

## **“Is anyone available now? I’m willing to pay” – Youth in prostitution, at our fingertips.**

Pornographic videos, solicitation offers for thousands of shekels, and lack of enforcement • Even in 2021, the internet is far from a safe place for minors: we wandered through apps and dating sites and were exposed to a disturbing reality • "I provided him with sexual satisfaction in exchange for a shower and a bed." What really hides behind the euphemism “support”?

Written by Sapir Lifkin

“I’m 57, is that OK for you?” - This is how an online user replied when he discovered that he was talking to a 17-year-old on a dating site. Within minutes he offered "Support" - 1,500 NIS per meeting (approximately \$468). “I would love to meet every week,” he said. After a short back and forth, he went up to 3,000 NIS (approximately \$936) for the first meeting, “we’ll see if we have chemistry and go from there.” Another user was deterred for a moment by the age of young Adele but did not give up: "I believe you will be satisfied; let’s meet." Another user did not hesitate, even when he found out that there was a 16-year-old girl on the other end of the conversation. He was not bothered by the age but by two other questions: "Do you have a picture? What’s the rate to support you?”.

They, and many others, roam the web and prey: they look for paid sexual encounters, even with minors. The girl, "Adele," with whom the adults spoke, was created by us. The number of messages she received indicates what is going on, sometimes at the click of a button – solicitation for prohibited sexual acts and payment transfer. Every time we logged in to one of the sites where the exploitation of minors was booming, the mailbox was quickly filled with disturbing messages. In some cases, the messages even turned into conversations with obscene offers and a promise to pay.

What would happen if "Adele" was one of the many minors who use these sites? Unfortunately, we do not have to guess. A few teens agreed to share a bit of the life trajectory that led them to prostitution. The severe data collected is probably just the tip of the iceberg, and the fake profiles we opened tell the story most of us do not want to hear - the devastating world we have at our fingertips - online, in groups, on sites with whitewashed names – containing horrors that are difficult to stomach, and horrific exploitation of minors for prostitution, which scars them and takes a heavy toll.

According to official estimates, about 3,000 minors in the State of Israel are currently engaged in prostitution, and at least 970 of them are known to the Welfare Services. Informed sources presented a harsh reality to N12 Magazine, according to which at least 5,000 boys and girls who are sexually exploited live among us today. How does it work? It turns out that it's simpler than you might think and that there is a good reason to stand up and take action before the situation worsens.

The data published at the end of last January in the annual report of the Ministry of Welfare only reinforces this gloomy reality. The report indicates that Israeli social services know of 1,334 women and teenage girls in prostitution, 14% of whom are under 18. Additionally, it was noted that 30% of the women and teenage girls known to social services try to end their lives, 50% of them suffer from the complex post-trauma disorder, 40% suffer from diagnosable mental health problems, 27% were previously hospitalized in psychiatric hospitals, and 20% suffer from eating disorders.

When we contacted the Israeli Police and asked how many cases had been opened in the last six years for solicitation of minors for prostitution, how many of them were transferred to the State Attorney's Office, and how many indictments were filed, we encountered a refusal to provide us with the small figures, which the police does seem to have. Indeed, based on the data we received following the Freedom of Information request of the Task Force on Human Trafficking and Prostitution, it's easy to understand why the police chose a generic response and refused to expand. Between 2015 and 2019, only 120 reports were filed with the police for engagement in underage prostitution, 118 of which were transferred to the State Attorney's Office. In 2016-2020, no more than ten indictments were filed following the engagement in underage prostitution, only six of which were for the offense of soliciting minors for prostitution.

In 2021, underage prostitution was more common than one might think. The teens we spoke to stressed that they enjoy anonymity and are easily accessible to clients thanks to the internet. According to a national survey, as of 2016, there are 670 sex sites used for this purpose, and sources estimate that the numbers have only grown since then. For a week, we used several sites where attempts to lure minors into prostitution are booming. We launched a fake profile under the name "Adele" from Tel Aviv and introduced ourselves as a girl of different ages. First as a 17-year-old, then a 16-year-old, and later as a 14-year-old. We only mentioned the age in conversations and in the bio, which we needed to write to be able to register to the site.

