearable. When he was high on booze and drugs, he always wanted to have sex with me, but I didn't. I had people on top of me the whole day. You just want some peace in the evening. Sex with Aziz was terrible. The atmosphere in the house was deadly stressful. He hit me black and blue several times. I had bruised ribs, a concussion, a broken nose, and more. He destroyed furniture worth tens of thousands euros. He threw brand new TV sets out of the window in no time. Look, I was not easy to deal with, either. I fought back. But in vain."

"Aziz weighed a hundred kilos. Because of my drug addiction, I weighed just under sixty kilos. Our neighbours pretended they did not hear anything, even though I called for help. Not once did they call the police. When Aziz broke my nose banging with my head against the wall, I called the police myself. They came and asked me to leave the house. I was taken out of my own apartment although everything had been paid with my money. I freaked out. More police came. Then they made Aziz leave the house for an hour. I was given the time to pack my things and leave. I went back to my parents for a few weeks, but eventually returned to my friend. Why? Because I was addicted to cocaine. But also because Aziz blackmailed me. He threatened to tell my family about my job as a prostitute. One day, dead drunk, he met my sister on the street. He shouted: "Nora is a whore! She works in a window!" Then my sister told everything to my parents."

"For years I hid my life as a sex worker from my family. I lied to them and, in the meantime, I kept doing what I was doing. Still today, I can hardly look my father in the eyes. Probably that won't change for the rest of my life. I have done the worst thing a daughter can do to her father. It is difficult to understand how I've done that for so long. "

"If I had not been addicted to cocaine, I would have never become so dependent on Aziz. I'm sure about that. And that misery would have not lasted ten years. One day Aziz's brother shot a boy dead. At that moment I knew that I had to break for good with Aziz and his family. That is what I did. I regret that I didn't take that decision earlier. I stayed with that boy for ten years. Ten! That is my youth, my identity. Even though I hate him, he has become a part of my personality. That's horrible."

At last Nora wriggles free of Aziz after all those years, but history seems to repeat itself. Soon she falls in love with Nordin B., a Turkish pimp who claims to have a construction company. The company actually belongs to his brother, but Nora doesn't know it. Later she discovers that he even has a wife and a child.

Despite what she went through with Aziz, Nora believes all the lies that her new friend tells her. "He had beautiful eyes and was very persuasive," says Nora. "He was much shorter than me and when he was in his BMW you could hardly see his head above the steering wheel. I still cannot understand how I fell in love with him. He was crazy. Once he leaned next to me out of the car window shooting in the air with a 9 mm. I have experienced unimaginable things with that guy. One day it was too much. He demanded for the umpteenth time that I gave him all my money, but I had enough of it. I took his gun from the bedside table and ran after him with it. I never saw him again."

I STAYED WITH THAT BOY TEN YEARS. TEN! THAT IS MY YOUTH, MY IDENTITY. EVEN THOUGH I HATE HIM, HE HAS BECOME PART OF MY PERSONALITY.

Nora does not understand how she may have fallen in love with Nordin. She thinks that her cocaine addiction and the influence of the sex industry have played a role. But the abuse of her grandfather also played a major role in her proneness to loverboys. This is not unusual at all. At Payoke we see many victims of sexual exploitation who have been abused as children. In their adolescence they search for love and affection in dominant partners because they feel safe with them. This is how they end up in a vicious circle.

CYCLES OF VIOLENCE

Nora fell for tough men. They gave her a sense of protection. Not long after she had chased away Nordin B. she met Orkan D., a porter of Turkish origin. Nora thinks he's the love of her life. However, he appears to have morbid jealousy.

"I had high standards of living, lived in a luxury villa and earned a lot of money. When I arrived at my window in the morning, there was a long line of men waiting. They came just for me. During the day I was busy and I couldn't be reached most of the time. Orkan could not stand that. "Dirty whore!" I have been told a thousand times. He never came into the red light district. He hated prostitutes. He wanted me to break with the environment. I tried, I did it for him. But that decision obviously had financial consequences. He started to sell cocaine, and of course I had to help out. Eventually I went back to work as a prostitute. He did not seem to have any problem with it after all, because I could sell cocaine for him to other prostitutes."

