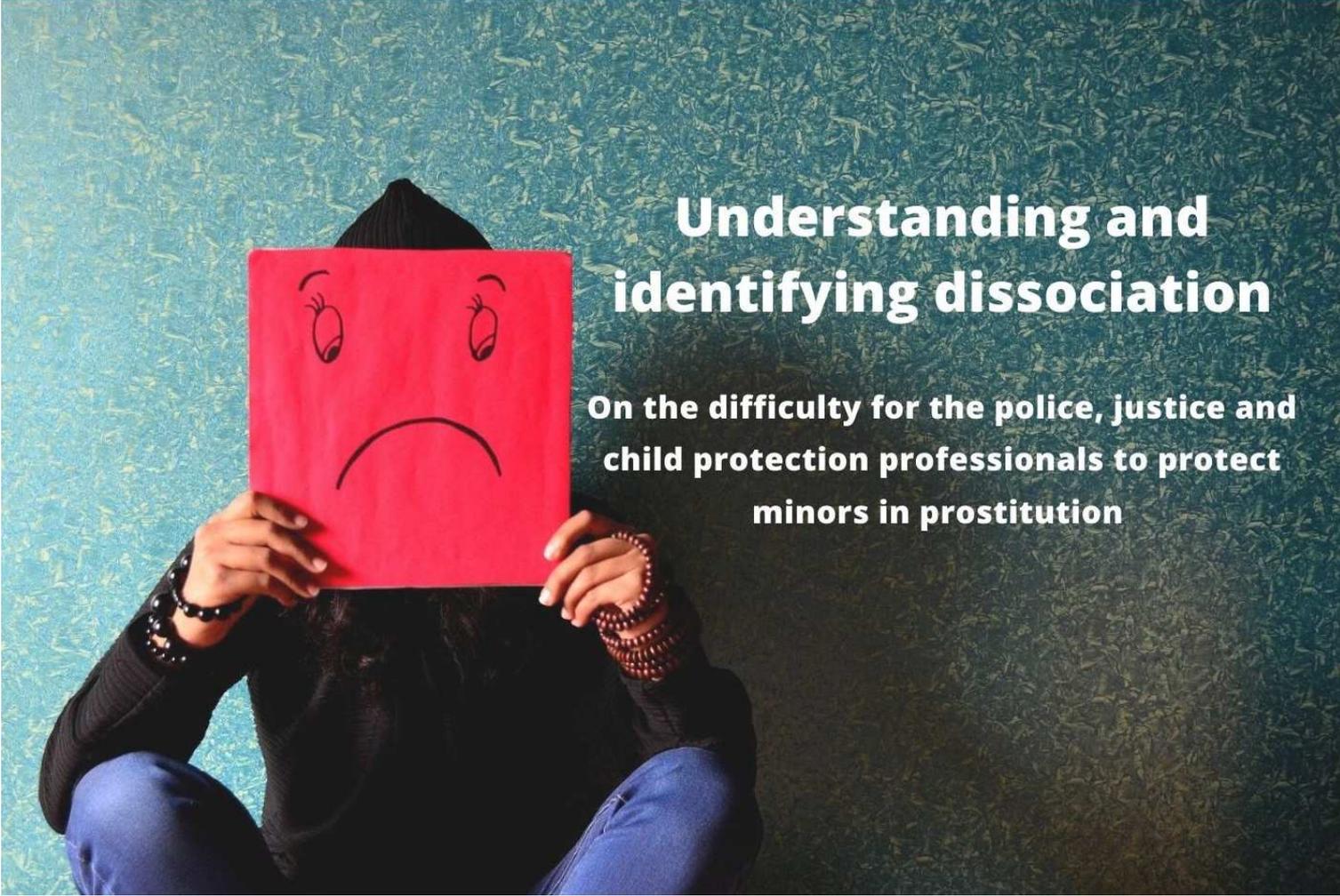




EXPERTISE NOTE OF THE OBSERVATORY



Understanding and identifying dissociation

On the difficulty for the police, justice and child protection professionals to protect minors in prostitution



I could feel a little like a princess, like someone special... it allowed me to tell myself that it wasn't so bad after all. I could forget all the moments of violence. Prostitution is really not about sex ... it's really about being reduced to the state of an object, it's losing your humanity », explains Andrea¹, 23, who has been in prostitution since the age of 14. The excerpt summarises the manifestation of a state of post-traumatic disorder (PTSD), often observed in minors in prostitution: dissociation.