On the dating site "Date Book," a man who introduced himself as a 39-year-old from Haifa reached out to us. "Hi, what's going on, Honey?" he wrote. "I'm fine, from Tel Aviv," we said. When he asked: "What are you looking for?" and was told that we were a 17-year-old girl, he did not think about ending the conversation and kept going. "If I'm not too old for you ... it's all good," and suggested we keep talking on Telegram (an encrypted texting app).

When we joined "Sugar Daddy," which is self-described as a site for discreet relationships based on "support," we received 65 messages in just half an hour, and even there, they were not deterred by Adele's age. A user named "Ronen" suggested - "Meetings, preferably more than just once. I believe that you will be satisfied." About the age, he had to say - "I advise that you don't mention it on here because it violates the website's terms and conditions." He suggested that we keep talking on Telegram. Eventually, he sent his phone number, and when we called him the next day, he kept trying to engage us and offered us money. "What a surprise! You're from the website, right?" He got nervous when we called him from an unknown number. "You disappeared yesterday. You're 17, right? If you are OK with it, I can live with it. I can offer you three meetings and 1,500 NIS for each one."

Another user offered us "Fun meetings, and I can provide you with things, shopping for example," and even demonstrated a willingness to pay hundreds of shekels for it. A user who claimed to be 57 wrote: "Offering 1,500 for a meeting, I would be happy to meet every

week," and was even willing to increase the payment: "3,000 for the first meeting and then we will see if we have chemistry and go from there. OK?"

Another user was quick to send a picture of himself and wrote: "Honey, what do I have to do to be convincing enough so that you'll say you want to meet? What do you want? 1,500, and I'm heading your way." "Gorgeous," wrote another user when we introduced ourselves as a minor and sent us a picture of his bank account, which had hundreds of thousands of shekels, all to seduce us to accept his offer. "You sound like you're good and of high quality," he added.

"Hello Princess Adele, my name is Jake," was the opening of another message. "I really liked your profile. I love girls who dance, and you sound like an entertaining and interesting girl. I would love to get to know you better," he added. We replied with - "thank you. I'm 14, but I'm really mature for my age. Do you mind?" "I do not mind. Is a 1,000 OK? Can you meet me tomorrow? Do not worry; I will mentor you, and we'll experience it together. I am a good teacher and a warm, loving Daddy. I will pamper you like you're a princess. Be my good girl, and I will take care of you." Some of those who contacted us immediately suggested that we text over WhatsApp or Telegram for fear that their users on the site would be shut down.

As part of the investigation, we also joined "discreet meetings" groups on Telegram. Within minutes of joining, we received dozens of sexual offers, including pornographic photos and videos of girls, some of whom were minors, and even phone numbers. "A super-fit combat soldier from the North is looking for a girl or a couple for a crazy experience and lots of fun. Pictures will be sent in private," wrote one of them. "29 years old is looking to meet today. Who is interested?" Asked another. They also posted in the group: "Anyone available for a paid meeting now?" In other groups, which are also easy and quick for minors to join, large numbers of porn videos were sent to thousands of users, as well as voice messages and sexual offers.

Like with Telegram, what we've encountered on WhatsApp was discouraging, and we have been exposed to a lot of exploitation of minors by men. One of the group chats was filled with 50 porn videos in less than a day. A 16-year-old member of this group told us that she also received offers in private messages. "How are you? My name is Shuki. How old are you?" One of the users wrote to her. He bombarded her with messages when she did not answer immediately and added: "Answer, Honey. It cost you nothing to write back. I'm a good guy, so answer, Honey. How are you?" When asked about intent, he replied: "To chat. How old are you? Be nice?"

Osnat Hitron, Director of Government Relations at the Task Force for Human Trafficking and Prostitution, explains: "Unfortunately, exploitation of minors for prostitution is a horrific phenomenon that is much more common than the public realizes. The ease with which you can access websites and apps with the exploitation of minors is unbearable. We need to increase enforcement and bring offenders to justice.

