

## THE GLAMOUR OF EXPLOITATION: HOW POWER, POP CULTURE AND SILENCE MAINTAIN SEX TRAFFICKING

✍ by Saliqa Amin, 18 years old

In 2007 an intimate video of Kim Kardashian and Ray J leaked online: a moment that would have destroyed most women's lives. Instead, it became the foundation of a global empire. For 16 years, Kim has been judged, mocked, and slut-shamed, her name dragged through a cultural debate that refuses to die: *Did she leak it, or was it leaked? Who was to blame?*

Journalist Ian Halperin alleged in *Kardashian Dynasty* that Kim and her mother Kris Jenner deliberately leaked the tape to Vivid Entertainment: one of the world's biggest producers of pornographic films. An accusation both women have repeatedly denied, and one that has never been verified.<sup>1</sup>

But the real issue isn't the tape in itself. It's how the world reacted to it.

Kim's rise to power didn't erase the humiliation she experienced. It simply showed the world something uncomfortable: the exact same moment that destroys ordinary women can be rebranded as "empowerment" when you have resources, lawyers and PR teams.

And that is precisely why Kim's story matters.

Her sex tape revealed how pop culture shapes our beliefs about consent and exploitation. But for those without privilege, leaked images, grooming, blackmail and exploitation rarely lead to stardom. They lead to trauma.

Kim's experience sits at the centre of a bigger and darker question: What happens when pop culture glamorises the very dynamics like power imbalances, commodification, silence that allow exploitation and trafficking to thrive?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/kim-kardashian-kris-jenner-ray-j-make-deal-release-sex-tape-fact-check-1703727>

Because while the Kardashian empire expanded and so did another truth: the industries that build celebrities are the same industries that protect abusers.

Jeffrey Epstein's trafficking network functioned with the help of media, lawyers and billionaires. Sean "Diddy" Combs, long celebrated as a music icon faces allegations that expose the entertainment industry's hidden patterns of grooming. These scandals often flourish in the same spaces where fame is made, sold and bought.

Kim's story doesn't make her complicit in trafficking. But it does reveal a culture that rewards sexual exposure when it benefits the elite and punishes it when happened to the vulnerable.

In a culture where the powerful own the spotlight, exploitation rarely looks like a crime. It looks like content.

Power imbalances sit at the heart of human-trafficking ecosystems. Power in its most concentrated form acts like the invisibility cloak from Harry Potter. It helps perpetrators conceal themselves when they manipulate the very systems designed to prevent it. We can see this protection in the unlevel system of justice, where the wealthy and politically connected are given almost immunity.

In the United States, "political and corporate power structures contribute to the perpetuation of human trafficking" by creating legislative gaps and lobbying that paralyzes anti-trafficking laws. Capitalist cultural values that glorify wealth, power and sex "reduce human bodies...to commodities" and fuel demand for cheap labour and sexual exploitation<sup>2</sup>.

The case of Jeffrey Epstein demonstrates how weighted the criminal legal system can be for the favoured. Where villains take the place of victims and victims are assigned the role of villains.

The failure to prosecute Epstein fully was a product of a system that "gave the power of the State to private parties to protect a recidivist child rapist," allowing him to evade a life sentence<sup>3</sup>. When Epstein first faced charges, powerful lawyers including Ken Starr negotiated a non-prosecution agreement (NPA) that "immunised all of Epstein's co-conspirators... including Dershowitz, former President Bill Clinton and Prince Andrew"<sup>4</sup>. Because the plea deal was crafted under the oversight of U.S. Attorney Alexander Acosta, who signed off on the "secret deal" that gave Epstein a 13-month county-jail sentence with work-release privileges<sup>5</sup>. High-profile allies such as politicians, royalty and billionaires therefore "escaped prosecution" despite evidence of involvement. Investigative reporting and victim testimony for example the Miami

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<sup>2</sup> <https://hir.harvard.edu/sex-power-and-profit-a-global-comparative-perspective-on-the-us-human-trafficking-crisis/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://jgrj.law.uiowa.edu/sites/jgrj.law.uiowa.edu/files/2023-05/JGRJ%2026.2\\_Cook\\_1\\_0.pdf](https://jgrj.law.uiowa.edu/sites/jgrj.law.uiowa.edu/files/2023-05/JGRJ%2026.2_Cook_1_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.justice-integrity.org/791-ken-starr-explains-his-help-for-billionaire-pervert-jeffrey-epstein>

<sup>5</sup> <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1147&context=dignity>

Herald series and Boies & Giuffre’s statements exposed dozens of victims, but the same mechanisms that shielded elite participants kept them “away with impunity”<sup>6</sup>.

