



Popular and Political Representations

Beyond Trafficking and Slavery Short Course | Volume 1



Edited by Joel Quirk and Julia O'Connell Davidson

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Beyond Trafficking and Slavery Short Course
Volume One

Edited by Joel Quirk and Julia O'Connell Davidson

Beyond Trafficking and Slavery Supporters



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About Beyond Trafficking and Slavery

A wide range of activists, academics, trade unions, governments and NGOs are currently trying to understand and address forced labour, trafficking and slavery. *Beyond Trafficking and Slavery* (BTS) occupies a unique position within this larger movement, one which combines the rigour of academic scholarship with the clarity of journalism and the immediacy of political activism. It is an independent, not-for-profit marketplace of ideas that uses evidence-based advocacy to tackle the political, economic, and social root causes of global exploitation, vulnerability and forced labour. It provides original analysis and specialised knowledge on these issues to take public understanding beyond the sensationalism of many mainstream media depictions. It further works to bring citizens, activists, scholars and policy-makers into conversation with each other to imagine pioneering policy responses.

BTS is housed within [openDemocracy](#), a UK-based digital commons with an annual readership of over nine million. OpenDemocracy is committed to filling gaps in global media coverage, helping alternative views and perspectives find their voices, and converting trailblazing thinking into lasting, meaningful change.



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Moving beyond popular representations of trafficking and slavery

This book explores how slavery and trafficking have been represented—by public officials, activists, and numerous others—together with the frequently troubling consequences that these popular representations have had upon policy and practice.

Joel Quirk and Julia O'Connell Davidson

Information and communication are fundamental to political and social activism. Modern activists expend a great deal of time and energy trying to get their message out, using numerous strategies in an effort to attract the interest of the media, governments, corporations, international organisations, and the public at large. Recent work by Clifford Bob and others has shown that these [efforts to raise awareness take place within a competitive marketplace](#), with numerous worthy causes vying for resources, interest, and investment. While some causes grab the headlines, many others remain in comparative obscurity.

‘Human trafficking’ and ‘modern slavery’ have fared well in this fierce competition between causes. Over the last two decades, human trafficking has secured a remarkable level of both popular and official recognition, resulting in a state of affairs where most people now have at least a passing familiarity with this general topic. While ‘modern-day abolitionists’ routinely lament how little the general public knows about their cause, many campaigners working on other issues would count themselves lucky if they secured even a fraction of the publicity and investment that trafficking now receives. This recent success is not simply because trafficking is ‘more deserving’ or ‘more urgent’. It can instead be chiefly traced to the strong popular appeal of representations of human trafficking as an exceptional problem involving ‘innocent’ victims and rapacious villains, together with the numerous ways in which the issue of trafficking has helped to advance the strategic

interests of governments seeking to control, discipline, and/or limit the mobility of certain populations.

The recent political success of anti-trafficking has come at a considerable price. In order to [help get their message out](#), activists and officials have repeatedly turned to a range of simplistic and misleading images, dubious ‘statistics’, and self-serving narratives. Even the history of slavery and abolition has been selectively mined to support contemporary causes, while more challenging questions regarding the limitations of anti-slavery activism and [the enduring legacies of historical slave systems](#) remain neglected. Although most people have now heard about human trafficking as a form of modern slavery, they frequently have a very limited understanding regarding the specific issues at stake. Much of what people think they know about trafficking and slavery is inaccurate, incomplete, or unfounded.

Take, by way of example, the popular genre of ‘global facts and figures’ concerning trafficking and slavery. According to countless speeches, books, and media reports, i) [there are more slaves now than at any point in human history](#); ii) [human trafficking is one of the fastest growing criminal industries in the world](#); and iii) [human trafficking has become the third largest global criminal industry](#), behind only guns and drugs, [generating \\$32 billion annually](#). Since the main attraction of these ‘facts’ stems from their value as advocacy tools, there has been a widespread reluctance to ask how they have been calculated, and whether or not they are true.