Legal amendments to define prostitution are yet to be adopted. At the moment prostitution is not defined in the criminal code

but in a jurisprudence of the Court of Cassation from the 27 March 1996. Prostitution means "allowing physical contact of any nature, in exchange for a payment, in order to satisfy the sexual desires of another". Article 13 of the 4 March 2002 law on parental authority posits that any minor in prostitution is deemed to be in danger and must be protected by a judge for juveniles.

The phenomenon is often reduced to the exploitation of unaccompanied migrant or refugee minors, student prostitution, or prostitution in gang-ridden districts. Childcare professionals, however, note that minors in prostitution are usually young French girls

from 13 to 17 years old. To this day, it is estimated that there would be from 5.000 to 8.000 children in prostitution in France.

Prosecutors and educators observe that prostituted minors have been victims of violence (sexual, physical or psychological) and have gone through separations that have made them vulnerable. Andrea's case attests to that²: the young woman tells that she was raped when she was six. It is also often the case that the minors are already known to social services. "Your story is unusual: I have only come across few cases where the child puts him or herself in danger without the parents being neglectful" openly states the judge to Nina, a minor who survived prostitution³.

Dissociation: the key to make sense of it all

After physical or psychological aggression or any other traumatising event, a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) comes into place to protect against an imminent death threat. To keep living, the cerebral system will instinctively neutralise feelings of stress and powerlessness stemming from the atrocity of the event to repels them in the unconscious. Because of their overexposure to sexual violence in childhood – which is the case for 80 to 95% persons in prostitution – persons in prostitution will massively display the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. For an average exposure to traumatising events, the risk of PTSD is estimated to be only 24%⁴.

>>> For further information : [L'état de stress post-traumatique \(ESPT\) chez les personnes prostituées, Fondation Scelles, Janvier 2019](#) (only in French)

Among the different manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder, dissociation corresponds to the emotional anaesthesia, both physical and psychological, instinctively activated by the victim to survive danger. This phenomenon has been studied at length by psychiatrists, most notably by Dr Muriel Salmona, president of the NGO Mémoire Traumatique et Victimologie (Traumatic Memory and Victimology)⁵.

In her book *Le livre noir sur les violences sexuelles*⁶, she explains that when faced with a threat, the cerebral system naturally produces a **disjunction**. Biological endogenous drugs act as narcotics. Those substances have a double effect of increased tolerance and habit. As a result, the more the threat is frequent, the more the quantity is important, and so is the disjunction that operates spontaneously. In prostitution, that means that even though the increase in encounters with men worsens the trauma, it also gives the feeling of being painless.

It is in order to overcome this obstacle that victims adopt **dissociating behaviour**. They will take further and further risks to secrete more stress and increase the production of endogenous drugs and thus reach disjuncture.

Often persons in prostitution will also increasingly use **drugs** to facilitate dissociation (cannabis, hallucinogenic, major stimulants, opiate, tranquillisers...). To survive, Andrea tried to get rid of her emotions ending up in a vicious circle: "The more I went through a violent event, the more I needed drugs, and the more I took drugs, the more I went through violent things"⁷.

>>> For further information : [« Papa, viens me chercher ! » : Face-à-face d'un père et sa fille mineure, victime de prostitution](#) (only in French)

To understand the prostitution of minors, it is thus necessary to acknowledge that most of them have gone through traumatising events that have damaged their biological mechanisms of defence. That same vulnerability that made of them ideal preys of the system of prostitution will only be worsened by the situation of prostitution they find themselves in. As a result, when simultaneous disjunction and dissociation are absent, their brain will be bound to accept the more frequent and serious situations of danger. As the danger of the situation provides more efficient disjunction and release of endogenous drugs, the price to pay for the person and the seriousness of what she is exposed to will also increase.

Muriel Salmons continues her analysis by highlighting the depth of the trauma in the child⁸. While the adult victim may remember the positive events that came around the traumatic episode, the child cannot reassure herself or himself by projecting a comforting and optimistic future or past. *“S/he has to construct her or himself in a violent and incoherent universe, where s/he is in a perpetual state of insecurity”*, explains the psychiatrist⁹.

Hence, child professionals, often notice a ‘**parentification**’ of the traumatised minors. The “parentification” of the child is *“the process by which a child or an adolescent takes responsibilities more than his age or experience can deal with. In that sense, the child becomes a parent for her or his own parents”*¹⁰.

To survive, the child will develop an adult form of resilience. According to Muriel Salmons, that adaptation translates in a hypersensitivity to the “mood changes” and “desires” of her/his aggressors¹¹. The child will also isolate, increasing the distance with the adults around her or him who will not understand her/his attitude. Only other traumatised minors will and the child in question might open up with them.