After his release, Epstein’s reputation was rebuilt through philanthropy and elite social events, where “high-society women... helped to legitimise him” and his donors kept financial ties despite the scandal<sup>7</sup>.

Consequently, those with little power so mostly the trafficked women and girls are the ones who become visible in the public record, while the rich, influential and institutional actors to this day remain largely unaccountable. For example, in the 2016 federal civil lawsuit filed by a woman alleged that Donald Trump and Jeffrey Epstein sexually assaulted her in 1994 when she was 13. The complaint described threats and violence but the case never went to trial and the woman cancelled a public press conference citing safety concerns and ultimately withdrew the suit. Trump denied the allegations and the claims remain unproven in court.<sup>8</sup>

Normalisation of exploitation or exploitation in itself becomes easier to ignore when its causes are treated like random crimes or even something the victim wished upon themselves. Pop culture and public conversation often make this even easier by accepting the limits set by the status quo and repeating them until they feel normal. Once that happens people can watch consume and enjoy things shaped by exploitation without ever feeling any connection to the systems that made them possible.

An interesting example in the entertainment industry is the public trial of Sean Diddy Combs or better known as Diddy, an American rapper. It was revealed that Combs used his fame to “coerce women... to travel across state lines for prostitution,” a violation of the 1910 Mann Act. Victims Cassie Ventura and the pseudonymous “Jane” testified that he forced them into drug-fuelled “freak-offs,” beat them, and threatened them with violence. The judge described these acts as “physical, emotional, and psychological” abuse and emphasized that a “substantial sentence is necessary to send a message to abusers and victims alike”. Although a jury acquitted him of racketeering which is “a set of illegal activities aimed at commercial profit that may be disguised as legitimate business deals. Racketeering is defined by a coordinated effort by multiple people to repeatedly earn a profit.”<sup>9</sup> and sex-trafficking. He was convicted on two counts of transporting for prostitution and sentenced to 50 months, with release projected for May 2028<sup>10</sup>.

Combs was found guilty on two federal counts of transportation for purposes of prostitution, each carrying a maximum of 10 years, meaning he faced up to 20 years in

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.justice-integrity.org/791-ken-starr-explains-his-help-for-billionaire-pervert-jeffrey-epstein>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.justice-integrity.org/791-ken-starr-explains-his-help-for-billionaire-pervert-jeffrey-epstein>

<sup>8</sup> <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1147&context=dignity>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/racketeering>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0qz32wzeego>

prison. Prosecutors requested a minimum of 11 years, emphasising the need for deterrence, while his lawyers argued such a sentence would be excessive.<sup>11</sup>

Yet the most revealing part of the case lies in what Combs was not convicted of. Prosecutors had charged him with racketeering, arguing that his staff helped orchestrate “freak-offs” events where witnesses described being pressured to have sex with male escorts while Combs watched. The Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO)<sup>12</sup> charge required proof of a coordinated criminal enterprise. Defense attorneys said that employees were not present during these encounters and therefore not complicit. Ultimately, the jury didn’t charge Combs on racketeering justifying it by how difficult it is to legally hold powerful individuals accountable when their networks are informal or protected by money<sup>13</sup>.

For fans, the clash between admiration for an artist’s cultural impact and the reality of his crimes creates a sense of betrayal and an emotional rift with his music. Which lead people to question multiple things:

- Firstly, whether society’s idolisation of pop artists and Hollywood stars and celebrities is a tool that can mask and even excuse serious misconduct?
- Secondly, should fans and even casual listeners attempt to “separate the art from the artist,” and if so, does continuing to enjoy the music risk normalising or indirectly supporting the behaviour?
- Thirdly, should it be the public’s responsibility to be aware of the artists’ public persona and have a critical view of their private persona, by assigning personal and moral value to the entertainment we consume?