However much various activists and organisations might proclaim otherwise, there is currently no sound methodological basis for constructing a global estimate of slavery or trafficking today. And since we don’t have a reliable baseline or sampling frame, we also have no reasonable basis for concluding that things are rapidly increasing globally. Most ‘statistics’ associated with trafficking and slavery are little more than blind stabs in the dark, with the further complication that those

Beyond Trafficking and Slavery



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responsible for making up the numbers usually have a vested interest in coming to the highest possible total. Whenever comparisons take place—as, for instance, with guns and drugs—their ultimate goal is to make the problem of human trafficking and slavery as large as possible. Much the same story applies when it comes to comparisons between past and present. Modern activists use an expansive definition of ‘slavery’ when looking for contemporary slaves, yet restrict their understanding of slavery in the past to legal slavery. If many definitions of slavery used today were projected backwards through time, then huge numbers of people would need to be reclassified as slaves.

Unfounded, misleading, and self-serving representations of trafficking and slavery have also had far-reaching consequences at the level of policy and practice. Several brief examples from a much longer list can be offered here. Thanks to an often [voyeuristic interest in commercial sexual abuse](#), much less interest has been directed towards ‘unsexy’ problems and practices. Thanks to [unrealistic models](#) of ‘innocent victimhood’, individuals with more complicated personal stories have been deemed unworthy of assistance, despite the fact that they have been exploited and abused. Thanks to the construction of migration as a problem and threat, policy responses have focused upon [telling migrants to ‘stay at home’](#), irrespective of the positive possibilities of mobility and the potential problems of ‘home’. Thanks to the popularity of ‘[slavery as exception](#)’, global patterns of systemic abuse, exploitation, and discrimination have been routinely [dispatched to the margins of political conversations](#). Thanks to the depiction of trafficking victims as ‘exotic outsiders’ [in need of rescue](#) and salvation, there has been an uncritical return to some of the worst tropes of the [colonial ‘civilising mission’](#), where [paternalistic intervention by ‘superior’ westerners is justified](#) in order to ‘save’ non-western supplicants.

Many of these popular representations of slavery and trafficking have proved to be remarkably resistant to challenge and critique. Most of the issues highlighted above were first identified in the late 1990s—if not before—and have been repeatedly challenged in the decades that have followed. Despite this, the same representations and formulas continue to be widely reproduced. There is now, for example, an extensive literature documenting the [limitations](#) of high profile ‘[fact and figures](#)’, yet dubious ‘statistics’ persist. Similarly, [researchers have demonstrated](#) that [major sporting events](#), such as [World Cups](#) and [Super Bowls](#), do not appear to generate major spikes in the local prevalence of human trafficking, yet each [new major sporting event](#) nonetheless generates a [new round of sensationalist](#) reports regarding the imminent threat of a massive increase in trafficking and prostitution.

This recurring pattern points to a fundamental challenge. There are numerous actors and institutions in anti-trafficking and anti-slavery circles who are heavily invested in upholding and reproducing these flawed representations and associated policy responses. This is important, because their increasingly defensive resistance to alternative voices and approaches constitutes one of the principle obstacles to developing and disseminating better understandings of the diverse problems and issues at stake, and working towards more effective strategies, interventions, and frames of reference. Popular representations of trafficking and slavery have too often hurt—rather than helped—efforts to both understand and combat global exploitation, discrimination, and vulnerability.

Introducing our contributors

This book is divided into five major sections, with each section speaking to a different aspect of the larger series of problems and practices we have outlined above. We begin with a series of pieces concerned with political rhetoric and popular theatrics. Much of the rhetoric associated with ‘modern-day slavery’ and ‘human trafficking’ is only loosely connected to actual policies, practices, and experiences. Our opening piece from Joel Quirk demonstrates that it is both factually inaccurate and politically problematic to speak in terms of a singular and cohesive global struggle. There is not one ‘anti-slavery movement’, but many different movements with their own interests and agendas. This line of argument overlaps with our second piece from Janie Chuang, who explores the legal and political pitfalls associated with the recent re-branding of anti-trafficking as ‘modern-day slavery’. This disconnect between rhetoric and practice reaches its logical endpoint with the ‘celebrification’ of anti-trafficking, which is explored by Dina Haynes. She demonstrates that an increasing number of interventions by well-known icons of popular entertainment tend to favour superficial soundbites and simplistic narratives. These celebrity anti-trafficking ‘heroes’ not only crowd out expert voices and lived experiences, they also play a major role in shaping popular opinion. As Kerwin

Kaye demonstrates, these distortions also extend to popular movies on human trafficking, with erotic fantasies of ‘rescue’ and suffering commonly standing in for ‘gritty realism’. We conclude this section with an important piece by Liam Hogan, who demonstrates how appeals to ‘Irish slavery’ in the Caribbean have generated a new mythology that provided rhetorical ammunition for white supremacists in the aftermath of the events in Ferguson, Missouri.