Shani Nardimon is the director of "Halev" in Tel Aviv, an ELEM program for boys and girls who experience sexual exploitation and are "on the prostitution spectrum," as Nardimon defines it. She explains that "nowadays, teenage prostitution is less visible on the street. We will have to browse the internet, dating sites, Instagram, and WhatsApp to find them. It is

prostitution at our fingertips, and we have a scouting team working to find teens wherever they are. Prostitution has remained the same because it's still exploitation, and it still causes trauma."

According to her, "people imagine prostitution like in *Pretty Woman*. So no, clients don't just come to have sex; it's a whole world of perversions and violence. We accompany an insane amount of minors to emergency rooms because of violence. Their ability to defend themselves when they're minors is limited; everything becomes secretive. They want to hide, and the clients want to hide. It is much trickier," she adds.

**A minor in Prostitution: "I was expelled and dropped out of any institution you can think of."**

Liel (pseudonym) from southern Israel is one of those 130 girls and boys in prostitution and is currently being treated at "The Heart/Halev." She says: "I came here four years ago as a teenage girl whose whole life revolved around lies, fears, and defenses. I figured that I had arrived at another temporary place and that in a week, I would probably run away or be asked to leave because I was unsuitable or unwanted."

**How were you eventually received?**

"I went through the doorway and was greeted with a smile from ear to ear right away, and with anticipation to get to know me and love me."

**Did it feel unreal?**

"At first, I did not know how to deal with it all. I kept waiting to hear a 'no,' but that never happened, nor was I being judged. In the past, people could not stand me. I am the girl who was expelled and dropped out of every possible institution and framework. I thought it was inconceivable that there was a place where youth were being saved from life on the streets and got to be in this safe bubble. There are so many teenagers here, and each one has a story that no one in the system cares about. This place gives them a notebook and pen to tell that story and the tools to pave a life for themselves. I don't know if it's better, but at least it's not like worrying about survival."

**"For years, I did not have a solid ground to stand on. Now I might become invisible again."**

Noya (pseudonym) also shared the difficult feeling she experiences day in and day out. She talked about her friends who are in prostitution. "I was tossed from one institution to the next, from one boarding school to another. I could not go through any process of improvement over the years. The lack of trust in people and the system was huge. I lost hope."

**And then what happened?**

"Just when I was about to give up, I learned about this place, the place that became my lifeline. The place where I started breathing, where I began to live again."

**What has changed in you since then?**

"I was able to persevere; I was able to simply be. Just be, in every sense of the word. Physically and mentally. Take off my masks, shed the lies, the fears, various habits, shame, and more. Stability is the most basic thing a person needs to live. I had no solid ground for years, so my life wasn't grounded either. And now that I finally have a home and a family,

they have decided to shut down my home and bring in new people. They're halting my progress, my trajectory. They force us to start all over again without taking the other girls and me into account. Now I am back to being invisible, being a number."

### **Not just on WhatsApp: prostitution on the LGBTQIA+ community platforms**

"Grinder" is now considered the most popular dating app for men in the gay community, but prostitution is still present there and on "Atraf Dating," the leading site among gay men. LGBTQIA+ teens told N12 that they get many offers on these platforms, some of which end in sexual exploitation. "Giving blowjobs and offering support now in Afula. It's possible to meet in a car. Do you want to? Please answer," a user wrote to one of them. He offered 400NIS in return. Another boy was offered "200 for 4 minutes without penetration, or 300 with." Another user wrote to him: "send a pic of your body" and offered 200NIS.

Nadav (pseudonym), a young gay man, wound up in prostitution when he was 13. He is currently in the middle of a lengthy rehabilitation process and is very familiar with the phenomenon. "As a kid at school, I was rejected, and no one paid attention to it. I left home and found myself in Haifa and later Tel Aviv. I quickly ended up on the streets. I was moving between hostels and boarding schools for almost two years. My rehabilitation wasn't very successful then because getting drunk was prohibited in some of these places, so it didn't stick."