More than the adult, the child will be cornered in to behaviour with deleterious dissociative risks (...) to survive. More than the adult she or he will feel painfully different from the others without knowing why and will increasingly see her or himself as a crippled of life

Excerpt from: « Le livre noir des violences sexuelles », Edition Dunod, Paris, 2013.

On the difficulty of understanding dissociation...

Dissociation is one of the “survival strategies” that Muriel Salmons has listed, along with running away and adaptation, all part of what is known as the “Stockholm syndrome”¹².

A study on the impact of sexual violence conducted by the association *Mémoire traumatique et victimologie* in 2015 has shown that **traumatised children** dread not being believed or having their testimony

questioned. As a consequence, they will retreat into silence¹³. This fear is in part justified by the fact that adults around them, be they their own parents or child protection officials – might adopt a “moralising and punitive discourse” because of a lack of understanding of or training on the situation

Herein lies a double contradiction: *“When victims are deeply hurt, the symptoms they show, instead of being linked to the violence and trauma will be associated to an underlying psychiatric pathology, thus labelling them as mentally ill. When the victims show no sign of ill-being, even the gravest acts of violence are underestimated: they wouldn’t be so serious, they could even be invented...”*¹⁴.

The difficulty to detect the dissociation lies in the fact that dissociation often results in detachment, in a state of affective indifference so that the dissociated child appears to be perpetually indifferent or disconnected.

Concretely, minors in prostitution refuse to admit that they are in prostitution or conversely will affirm that they “deal with it” and the “everybody does it”. They refuse to cooperate with social services and keep asserting to their parents, educators and psychologists that they are not in danger. When the person they speak to is unaware of their state of dissociation, he or she will deem the child to be quite “provocative” because the minors, the girls in particular, engage in multiple artifices (exaggerated makeup, fake lashes, fake hair, etc.) to hide their ill-being to try disappearing from the landscape. Only the phenomenon of dissociation can explain “why they are laughing instead of showing suffering”¹⁵.

... For investigation services...

As a consequence, investigations on the pimping of minors often alternate between the minors receiving *procès verbaux*¹⁶, custody to the parents and runaways. During that process, children might also refuse to attend psychological or psychiatric consultations or auditions from investigators. The police can only notice the absence of concrete elements to attest the ongoing prostitution. Beyond that, investigative services are saturated and

lack the material capacity to monitor websites and tap phones to dismantle large pimping networks. Those networks are often “micro-networks”, both ephemeral and highly mobile geographically. They are also clandestine since they function almost exclusively through social media. Those micro-networks are made up of one or two pimps, often boys, sometimes young girls. They find this criminal activity to be more profitable and less risky than drug dealing. Indeed, children in prostitution are sometimes exposed to fifteen male buyers of prostitution, which means that the pimps can collect up to thousands of euros for one day or night. Their exploitation also does not require any stockpiling or preliminary import, nor district to conquer and to manage. On that note, it has been noticed that prostitution

is shifting from public spaces to hotels or even flats rented through Airbnb. All of those elements mean that evidence remains porous and many cases are dropped.

Simon Bénard-Courbon, substitute in charge of prostitution of minors at the Tribunal of Bobigny, laments the lack of training of professionals on the prostitution of minors¹⁷. Just like in the French film *Polisse*¹⁸ where the officers of the Police Brigade for Minors laugh when a girl tells them with disconcerting that she accepted to do fellatio to boys to get her phone back, the police officers do not believe the children, notices the substitute.



Translation : “But you really cared about that cell phone, didn't you?”
Source image : <https://twitter.com/artefr/status/536632110996795392>

... For the juvenile court judges...

The juvenile court judges, just like prosecutors, lament their inability to protect the children. “*The police officers and social workers I meet are used to dealing with lost cases, less with girls like me*” observes Nina¹⁹. Magali Lavie-Badie, juvenile court judge at the judicial tribunal of Bobigny notes that social workers are uncomfortable talking about sexuality and prostitution with minors after having built a trusting relationship with them²⁰. She also adds that existing tools used by the juvenile court judge are not adapted.

Indeed, the uncanny behaviour of the dissociated minors coupled with the lack of training of institutions on the topic results in alerting about the situation when it is too late. Summoned to make an emergency decision, the juvenile court judge is not in a position to order judicial measure of educational investigation, a decision that would allow her or him to learn more about the child and her entourage. That investigation could, in turn, give the possibility to provide an educational measure adapted to the child. However, the judge cannot order a measure of educational assistance wherein a social worker

accompanies the child both in her family and at school. Indeed, that sort of assistances would require the parents to understand and accompany the child to help her exit the system of prostitution.