This is followed by a section which challenges what Teju Cole has aptly described as the ‘[white saviour-industrial complex](#)’. We begin with a major contribution from Kamala Kempadoo, who considers how popular representations of trafficking and slavery can be traced to older stories about the ‘white man’s burden’. This burden has its genesis in histories of colonialism and imperialism, casting the ‘west’ in the role of saving ‘the rest’. This overall line of argument is further developed in a series of case studies from Garrett Nagaishi, Sam Okyere, and Vanessa Pupavac. The main focus of Nagaishi’s contribution is Operation Underground Railroad, a Utah-based organisation with the self-assigned task of rescuing—via military raids—exotic victims from the ‘darkest corners of the world’. Okyere’s contribution explores the selective role played by culture in explanations of modern-day slavery, with backward ‘cultural traditions’ proving popular in the global south, while culture fades away as a variable in the global north. Some of the problems inherent in this approach are illustrated by Pupavac, whose case study of William Wilberforce demonstrates that the construction of slavery as a singular object of paternalistic concern was linked to a punitive approach to poor and vulnerable workers in Britain, since ‘disciplined’ intervention by their ‘betters’ was for their own good. We conclude this section with a piece from Ingrid Palmay, who argues that recent critics who have challenged feminism for being white, western, and privileged have only concentrated upon part of the puzzle, and that there are important alternative feminist voices and approaches from the global south, which cut against ‘white saviours’.

Our third section seeks to explain the political appeal of anti-trafficking efforts. Governments and corporations have frequently been big supporters of ending 'slavery'. While much of this support is rhetoric without substance, it is nonetheless significant that so many rich and powerful actors have gravitated to anti-trafficking. The source of this appeal should be evident from our section title: 'the mythology of a few bad apples'. Our contributors to this section demonstrate that the political and ideological appeal of human trafficking can be traced to its construction as a deviant 'exception' (Joel Quirk and Annie Bunting), whose eradication involves a 'hollow call' (Neil Howard), and which in turn has the effect of 'saving the market' (Bridget Anderson). The core argument here is that a powerful mythology of isolated 'bad apples' has the self-serving effect of concealing the larger point that exploitation arises from the smooth functioning of global capitalism and official policies, rather than amoral individuals and corrupt institutions. This mythology of 'bad apples' is developed further by Ben Rogaly, who explores how capitalism "creates, perpetuates, and relies on forms of unfree labour", most notably via the exceptional status ascribed to international migrant workers. James Esson concludes this section with a study on migration and football academies in Ghana, where popular fears about child trafficking conceal deeper underlying problems.

Our next section is concerned with sex work and sensationalism. The status of sex work has long been an ideological and political flashpoint. Moreover, popular accounts of sex work too often fall into narratives of voyeurism, paternalism, and punishment. As Jennifer Musto demonstrates in her study of 'domestic minor sex trafficking', the boundaries between protection and punishment can often be far from clear, with forms of incarceration and surveillance frequently being justified in the name of 'protection'. The 'protection' of sex workers is in turn deeply implicated in the politics of rescue. Building upon fieldwork in Mumbai, Svati Shah offers a powerful account of how medical interventions focusing on HIV have been swallowed by the recent construction of prostitution "as a state of being from which [sex workers] must simply

be rescued”. This politics of rescue is tied to a lack of respect for sex workers. This theme is taken up by Richter, Yingwana, Tlhwale, and Tenga, whose piece outlines some of the key concerns that need to be taken up when writing about sex work. This section concludes with a second piece from Bridget Anderson, who compares and contrasts two influential books, *Understanding Global Slavery* and *Sex at the Margins*. While the latter is well known for offering a challenge to the negative effects of the ‘rescue industry’, Anderson argues that it shares a similar concern with ‘rescuing the market’ as *Understanding Global Slavery*.