"Orkan exploited me heavily. He had no money. Our rent, cars, clothes, dinners, I paid for everything. Strangely enough, he never wanted to take my money in cash. That was dirty money. He called it 'whore money'. But I could pay the invoices for his holidays in Turkey. He had no problems with that. What a sick mind."



"Just like Aziz, he came from a disadvantaged family, where there was a lot of violence. Every time I had enough and spoke out, I would get beaten up. Orkan practiced martial arts. If we had a fight, he would punch my nose. When I found out he was cheating on me with another girl, I left him. I was furious. Before I left I asked him to choose: me or the other girl. He beat me badly."

"To this day, it is still difficult to accept that someone has abused me so badly. What Aziz and Nordin have done to me, I can accept it. I don't care that much about it anymore. But when I met Orkan, I thought he was the real love for me. That hurts. A lot. I'm still struggling with it. If I met him in the street, I could do something crazy. After everything he did to me, I still wouldn't be able to control myself."

A NEW BEGINNING

Nora had enough of it: the coke, the violence and prostitution. Her life had become a nightmare from which she wanted to awake. To help her out, Payoke referred her to a rehabilitation clinic. She had electrodes placed behind her ears to restore her lymphatic system. But the therapy didn't work due to her extreme addiction to cocaine. Her nose was also badly injured from snorting and from the serious beatings by her loverboys. Nora underwent a painful operation, where a bone from her elbow was used to repair her nasal cavity.

"When you snort a lot of coke, it's like you start seeing things through a narrow tunnel. You do not realize it as long as the poison is in your body. I am very lucky that after all those years of doing drugs and sorrow, I still look good and didn't go insane. The rehabilitation program cost me several thousand euros but apparently it helped a lot. I have been abstinent for two years now, I live with my parents and even have a boyfriend. No tough, rough gangster this time, just a sweet, slender and intelligent boy. Burning bridges with that environment and everything connected to it is essentially a matter of willpower. I was determined in my decision. I had to quit that dog's life and for good."

"Obviously my parents are very happy to have their daughter back. I am clean and no longer into the prostitution business. My father and my mother are now separated, and yet we have a much stronger bond now than ever before. I'm very lucky I had a chance to turn to them after leaving the prostitution business, otherwise I would have probably ended up back into my window."

"There are many girls who don't have that safety net. They often end up worse off. That's why I would like to talk to students in high schools. Young people must help each other more. Most prostitutes start at a young age and they are more receptive when listening to a peer. Young people have to learn to recognize signs of exploitation and they must no longer be indifferent to each other's sorrow."

YOUNG PIMPS AND BITCHES

At Payoke we realized that actively involving victims in the fight against exploitation can be an effective tool to help them process their trauma. They struggle with all the injustice they suffered and want to act on it. Raising awareness among young people, for example, was a very important issue for Nora.

"Loverboys benefit from the social gap between the rich and the poor. They seduce their victims with glamour and glitter. I used to be very materialistic, like many teenagers nowadays. That is one of the many reasons why loverboys are so successful. On television you see nothing but advertising for brands such as Gucci and Prada. Those are things that a normal income cannot buy. Especially disadvantaged young people are staring blindly at all that inaccessible wealth. They want to wear expensive designer clothes, sometimes go to a tanning salon and drive a luxury car."

"Materialism has become the absolute norm in our society. People have become commodities. Merchandise. The message teenagers constantly get on television is that you have to get rich quickly and that it is ok to exploit women. Pandering has become trendy. A hype. To be successful you need to have loads of money and two chicks by your side. Then you're cool. Young people who don't get an education at home are prone to such ideas. They worship celebrities that glorify a pimp culture and give the wrong example."

"But 50 Cent doesn't really care about all this. There is really nothing cool about picking up a couple of girls in Schippersstraat on your luxury car. I want to get this message across young people. That beautiful car and those good-looking girls will eventually disappear. But in the meantime you have destroyed the life of two persons."

Raising awareness among young people is a key component in the fight against exploitation by loverboys. Nora has not yet sufficiently recovered from her trauma to face a class full of students and tell her story. However; she will soon start training Belgian police officers on how to identify and support victims of loverboys.