He also recalled: "I became involved in prostitution without realizing it. I lived in Haifa for six months at a university dormitory with an education major student. I would give him sexual favors, and he would provide me with access to a shower and a bed. At the time, I didn't see it as prostitution; I saw it as finding someone who helped me escape. It was a quid-pro-quo deal for me. "

According to him, this wound will probably never heal. "There are still difficulties and scars left from my time on the street. These are scars that I am still dealing with today - lots of anxiety attacks and fears. There are moments when I wonder, 'why am I alive?' I am in survival mode. I have a 100,000 NIS loan from the bank, so I always have this concern about things being held over me."

### **The fate of the youths**

In the past seven years, once darkness falls, many minors have been coming to the "Halev/ The Heart 24/7" center in south Tel Aviv. The Center has been operating since 2014 as part of ELEM. When you see the bright eyes of the youth who step through the center's doors, it's easy to understand why Halev is so important. There they can eat, shower, sleep, and know that there is someone who loves them and will not give up on them. Over the years, additional The Heart/Halev centers opened in Eilat, Haifa, Petah Tikva, and Dimona.

ELEM explains that it was only in 2014, when MK Meir Cohen (Yesh Atid) served as the Minister of Welfare, that the state officially recognized child prostitution as a phenomenon. Accordingly, ELEM established a broad, holistic program for finding and treating youth in prostitution. The program specializes in sexual trauma and prostitution. But ELEM recently lost its bid by the Ministry of Welfare. It was decided to transfer the operations of the "Halev/

The Heart 24/7" center from ELEM's hands to the Ramat Tiberias Residence Company Ltd. Our research shows that this private company specializes in the treatment of autism and behavioral problems. It has no experience in dealing with prostitution.

Experts expressed concern that the decision will come at the expense of the 130 minors currently served at the center while Ramat Tiberias works to gain the proper knowledge and professional experience. In light of the decision, ELEM filed an appeal stating that "in recent years ELEM has worked hand in hand with the Ministry of Welfare. But four years ago, the leadership of the Ministry's Corrections Department was replaced, and dramatic changes took place. The new leadership believes that NGOs should be replaced by contractors, and for-profit companies, with no knowledge or professional and therapeutic understanding of the matter at hand. "How come the leadership isn't being criticized by all the praise it gives to a private company with zero experience in the field?" We spoke to a source in the ministry who emphasized that the Ministry is committed to keeping the "Halev/The Heart" center in Tel Aviv operational. He mentioned the possibility that ELEM will receive an extension if necessary so that the minors who are treated there will not be harmed.

Following the bid results, the Task Force on Human Trafficking and Prostitution sent a letter to the Ministry of Labor and Welfare, in which it pleaded to re-examine the results, pointing to the fear of serious harm to the rehabilitation and treatment process of minors in prostitution. "We believe that the bid results clearly indicate the dangerous direction that the ministry is taking," they noted. "The decision not to continue the contract with ELEM, and transfer responsibility to an entity which is inexperienced in working with this population, especially during this critical time, is a dangerous decision that raises deep concerns and may even cost human lives. The circumstances require that the decision be reconsidered."

Or Abu, Director of the Task Force on Human Trafficking and Prostitution, explains: "Precisely at this critical time, when the enforcement of the law banning the use of prostitution begins, it's vital that the Ministry of Welfare strengthen the joint work with NGOs that have been working in the field for years, and have vast experience and expertise with populations engaged in prostitution. This is the way to reach out and help women, especially minors, get out of the destructive and cruel world of prostitution."

### **Where's the Enforcement?**

Arnon Edelstein, a professor of criminology who investigates this troubling issue, explains that the small number of open cases - only ten in four years - is not accidental. "Any existing police data does not reflect the reality of this phenomenon because of the shame, discretion, and the criminal nature of it. A boy or a girl who engages in prostitution will not press charges, nor will the client."