We conclude this volume by looking at the methodological problems and political effects associated with recent efforts to quantify human trafficking and modern-day slavery. Unlike words, which require interpretation, numbers are widely assumed to express unbiased facts. While this may be true in some specific cases, the vast majority of the ‘statistical’ claims linked to trafficking and slavery have no credible or even identifiable foundation. Despite frequently being a complete farce in methodological terms, numbers can nonetheless have major political and ideological effects. As Siobhán McGrath and Fabiola Mieres argue, the ‘Global Slavery Index’ of the Walk Free Foundation both uncritically reproduces and further legitimates a fundamental divide between civilised/modern/saviours (the west) and uncivilised/backward/suppliants (the ‘rest’). Sally Engle Merry in turn demonstrates that the preoccupations and technologies associated with ranking have been a powerful vehicle for the United States to promote its anti-trafficking agenda. Ronald Weitzer’s contribution not only exposes the serious methodological flaws associated with popular estimates, he also connects these estimates to specific political agendas, such as recent efforts seeking to criminalise sex work. Our final contribution from Joel Quirk and Marlise Richter specifically focuses on the LexisNexis human trafficking awareness index, which uses media reports as a proxy for human trafficking. This ultimately has the effect of codifying and combining the numerous problems and limitations associated with media reports on human trafficking into a numerical form.



Section one

Political rhetoric and popular
theatrics

The rhetoric and reality of ‘ending slavery in our lifetime’

‘Modern-day abolitionists’ commonly present their activities as forming part of a shared global struggle, but despite popular rhetoric, there is not one global anti-slavery or anti-trafficking movements.

Joel Quirk

Recent efforts to combat ‘human trafficking’ and ‘modern-day slavery’ have frequently been characterised as a cause associated with ‘[modern-day abolitionists](#)’, who regard themselves as the successors of historical anti-slavery activists in the United States and United Kingdom. According to these self-proclaimed abolitionists, such as David Batstone and Not For Sale, their primary goal is to ‘[end slavery in our lifetime](#)’. While this is undoubtedly a compelling slogan, we need to look beneath the rhetoric and ask what this actually looks like in reality.

For historical anti-slavery activists, the cause of ending slavery involved targeting a clearly defined population whose status as slaves was heavily reliant on the government for sanction and support. For ‘modern-day abolitionists’, the cause of ‘ending slavery’ now extends to a tremendous variety of practices and problems. These include war-time captivity in Nigeria, bonded labour in Pakistan, abuses on fishing boats in Thailand, ‘slave chocolate’ in Cote D’Ivoire, forced labour in cotton production in Uzbekistan, and the abuse of migrant domestic workers in the United Kingdom. ‘Modern-day abolitionists’ regard these diverse problems as different aspects of a cohesive and singular global cause: combating trafficking and modern slavery. Should these very different problems and practices be lumped together in this way?

To help answer this question, we need to reflect upon the many different issues which have been loosely aggregated under the global banner of ending slavery and trafficking over the last two decades. While no



Source: [Notforsale.com](https://www.notforsale.com/). Fair Use.

list can ever be definitive, the goal of ‘ending slavery in our lifetime’ is most commonly understood in terms that require action in relation to the following:

- Sex work and exploitation
- Migration and exploitation
- Bonded labour and exploitation
- Child labour and exploitation
- Domestic labour and exploitation
- Global supply chains and exploitation
- Hereditary bondage and descent-based discrimination
- Wartime captivity and wartime abuses
- Forced and early marriage
- Forced labour for the state

In addition, it is important to briefly mention the following related themes, despite the fact that they haven’t really featured prominently in anti-slavery and anti-trafficking circles:

- Prison labour and patterns of incarceration
- Repairing the history and legacies of historical slave systems

This is a long and diverse list. There are a number of points of overlap and intersection between different themes, as well as in relation to

much larger social challenges such as sexism and patriarchy. Things quickly get even more complicated, however, since combating trafficking and slavery is commonly understood to involve a specific subcategory of ‘slaves’ found amongst much larger populations. Not everyone who works within a global supply chain can be classified as enslaved, trafficked or subject to forced labour. Much the same logic applies to migrants, sex workers, prisoners, domestics, and other populations. Throwing together all of these different themes is a recipe for confusion rather than clarity.

Accordingly, ‘ending slavery’ not only requires us to firmly distinguish between ‘slave’ and ‘non-slave’ across many different practices and population groups, but also to formulate interventions that specifically target this small subcategory of affected persons. This overall picture is in turn further complicated by the ways in which people move in and out of different types of situations, so there will always be new cases.