"He does not want me to see you again"

"It is only once. We need the money"

"I love you, but sometimes you look like a different man"

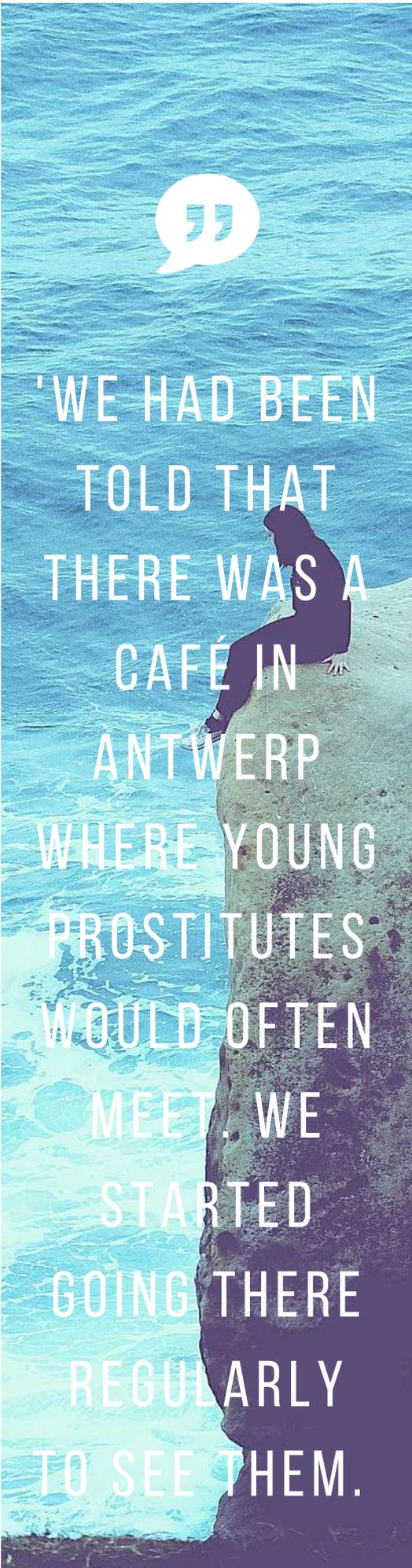
"Sorry if I did not answer the phone"

"How I got that money? That is none of your business"

"Those bruises? I fell"

"IN BELGIUM NOBODY CARES ABOUT LOVERBOYS"

Julie De Ceuster



'WE HAD BEEN TOLD THAT THERE WAS A CAFÉ IN ANTWERP WHERE YOUNG PROSTITUTES WOULD OFTEN MEET. WE STARTED GOING THERE REGULARLY TO SEE THEM.

Julie De Ceuster is an educator in an institute for special education. Fourteen years ago she worked as a social worker at Payoke taking care of minor girls exploited in prostitution. She assisted 22 victims of loverboys over a period of seven months. 'There was indeed a problem, even though the police and social workers would deny it. "

During a visit to Mental Healthcare (GGZ) services in the Netherlands, Julie and her colleague Kathleen Verdoodt find an awareness-raising brochure about loverboys in the form of comic strips. They recognize the same phenomenon they witness in their home town of Antwerp. Thanks to the brochure, Julie and Kathleen can develop a questionnaire to identify victims of loverboys.

'What do you mean by loverboys?

'We had been told that there was a café in Antwerp where young prostitutes would often meet. We started going there regularly to see them. After a while they felt confident enough to speak to us and we gradually won their confidence. It wasn't easy to get close to them. To their eyes, everyone was bad except for their loverboy. You have to gain their trust. That's why we had to be close to them, on the street.'

"If it came out from the first conversation that something was wrong with these girls, then we would try to make contact with a person of trust in their family. We would bypass the parents knowing the victims usually were not in good terms with them. They normally considered their parents the enemy number one. It was not easy to guide them. They were madly in love with their exploiters and often did not see any problem in this. If they ever filed a police report, they would withdraw it soon after."

'The victims we helped were mostly adolescents who wanted a little attention, tenderness and love. They were looking for someone who believed in them. It's not true that all victims were disadvantaged young people.'

"They came from all walks of life and had different backgrounds. That was incredible. First I thought that I would work with young people from families with little financial resources. But there was no pattern. I met girls who came from poor farming families, but also daughters of rich lawyers."