"In the past, whenever I reached out to the Ministry of Welfare to conduct research, they said there was no need," he recalled. "Contrary to the old theory that prostitution is a product of one's upbringing, while 90% of people in prostitution experienced sexual abuse in their homes, that is not decisively what made them turn to prostitution. Punishment does not work. Such people need treatment and counseling so that they don't get to the same place again."

The Task Force on Human Trafficking and Prostitution worked to advance the enactment of the law banning the use of prostitution in Israel for over a decade until it finally passed as a temporary order for five years, following the recommendations of the Inter-Ministerial Committee appointed by MK Ayelet Shaked, while she was serving as Justice Minister. The law was supposed to come into effect on July 10th, a year and a half after its publication, to

enable the preparation of law enforcement agencies and the expansion of the rehabilitative responses provided to people in prostitution.

Only six months after the law went into effect, Homeland Security Minister, Amir Ohana, signed the order allowing police officers to enforce it. Accordingly, prostitution consumers are to be fined 2,000 NIS, and in the event of a repeat offense, they are subjected to a double fine. In the case of multiple offenses, the authorities may issue criminal indictments that can lead to penalties of up to 75,000 NIS. In practice, the first report of a client of prostitution being found was only on February 10<sup>th</sup> this year. He was caught in the act at a brothel in Hadera. Since then, little enforcement has been focusing on brothels, while a significant portion of minors partakes in prostitution elsewhere, at the click of a button.

Or Abu, Director of the Task Force on Human Trafficking and Prostitution, notes that "we work with the police to have enforcement and shift the public perception, so people realize that we, as a society, do not want to exploit women in general, and minors in particular. There aren't police officers patrolling the streets. Currently, it's more of a gradual process. We need to increase enforcement and do it to fit the reality in the field so people in prostitution aren't harmed. We have created a dedicated training program which provides the relevant tools."

"Instead of sweeping problems under the rug, we should investigate them and invest in this issue when minors are to be considered," concludes Prof. Edelstein. "Nearly 100% of the adults who engage in prostitution started while still minors. It destroys lives, and it's just as bad as a disease. These are girls who suffer daily and deserve more help. The younger they are, the more likely it is to get them out of the world of prostitution. Until the issue is examined properly, nothing will change. "

**Response from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs:** "The ministry initiates and leads the establishment and development of new services for the rehabilitation and treatment of young people and adolescents on the spectrum of prostitution. In 2019-2020, more than 30 million NIS have been allocated for this purpose annually. In addition, the Ministry funds 15 The Heart/Halev centers, which treat 740 teenage girls and young women across Israel, at the cost of 13 million NIS a year, five of which are managed by ELEM. The Ministry of Labor is currently upgrading the services provided by The Heart/Halev centers, in collaboration with the labor department and social security, to provide these young people with high-quality vocational training and essential tools for entering the workforce. The bids for the operations of all the services are done professionally and are supervised by accountants and lawyers. Organizations who apply must meet all the bid conditions and show that the personnel has relevant experience. ELEM had concerns regarding the results of one of the bids and submitted an appeal to the committee and an administrative petition to the court. The designated authorities handle both. The Ministry of Welfare is committed to The Heart/Halev center's continuous operation and provision of services while maintaining the continuity of care, regardless of the bid's final winner."

**The Israeli Police responded:** "At the beginning of the year, the Israeli Police began enforcing the Prostitution Consumption Prohibition Law after publishing regulations and the proper training of police officers. As part of this process, the officers underwent special training created in collaboration with the organizations aiding people in prostitution. The police have recently reduced its COVID restrictions enforcement and are allocating resources to its many missions, among them enforcing brothel operators and prostitution clients who break the law. Enforcement operations are conducted in full cooperation with all relevant

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parties and aid organizations. We will continue to act with the aim of reducing the phenomenon and discouraging citizens from committing the offense of receiving paid sexual services, which is prohibited by law.”

**The Ramat Tiberias Residence did not respond to the claims raised in the article.**