It is at this juncture that political rhetoric inevitably gives away to political reality. ‘Modern-day abolitionists’ can’t possibly take simultaneous action to combat abuses against an amorphous subcategory of ‘slaves’ across all of these different practices and population groups. When push comes to shove, activists and institutions only rarely concern themselves with the overall whole, but instead direct their energies in relation to specific issues and locations.



Source: Noforsale.com. Fair Use.

While the popular rhetoric of shared global struggle is undoubtedly appealing, the reality is that it ultimately doesn't mean very much in practice. Ending slavery is not a single cause, but instead involves many different causes that have been uncomfortably lumped together. There is frequently relatively little to *directly* connect interventions in one part of the globe to parallel interventions taking place in other parts of the world.

Brazilian activists seeking to end extreme exploitation in the agricultural sector have little to do with their counterparts seeking to combat the legacies of historical slave systems in Mali or Niger. Much the same can be said about activists concerned with state-sponsored forced labour in North Korea relative to bonded labour in Pakistan. Activists in the United States concerned with 'domestic minor sex trafficking' rarely look beyond their own borders, or even beyond sex work, when it comes to making substantive political and policy interventions. There are sometimes broad *similarities* in the types of practices that occur in these otherwise very different contexts, but a great deal of a creative aggregation and extrapolation is required in order to translate these generalities into the language of a common and cohesive global cause.

Modern-day abolitionists often attempt to solve this problem by weaving together rhetorical appeals that superficially link numerous contexts and constituencies together. This sometimes means re-badging individuals concerned with specific themes, such as migration or child rights, as 'anti-slavery activists' to invent new 'modern-day abolitionists'. While there may well be overlaps between causes, this rhetorical co-optation nonetheless has the effect of smoothing over differences in agenda, philosophy, and approach. In other cases, activists concerned with one theme—such as sex work and exploitation—attempt to recast their activities as contributing to the larger cause of ending slavery and trafficking, often by simply adding the buzzword 'labour trafficking' into their rhetorical vocabularies.

Over the last year, anti-trafficking activists have made a series of appeals for action in Nigeria, Syria, and Iraq, and thereby established rhetorical linkages between wartime captivity and sex work and exploitation. In the vast majority of cases, activists and organisations making these rhetorical appeals have not followed up with any substantive inventions. Activists and institutions may well be rhetorically committed to combating a huge number of problems, but this rhetoric conceals a political and spatial landscape where substantive inventions remain concentrated upon specific themes and locations.

Several conclusions follow from this overall line of argument. Firstly, and most obviously, it is essential not to confuse political rhetoric with political realities. However much people proclaim otherwise, there is not one global anti-trafficking or anti-slavery movement. There are instead many different movements and institutions with different agendas and interests. It should also be apparent, moreover, that these political agendas don't always point in the same direction.

Instead of lumping together diverse issues, we instead need to disaggregate the numerous causes and agendas that now uneasily co-exist under the banner of 'ending slavery'. This means focusing upon more specific themes and engaging in more narrowly focused political debates to address specific problems, such as the vulnerabilities associated with migration. Each of the themes identified above can be usefully understood as autonomous spheres of activism and analysis, rather than as subcategories within the increasingly incoherent and overloaded rhetoric of 'ending slavery'. There is undoubtedly overlap between some of these themes, but these points of intersection should be substantive and not simply rhetorical.

Finally, we also need to reflect upon whether or not the categories of 'slavery' and 'human trafficking' ultimately offer the most effective starting point for approaching these diverse themes. As we have seen, 'ending slavery' frequently means attempting to target specific sub-

categories of ‘exceptional’ cases that are found amongst much larger population groups. Targeting these exceptional cases cannot only be very difficult in practical terms, it also tends to create an informal separation between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ cases.

Instead of concentrating our energies upon a small subcategory within a larger population, perhaps it would be better to make the *entire* population the chief object of activism and analysis. While different themes require case-specific responses, this broadly means working to improve the rights and protections afforded to *all* migrants, sex workers, prisoners, domestics, supply chain workers, and other vulnerable populations. Instead of privileging individual cases, we need to be thinking in terms of collective transformation.

The challenges and perils of reframing trafficking as ‘modern-day slavery’

The ‘modern-day slavery’ frame has been effective in generating support for anti-trafficking efforts, but at what cost?