On the other hand, Pop feminism tends to generate conflicting interpretations when its portrayal intentionally blurs the line between female sexual empowerment and physical commodification. When feminist themes are packaged for mass consumption, the result can either challenge dominant norms or unwillingly reproduce them.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0qz32wzeego>

<sup>12</sup>

[https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/racketeer\\_influenced\\_and\\_corrupt\\_organizations\\_act\\_\(rico\)#:~:text=The%20Racketeer%20Influenced%20and%20Corrupt,of%20an%20organized%20criminal%20enterprise.](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/racketeer_influenced_and_corrupt_organizations_act_(rico)#:~:text=The%20Racketeer%20Influenced%20and%20Corrupt,of%20an%20organized%20criminal%20enterprise.)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0qz32wzeego>



Sabrina Carpenter’s 2025 album “*Man’s Best Friend*” and its promotion is a prime example. The original cover where Carpenter was kneeling while a suited man holds her hair was initially framed as satire of the male gaze<sup>14</sup>. Critics like the Glasgow Women’s Aid argued that the image reproduced established tropes that frame women as decorative objects, calling it “regressive” and “a throwback to tired tropes that reduce women to pets, props, and possessions.” The controversy didn’t hurt Carpenter it actually boosted hype around her album release. As Professor Catherine Rottenberg noted, she appeared to be “fanning the flames of controversy to sell her brand,” proving once again that shock is profitable especially when framed as empowerment.<sup>15</sup>

Her title song “*Manchild*” lyrics also caused controversy. Carpenter adopts a deliberately submissive persona while lyrically mocking male incompetence:

“Oh, I like my boys playing hard to get,  
 And I like my men all incompetent,  
 And I swear they choose me, I’m not choosing them,  
 Amen, hey men!”

These humorous, catchy yet self-aware lyrics sends for some an ambiguous message: it gestures toward critique but remains centred in the same power imbalance it attempts to make fun of. Its ambiguity increases its shareability which transforms gendered hierarchies into clickable content.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/jun/14/sabrina-carpenter-album-art-offensive>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cq6myp7582do>



A comparable dynamic emerged during the “Lolita” debate. When a *W Magazine* photoshoot was interpreted as echoing Nabokov’s novel in which he describes the character of Humbert’s obsession with his 12-year-old girl stepdaughter called Dolores Haze. In the plot he kidnaps and sexually abuses Dolores.

Audiences accused Carpenter of romanticising twisted relationships, while Carpenter denied any intentional reference. The controversy centred on whether the imagery constituted an artistic commentary or a calculated provocation designed to amplify engagement.<sup>16</sup>

Across both cases, the issue is not equivalenced to trafficking. When feminist narratives are embedded in sensationalised visuals that rely on submissive poses, infantilisation, or stylised dominance and submissiveness, they can sometimes contribute to a cultural environment in which such power relations are seen as familiar maybe even visually appealing.

This reveals pop feminism’s central paradox which is that empowerment is shown through images that reproduce the same hierarchies associated with exploitation like objectification and the commodification of the female bodies and the resulting attention is commercialised for profit.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/sabrina-carpenter-denies-lolita-influences-photo-1236000872/#:~:text=In%20the%20comments%20of%20a,an%20empowering%20embrace%20of%20sexuality>

In this wider context, portrayals of women by female artists influence public perception not by causing trafficking, but by shaping the environment in which audiences and especially younger audiences learn to interpret power and vulnerability.

Unfortunately, in this digital era often the most high-risk and high-sensitivity narratives get the most clicks, gets the most commented on, gets the most shared and consequently generates the most commercial hype and leverage.

All in all, if there is one thread connecting Kim Kardashian's leaked tape, Epstein's protected empire, Diddy's public reckoning, and Sabrina Carpenter's pop-feminist controversies, it's that exploitation survives not simply through the violent acts themselves but through interpretation. Through the stories we tell about power or desire or agency. Through the images we normalise long before anyone enters a courtroom because celebrity culture doesn't just reflect exploitation it teaches people how to view it.

Each case is turned into a storyline, complete with dramatic arcs, commentary, and commercial tie-ins. The public ends up consuming exploitation the same way it consumes any other trending topic. The more this happens, the more familiar these patterns become. Familiarity reduces shock. Shock reduction means normalisation. And normalisation means even something as evil as trafficking feels less like a crisis but more as a simple celebrity news that trends and eventually dies down.

The Kardashian tape framed a woman's private life as a product. The Epstein case framed elite abuse as something that eventually fades into background noise. The Diddy allegations fit the pattern of scandal → denial → discourse → return to business. Carpenter's use of sexualised imagery framed power imbalance as an aesthetic you can sell.

But there is another side to this picture. The same cultural machinery that glamorises dominance can also expose it. Survivors have used the visibility of celebrity scandals to speak publicly in ways that were impossible a decade ago.

The future of anti-trafficking awareness may not depend only on new laws or big court cases but on changing the way we culturally read the world around us. If exploitation can be dressed up as entertainment then awareness has to be sharp enough to see past the glamour and recognise what's really happening underneath.

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