



Listening to Olivia: Violence, Poverty, and Prostitution (Northeastern Series on Gender, Crime, and Law)

Jody Raphael

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For nineteen years, Olivia lived the shadowy life of stripper, streetwalker, and heroin addict on the fringes of society. Leaving a troubled home at age sixteen to land a seemingly glamorous job at a Chicago stripclub, she became trapped in a web of prostitution and drug addiction that eventually forced her onto the streets and into a world of hardship at the hands of abusive men. But Olivia, a resourceful, vibrant woman of color, ultimately escaped the prostitution lifestyle and is now director of addiction services at a community counseling program, working to support drug-dependent women.

Listening to Olivia is the compelling account of her descent into poverty and abuse together with her hard fought recovery. By assimilating new research on the women and girls in prostitution—in addition to their male customers—Jody Raphael discovers that experiences like Olivia’s are alarmingly common and argues that the sex trade as an institution promotes violence against women. Smashing both the common stereotype of the depraved streetwalker and abstract feminist arguments legitimizing prostitution as the sexual liberation of women, the author uncovers an emerging multimillion-dollar global trafficking industry that detains women in a violent cycle of exploitation and dependence. Olivia’s own insights on her turbulent childhood, stripping in clubs, soliciting on the street, drug addiction, brutal pimps, her three pregnancies, and her extraordinary transformation highlight important new questions: who are the men who buy sex from such poor, strung out women; and why are so many of these men so violent?

Olivia’s story gives a human face to the overwhelmingly low-income, non-white, and unempowered young women in prostitution today. Combined with a wealth of new findings, this gripping and accessible study challenges the academy, the legal system, and society as a whole to wake up and listen to the women like Olivia.



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