Janie Chuang

In the last five years, we have seen a rebranding of global anti-trafficking efforts as ‘modern-day slavery’ abolitionism. The US Department of State and powerful philanthropists are key proponents of the slavery makeover, prompting other governments, international organisations, and non-governmental organisations alike to adopt the ‘modern-day slavery’ frame. The slavery frame has helped ignite outrage and galvanise political support for modern anti-slavery campaigns. It has also helped expand the anti-trafficking spotlight beyond the sex sector to expose the extreme exploitation that men, women, and children suffer in the non-sexual labour sectors of our global economy. These benefits come at a cost, however, both with respect to legal doctrine and practice, and, perhaps more significantly, to how we understand and respond to the problem of extreme exploitation for profit.

One does not have to be a legal purist to appreciate the risks that come with building a global movement around a broadly-defined, made-up concept of ‘modern-day slavery’. Each of modern-day slavery’s purported component practices—slavery, trafficking, and forced labour—is separately defined under international law, subject to separate legal frameworks, and overseen by separate international institutions. Conflating trafficking and forced labour with the far more narrowly defined (and extreme) practice of ‘slavery’—however rhetorically effective—is not only legally inaccurate, but it also risks undermining effective application of the relevant legal regimes. Legal definitions matter when it comes to providing a common basis for governments worldwide to collect and share data, to facilitate extradition of criminal

suspects, and to pursue policy coordination with other governments. They also matter when it comes to individuals directly affected by the legal regimes designed to identify perpetrators and provide redress to victims of slavery, trafficking, and forced labour practices.

For example, conflating trafficking (and forced labour) with slavery risks implicitly *raising* the threshold for what counts as trafficking. In the US, for example, we have already seen how strategic use of slavery imagery by defense counsel in trafficking prosecutions can raise jurors' expectations of more extreme harms than anti-trafficking norms actually require. That not only undermines prosecutorial efforts, but it renders accountability and redress for victims even more elusive than they already are. Similarly, diluting the slavery norm risks undermining its *jus cogens* status—*jus cogens*, or peremptory norms, are overriding, fundamental principles of international law from which no derogation is permitted—which in turn could compromise the international community's ability to prosecute alleged perpetrators of slavery—a practice that, albeit rare, still exists in parts of the world. A flexible or indeterminate interpretation of what counts as slavery also risks violating the principle that crimes and punishments should be clearly defined in the law (*nullum crimen sine lege, nulla poena sine lege*), thus compromising the rights of the accused.

Perhaps equally if not more concerning is how the slavery makeover can limit how we understand and respond to modern-day exploitation for profit. As sociologist O'Connell Davidson [has explained](#), slavery rhetoric and imagery can serve as a 'discourse of depoliticisation'. Typically, slavery imagery is used to distill the complex phenomenon of trafficking into a simple narrative of crime perpetrated by evil individuals and organisations, and suffered by victims who (like eighteenth century trans-Atlantic slaves) must have been kidnapped or otherwise brought to the destination countries against their will. Depicting slavery as the product of individual deviant behaviour, modern-day slavery abolitionism creates a simple moral imperative with enormous

popular appeal. In doing so, it depoliticises and absolves—behind a humanitarian agenda—the state for its role in creating the structures that permit, if not encourage, coercive exploitation of workers, especially migrants. The resulting prescriptions thus narrowly focus on punishing the enslavers and rescuing innocent victims. They further suggest that governments, corporations and individuals can eradicate slavery simply by engaging in more ethical consumption of goods and services.

Any commitment to addressing the *structural* contributors to the problem thus becomes extraneous to the anti-slavery project. States need not, for example, consider the relationship between tightened border controls and the growth in the market for clandestine migration services. They need not question the wisdom of guestworker programmes that fail to guard against employers and recruiters using the threat of retaliatory termination and deportation to chill worker complaints and worker organising. Instead, states can continue their heavy focus on penalisation and rescue strategies, despite their disappointing results. Meanwhile, the growing ranks of ‘philanthrocapitalists’ [can apply their considerable skill](#) at accumulating wealth to fixing the world’s slavery problem. We can maintain faith in the infallibility of their good intentions rather than question the merits of a system that enabled such wealth while also creating the vast global inequalities that feed coercive exploitation of the world’s poor.