"There were certain recurrent personality traits. Victims usually had low self-esteem and would get easily addicted to a relationship, quickly growing attached to those men who praised them to the skies. That made them very prone to fall victims of loverboys. Their parents were mostly hard-working people who were barely or never at home. The girls would feel lonely and had nobody to turn to at home. They lacked love and affection. To their eyes their parents were wicked people who had abandoned them. They are often people with inner conflicts. And then suddenly a boy comes to them and gives them all the attention in the world."

"Besides Payoke, I also worked with other Belgian organizations that fight against human trafficking. They told me that they didn't have cases involving loverboys. I still have doubts about that. I think it was mainly a way to avoid responsibilities. In Belgium there is no attention to the phenomenon of loverboys. In seven months I have assisted 22 victims. And this was only in Antwerp, and with only two social workers. There was definitely a problem, even though it was denied by the police and social workers."



Until 2001 the Belgians had never heard about loverboys. But things change when Julie publishes the results of her work with loverboys victims in the annual report of Payoke For the first time in Belgium, this specific form of exploitation is given a name and a registered number of assisted victims. The media finally began to cover the loverboys story. Julie seizes the moment and talks to the cabinet of the then mayor of Antwerp Patrick Janssens.

The young social worker addresses the urgent need for specialized care and guidance for victims of loverboys. Unfortunately, her proposal is rejected. Julie feels that there can be no support from Belgian politicians, from the social services and the police; she gets disappointed and gives up on her plans to open a dedicated shelter.

Where are the numbers?

"Belgian aid workers and police always react with caution when there are loverboys involved in a case. They always say these are isolated cases. It is not clear how many victims and perpetrators are out there. The number of victims in Belgium per year is unknown because they are not registered."

"How could you possibly know that there are only a few isolated cases if no data is available to support that assumption? In seven months Julie and Kathleen provided assistance to 22 victims. In the Netherlands in 2012 there have been about 278 victims of loverboys registered by the Human Trafficking Coordination Center (CoMensha)."

Victim Nora told us about the impunity that surrounds the phenomenon. She was exploited for twelve years in the prostitution environment and knows the faces of her loverboys very well. She finds it frustrating that the majority of them can go unpunished exploiting victims for years at end. "For the police there is usually no wrongdoing unless someone ends up in a hospital. Either way, they don't have it easy", 'says Nora.

"Even when a victim gets enough nerve up to file a complaint against their loverboy, she would withdraw it soon after because of the threats she received."

"When it comes to stalking, threats and blackmail, the police can do very little " says Nora. "I myself have filed a police report against my loverboy and I withdrew it right away. In the end I gave him 10.000 euros to leave me alone. Victims should be entitled to police protection once they file a complaint against their loverboy."

Where can victims go?

Victims of loverboys are a special target group for first responders. They are mainly young Belgian girls. They are proud, wear expensive brand clothes and appear confident. As a result, people get the wrong impression that they are tough girls. In reality, they are often traumatized and don't dare to seek help fearing the social stigma that would come for having worked in prostitution.

Victims are at high risk of repeated victimization. Nora's story is an example. Deprived of love and affection at home, they take enormous risks for some attention. This makes them easy prey for exploiters. Experience tells us that many of these young people have been already sexually abused before they come in contact with a loverboy.

Even when they finally find the courage to ask for assistance, they still feel the urge to get back to their exploiter. Regular reception centers underestimate this dependency relationship or do not have enough human and financial resources to adequately respond to the girls' needs. Loverboys don't give up on their 'merchandise' so easily. There are examples in other countries where pimps or their accomplices break into shelters to get their victim back.

Because of their strong dependence on the exploiters, victims of loverboys need individual assistance day and night and are allowed contacts with friends and family only under supervision. The recovery process can start only when the victim has completely burnt all her bridges with the exploiter and his environment. That is why the location of the reception center must not be known to the exploiter. These traumatized young girls need a safe nest to relax. They need an enabling environment to point their lives in a new direction.

PEOPLE GET THE WRONG IMPRESSION THAT THEY ARE TOUGH GIRLS. IN REALITY, THEY ARE OFTEN TRAUMATIZED AND DON'T DARE TO SEEK HELP

Payoke offers victims of loverboys individual guidance and psychological and legal support. But because of our limited human and financial resources we cannot offer a shelter that can be kept secure at night. Where can victims of loverboys then go? There are no specialized reception centers in Belgium. Unfortunately the loverboys problem seem to receive no attention here.



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WHAT IS NEEDED?