... For the professionals helping children...

Juvenile court judges often observe that given the emergency and the seriousness of the situation, only a affecting the children in foster care is a viable option. And yet, as Magali Lavie-Badie warns, such affectations often mark the “entry into prostitution”²¹. Numerous foster care homes have now become the ideal recruitment ground for pimps or what are called “*rabatteuses*”. The word originally means bringing down; in the context of prostitution it is the act of recruitment: some young girls who were victims of prostitution can later become pimps by trying to convince their friends to join. In that case, they are offered a ‘breakaway retreat’, which means that they are distanced for several weeks or even months to break away from the system of prostitution and engage in a dialogue on past events and their health. Often, though, dissociated minors fail. In her testimony, Nina explains that an educator for Social Help to Childhood had offered her a ‘two-week horse-riding session’ that she had categorically refused²².

Following a commercial logic, young minors placed in foster care are ideal, easily convincible preys, for the system of prostitution. Pimps trick them by giving them the illusion of romantic entanglement – the “loverboy” technique – or with drugs.

By acting this way, pimps create a relationship based on **stranglehold**. Largely known in cases of domestic violence, stranglehold functions in the exact same way with minors in prostitution. Pimps will drag the young girl into a cycle. That cycle begins with an initial phase in which the pimp seduces her and makes her promises: the “honeymoon” phase in domestic violence. After that, there will be phases in which he will be irritable stressed, exerting on her psychological or even physical violence with insults and threats. He will thus create an atmosphere of deep fear for the young girl, leading her to believe he is

essential to her since he “protects” her and that she cannot live without him. Finally, he will apologise and try to minimise his behaviour by coming up with excuses. This way she will lose her critical skills, her confidence, her benchmarks, increasing the state of confusion she is already in because of her young age. Stranglehold also explains why many parents struggle to remove their daughters from the hands of the “loverboy pimps”: “*To her, she is consenting. He is the one, but we can see that she is not doing well*”²³.

... On the necessity to heal traumatised minors

To protect minors and curb the system of prostitution, we must begin by treating the dissociation.

From a psychiatric point of view, that requires transforming the “traumatised memory” into an “autobiographic memory”, which means accompanying the young minor to realize the violence of the system of prostitution and the stranglehold she was subjected to in it. Treatments must provide meaning to minors so that they can exit their state of stunning and put words on the situation that traumatised them, enabling them to distance themselves from those. On the neurological level, the carer seeks a ‘**neurogenesis**’: a reparation of the cerebral block. Just like in an informatic system, it’s about “*rendering survival strategies useless*” and to repair the neuronal failures thanks to a “*professional mine clearer*”²⁴.

To achieve that, it is important to break the taboos that exist inside families. Just like sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) that have been surrounded with secrecy, Catherine Champrenault, Attorney General within the Parisian court of appeal, insists that parents must overcome their own suffering and feeling of failure to discuss that issue with their child²⁵. She admits that there is no magic formula but highlights the importance of not “*leaving the child alone in difficulty*”. The Attorney General asserts that sex education in the national curriculum either needs to be revised or introduced properly. Relays for

families, schools do not measure the extent of the phenomenon among young people²⁶.

It is important to maintain a positive discourse in the long term. Dissociation necessarily brings about a feeling of powerlessness. Nina's father explains: "It's really difficult seeing your daughter destroy herself and not being able to do anything about it", adding "any advice I gave her fell on deaf ears (...) to her, I can only be against her"²⁷.

Leaving dissociation is a perilous and lengthy process. Patience is key. When Nina was warned about the "psychological damage" she risked, she was convinced that that would not happen to her: "I won't have any damages, I'm really strong" she thought. Now she understands that the ones that looked after her were right: "When you do something intimate with someone you do not like, just out of interest, there are images that seep into your memory and that remind you how much you suffered to get that money. Images that you can never erase. But at the time such advice seemed ridiculous"²⁸.

To conclude, according to Raphaëlle Watch, deputy public prosecutor of Creil, the key challenge to defeat prostitution of minors is to "deconstruct the discourse that normalises the phenomenon and that pretends that as a voluntary and non-forced prostitution, it would be less serious than the ones enforced by trafficking or gangs. To advance this is to render invisible the violence inherent in the act of prostitution, that is the inevitable dissociation that the prostitute has to undergo to survive the act. Such mechanism is even more prejudicial when it affects the most vulnerable public of all: children in the midst of personal construction"²⁹.

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