To be sure, crime control and corporate social responsibility measures are crucial tools in the fight against modern exploitation. But far more is required to attack the roots of the problem. It may be inevitable that forced labour and trafficking are discussed in terms of ‘modern-day slavery’—but if so, we must be far better attuned to what the slavery analogy reveals and what it obscures. The recent renaissance in slavery scholarship holds exciting potential for [comparing the political economies of the slavery practices of the past and the trafficking/forced labour practices of the present](#). That scholarship has underscored, for

example, how states that had condemned chattel slavery in the US nonetheless profited from the interstate commercial trading system created and fueled by the slave trade. Understanding modern practices against that historical backdrop might help bring to light how the prosperity of today's wealthiest countries is similarly pinned to the pain of extremely exploited migrant workers—even as these countries lead the 'anti-slavery' charge. Or how the very exploitation we condemn as immoral actually drives our globalised economy—enabling wealthy countries to extract profits from migrants' cheap labour and poorer countries to extract revenue from their remittances.

A far more nuanced depiction of 'modern-day slavery' would expose these and other deeply uncomfortable truths about how our societies and economies are structured. But confronting those truths also opens up a host of new possibilities that seek to prevent exploitation by targeting structural vulnerability. Such alternative strategies should include reforming certain aspects of current labour and migration frameworks that invite and reward the exploitation of world's poor. These might include, for example, developing interstate mechanisms to better manage foreign labour recruitment, and strengthening domestic labour protections to empower workers to meaningfully resist coercive exploitation. Pursuing such strategies would be a departure from the penalisation and rescue models that have long dominated and defined the anti-trafficking field. But this is necessary if the modern-day slavery movement is to deliver on its promise of freedom.

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When human trafficking becomes a *Cause Celebre*

Celebrities no longer just raise money and awareness. They offer advice about how to approach and 'solve' the human trafficking problem. The United Nations has multitudes of celebrities representing it as the 'faces' of the topic.

Dina Haynes

No one is *for* human trafficking, save the traffickers, recruiters, and middlemen who profit from it. But does this mean that everyone with a publicist to please has the requisite experience to take on the complexities of human trafficking, or that we should unquestioningly follow the recommendations and advice of these self-designated anti-trafficking icons?

Until the summer of 2014, when *Newsweek* led with a [cover story](#) implying that Somaly Mam, an anti-trafficking activist, was a fraud, every celebrity human rights activist, government official, NGO representative and member of Congress I met had claimed her as a 'close friend'. She was dubbed a 'hero' (and awarded money with that title) by everyone from the US Department of State to *Glamour* magazine. She was lauded by John Kerry, Oprah, the UN Secretary General, and the Pope, among others. When I asked one US State Department official a few years ago why that agency continued to fund her when legitimate questions were surfacing about whether she was carrying out the work she claimed, the honest, if somewhat disappointing response that I received was "she's very photogenic". The implication was that Somaly Mam was one of a handful of people who put a face on human trafficking activism, and the benefits that came with ease of recognition outweighed the potential costs of backing the wrong horse.

Celebrities—people known for being known—are increasingly in-

volved in human rights activism. The pop star who sells clothes to fight poverty in Africa, the movie star working on intervention strategies in Darfur, the journalist who specialises in op-ed's about rescuing girls from their plight: all secure a broader following through work that seems both important and serious. They are celebrities, but also humanitarians. A complicit public often respects multi-millionaire stars all the more for putting their celebrity to good use. To paraphrase Susan Sarandon, a member of the Somaly Mam Foundation global advisory board, if a celebrity is going to be treated as a commodity she might as well get some air time for her particular activist agenda. And it works. Appearing in public recently, Emma Stone and her boyfriend Andrew Garfield held signs in front of their faces that described the needs of two charities. If the paparazzi tailing them wanted to publish photos of the two movie stars together, they would also have to show the information about the charities. They did.

But an all-too-real downside of the celebritisation of human rights causes is that questioning the veracity of celebrity claims becomes a perilous business. They are respected and loved by millions, and have funding and political support to back them up, regardless of how beneficial their activism is. The same has been true with human trafficking. One of the many problems with turning anti-trafficking activists like Somaly Mam into figureheads for a cause (and her celebrity supporters, in a circular fashion, into *bona fide* anti trafficking 'experts' for endorsing her) is that by virtue of their sizable public following, their words and suggestions become sacrosanct. Questioning dubious statistics and dramatic claims about human trafficking requires one to parry wrathful retorts like: "Are you saying that you are for five-year-old girls being sold into brothels?!" No. I'm not.