A dedicated reception center

There is a need for a warm nest to allow victims to relax. A place that enables them to turn their life around.

Streetworkers

Their presence on the ground is essential. They need to become part of the girls' environment, slowly gaining their confidence and building a relationship of trust. The streetworker acts as a mediator who can reach out to the girl's parents, family or guardians.

Peer mediators

Payoke believes that peer mediation, conflict mediation by peers, is an important element in assisting victims. Most prostitutes start at a young age. Advice from a peer is often more influential to a teenager than advice from an adult, as teens speak the same 'language'.

Prevention

It is very important that young people learn how to recognize signs of exploitation by loverboys. This can be done through information material, but also through workshops.

Resources

All these services have a cost. Therefore Payoke will continue to emphasize the importance of increasing the resources allocated to the fight against pimps' exploitation.

"THAT WHOLE PIMP HYPE GIVES HIP-HOP A BAD NAME"

Sevi Geerts

"I could care less how she performs when she was in the bed. Bitch hit the track, catch a date, and come pay the kid." In his song P.I.M.P. rapper 50Cent proudly screams that he is a pimp. From "Big Pimpin" by Jay-Z to the porn career of Snoop Dogg, the hip-hop world glorifies the pimp. Payoke spoke with Sevi Geerts from the popular Belgian hip-hop band Safi & Spreej about the P-I-M-P hype.

Sevi (Safi, 23) begins composing hip-hop songs at the age of sixteen. In 2012 he releases his first album with Christophe Caboche (Spreej, 25) under the hip-hop label Eigen Makelij. Their debut album *On the spot, Rust* is so successful that the duo becomes popular also in the Netherlands. A year later both rappers sign a deal with the leading Dutch record label Top Notch. "It's something that for Belgian hip-hop artists was considered impossible."

Life or existence

Very soon you started performing in large music events like Pukkelpop. Were you expecting to become so successful?

"I never thought it could happen that fast. To us Pukkelpop was the proof that hip-hop in Dutch was finally taken seriously, also in Belgium. More than anything else, I like being the headliner. Actually, that was not the case at Pukkelpop. If you are facing a big crowd and you know that they have all come for you, that gives a kick."

"We have just returned from South Africa. We performed at the Absa KKNK Festival. There were thousands of people, we didn't expect it at all. It was an overwhelming experience. Our lyrics are in Dutch, so we were not sure the public would understand them. When we asked them if they understood, the crowd went crazy. You could really feel the love.'



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"Everybody used to advise me against dedicating my whole life to music. My parents told me that I had to find a real job. Music is a hobby, it won't give you a guaranteed income. But I went for it anyway."

"And here I am, paying my bills doing what I'm passionate about. It doesn't feel like work at all. I do what I like and can pay my bills with it. What could you possibly desire more than that in life?"

In your clip "Life or existence" you show a rich businessman lighting up a cigar with a burning euro note, sitting in his luxury mansion, and staring into the void looking painfully lonely. In contrast to many other rappers, wealth does not seem to be the ultimate goal for you. Why not?

"Hip-hop artists often talk about wealth and luxury. I am not rich. It would be silly to sing about that. I am the kind of person who finds it difficult to let go of things. I can let go only by writing. That is why I am so passionate about music."



"So, first of all, music is a way to channel my emotions. *Golden Spoons* is a song I wrote to come to terms with the death of my godfather. But my songs don't always have a heavy content. The song *It's just for you* is about parties, having fun and forgetting about your problems for a little while."

"To me and Spreej, a luxury life is not the ultimate goal at all. We perform for people who have little and yet are happy."

"That man from our video clip has everything, he's ridiculously rich, and yet he's lonely and unhappy. Money can make you happy, but not necessarily."

"I can now make ends meet with my music and that is enough for me. If I could buy a luxury car it would be great, but it's not something my happiness depends on. *Life or existence* is the message: live with what you have and make the best of it."

Why all those famous American rappers need to show off their wealth? Megalomania? Simply because they can?

"They are free to do what they like, if you ask me. I respect that. You need to look at the whole picture, though. Those rappers also talk often about their struggle to escape the streets."

"Where there is a lot of poverty there is also more crime. If you grow up in poor neighbourhoods like the Bronx, it is difficult to escape. Crime is everywhere. Many young people eventually end up in the drug trade. Take the famous hip-hop artist Notorious B.I.G., he was a crack dealer before he started making music."

