

Agents who exploit Young girls' catwalk Dreams face prison

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and DANIEL FOGGO

CONMEN who set up bogus modelling agencies and exploit youngsters with the lure of instant fame will face prison under new laws to be announced next week.

Ministers have acted to protect thousands of teenage girls duped by agents who charge an upfront "joining fee" for taking a few photographs and then promise a career in modelling that never materialises.

From April, it will be a criminal offence for agents representing models, actors or other performers to levy joining fees. They will only be allowed to take commission on work they have found for their client.

'There is a problem with people taking money off young girls who are never going to make it as models'

The Government can introduce the change without new legislation simply by amending existing laws regulating the entertainment industry.

Nicholas Young, the co-chairman of the Professional Managers Association, welcomed the proposed changes, but said more needed to be done to tighten regulation of the industry.

"There is a problem with fly-by-night people setting themselves up as modelling agents and taking money off young girls who may be very pretty, but at only 5ft tall are never going to make it as models," he said.

Even girls who meet the requirements can fall victim. Lucy Clarkson, 17, now a catwalk model with the top agency Profile and the new face of the computer game heroine Lara Croft, fell foul of a less reputable outfit early on.

She was told by an agency in Sheffield that for a registration fee of £250 she would be inundated with work. "We

were told we were going to go far and be sent to places like Japan," she said. "Eight weeks later I was told to go home."

The list of victims runs into many thousands each year, says one campaigner, Katie Froud, an ex-model. She runs a helpline that gives free advice on how to break into the industry.

"Banning of up-front fees will certainly help in that agencies will only be able to take on girls who can actually get work. "I would also like to see a vetting of those allowed to set up model agencies to prevent paedophiles and other undesirables from exploiting these vulnerable girls."

Victoria Frost, a 15-year-old from Hastings, was told by an agency in Brighton that she would be flooded with work but a £20 deposit for photographs followed by a cheque for £200 were required first to produce her "portfolio". "The photographs were not very good at all," said her father John. "I could have done better. No one explained to Victoria or my wife that she is too small at 5ft to be a fashion model. When we realised it was a rip-off we cancelled the cheque."

Belinda Masters has issued a court summons against the Models Direct agency based in Norwich after it charged her £89 to register her three-year-old son Oliver as a child model. "They were very persistent and keen, saying they had work lined up for Oliver and I should send photographs of him," she said. "I sent five and never got them back. All I received was a laminated credit card-sized picture of him. "There was no sign of any work and I wrote 20 letters asking what was happening. After a few months a woman there told me they `weren't a charity'.

Now I'm taking legal action."

As part of the efforts to tighten up show business agencies, ministers will also announce measures to make the profession more accountable for handling fees collected for performers. The move follows a high-profile case in which famous actors and artists were left out of pocket when their agent went out of business.

Caroline Quentin and Leslie Ash, who star in the series *Men Behaving Badly*, lost thousands of pounds because part of their earnings got mixed up with their former agent's bank account.

New regulations will make it a legal requirement for the country's 4,000 theatrical agents to keep separate bank accounts for their clients.

Picture Caption: Role model: teenage girls aspire to the glamorous career enjoyed by young catwalk stars such as 12-year-old Tatiana

Picture Caption: Victoria Frost, 15, fell prey to an unscrupulous agency

Picture Caption: Photo shoot: even Lucy Clarkson, the new face of Lara Croft, was exploited by a disreputable outfit early on in her career

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