"Birdman, the man who discovered rapper Lil Wayne, had started a hip-hop label to get young men off the street. Thanks to him they would earn their money, instead of stealing. I think that's a positive message: do not become a criminal, build your own future instead."

P.I.M.P

It has become a trend that more and more hip-hop artists who do not come from the streets also rap about gangster life. Why is that?

"I suppose they think that there is a lot of money to make with it. I think that they just imitate what they see on TV. When you hear your idols rapping on TV about gangster stuff, it becomes more socially acceptable to your eyes. Normally, as you become an adult you grow out of such a way of thinking and get a little wiser".

"Spreej and I have a few songs with rapper Hef. Some of his fans find us completely fake. On Twitter I read comments such as "fuck Safi and Spreej, they are not gangsters, they don't come from the street, what is Hef doing with them? Why does it matter, actually? We just make good music together."

"Everyone in his songs tells about where he comes from. 50Cent sings about street life because he's from the streets . I don't because I don't come from the streets. I was never in need. I say it also in *Life or existence*: except for a few love-wounds, I can't complain. So, you do not make music about street life. That would be pretty stupid. "

Many American rappers glorify pimps. Is that also the case in the Belgian hip-hop scene?

"Absolutely. Like I said, a lot of rappers do it because they look up at what they hear or see on TV. Willem from The Opposites puts the finger on this issue in his lyrics when he says: "be a little more yourself, watch less TV ". You can be authentic and be yourself or do what you consider to be genuine."

"I'm sure that whole pimp hype has an influence on young people. However, besides gangster rap, there are so many other things that can give rise to criminal behavior. Just like the lyrics of rappers, video games where you have to kill people can also make teenagers aggressive."

"I curse a lot because I spent my entire life listening to Eminem. That music certainly has an influence. But is it actually the one doorway to criminal activity? I wouldn't say so. "

What do you think of the P.I.M.P hype?

"I am not for the glorification of pimps. I do not consider women as inferior. I don't share that view. I respect women. To me they are not objects or merchandise."

"That whole pimp hype gives hip-hop a bad name. People who do not know much about the hip-hop culture end up associating us with crime. It paints all rappers in a negative light, including those who want to convey a different message."

"I once saw a comedy clip by Chris Rock in which he points at women who dance to music with humiliating and degrading lyrics. Their reaction was : "He ain't talking about me.... " from which he concluded "As long as the beat is all right, they will dance all night."

WHEN YOU HEAR YOUR IDOLS RAPPING ON TV ABOUT GANGSTER STUFF, IT ALL BECOMES MORE SOCIALY ACCEPTABLE TO YOUR EYES.

"As long as the beat sounds good, it seems that many women and girls do not care about the lyrics. The majority of listeners just don't pay any attention to what the music says. Spreej and I are trying to change this. There is also content, it shouldn't be only a catchy beat."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Until recently, Payoke did not have a budget for prevention campaigns. We are delighted that Soroptimist International Belgium (SIB), an organization that fights against all forms of violence against women and girls, has brought about change. Thanks to their support, Payoke is finally able to conduct a prevention campaign on loverboys.

On their 75th anniversary, Soroptimists handed a 15,000 euros check to Payoke. With this money we can fill the gap in our preventive activities. Up to now there was no budget available for prevention because the government does not allocate any funds for these activities. We are pleased that SIB recognizes the importance of prevention and is willing to invest in it.

With almost 95,000 members in 120 countries and territories SIB supports and provides financial assistance to projects benefiting women. "Violence against women and girls is a global pandemic reaching alarming proportions", says SIB.

"It occurs in all social classes, religious communities and geopolitical conditions and is deeply rooted in the inequality between man and woman.' 'It is our responsibility to deal with all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls', SIB said. "We think that it is essential that they learn to stand up for themselves and demand respect. Education is a powerful tool to achieve that goal."

"This is why we give Payoke the means to carry out awareness-raising and prevention activities. There is not enough attention around the topic of exploitation by loverboys."

Payoke is grateful to Soroptimists for their commitment to victims of human trafficking. With this prevention campaign we will work together on the topic of loverboys, to put it back on the agenda and start a discussion about the need for a dedicated shelter for victims in Belgium.