Celebrities no longer just raise money and awareness. They offer advice about how to approach and 'solve' the human trafficking problem. Congress regularly invites celebrity witnesses to testify on human trafficking. The wife of one Hollywood star, an actress herself, was invited

to address the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on human trafficking, even though she admitted she had never even heard of the issue until eight months earlier. A pop star and another Hollywood couple each created anti-trafficking foundations that received sizeable funding from the US government. They were in turn designated 'heroes' for using that government funding to put out public service announcements about trafficking. The United Nations has multitudes of celebrities representing it as the 'faces' of the topic.

Yes, celebrity activists can raise awareness about the existence of human trafficking. But their often ill-informed characterisations of the problem and its potential solutions lead to unintended consequences, misallocated funds, and misdirected victim services, because the claims they make are backed by data, statistics, and assumptions rife with error.

A multitude of careful and considerate experts on human trafficking have emerged in the past few decades, and scholarship on the topic is showing us that much of what we think we know about human trafficking may be wrong. But it is the opinions of celebrities and celebrity activists like Somaly Mam and Nicholas Kristof who continue to hold sway. These individuals receive the lion's share of attention from the press, from the public and, crucially, from legislators and policy makers. In September 2014, [an article](#) in *Marie Claire* disputed the *Newsweek* allegations, suggesting that Mam was not misrepresenting herself or her work. Regardless of which story holds the most truth, no one person or one aspect of the issue should dominate the direction of policy, funding, or programming solutions.

Is it better to do nothing than something? The answer is not necessarily one or the other. But when the something done is not carefully thought out, or is based merely on the proposals of celebrity activists with something to gain, then it might well be better to do nothing.

Shilling fantasy as reality: a review of *Trade* and *Holly*

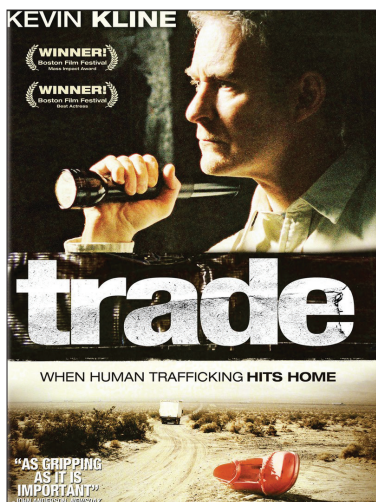
Movies glorifying the 'rescue' of sex workers by men posing as clients are erotic fantasies, not daring representations of modern sex-trafficking.

Kerwin Kaye

The tragic political trajectory of the old feminist anti-pornography movement (now largely converted into a campaign to fight trafficking) has reached a new low. At the premieres of the 2008 movies *Trade* and *Holly*—respectively sponsored by NOW-NYC (the New York City branch of the National Organisation for Women) and CATW-International (Coalition Against Trafficking in Women)—I watched in amazement as both groups endorsed appallingly sexist portrayals of damsels in distress and of gallant men riding to the rescue, all in the name of feminism. Worse yet, in neither case were the organisers concerned that their chivalrous knights appeared disturbingly fixated upon the teenage women whom the camera and script sexualised again and again.

Trade

Trade, starring Kevin Kline in a lack-luster performance, is about a hard-nosed cop with a heart of gold who saves a group of enslaved girls. The fantastical premise of this movie begins when a sweet 13-year-old virgin (and yes, it is important that she be a virgin) is literally chased down and kidnapped while riding her bicycle through the streets of a poor neighbourhood in Mexico. While the movie is supposed to be based upon Peter Landesman's much criticised *New York Times Magazine* [article](#) about 'sex slaves' (which itself featured a suggestive cover photo of a purportedly underage victim), even Landesman's creative reporting techniques failed to dig up any such incident. The kidnapping-sex trafficking story is little more than the addition of organised crime to the old 'the man in the bushes is gonna getcha' myth. The creative element is passing this B-movie hokum off as 'feminism'.



Fair Use.

In perhaps the most original departure from Landesman's text, the movie's gay director, Marco Kreuzpaintner, personally insisted on including a scene in which a *boy* is also presented as a victim of sex trafficking (most writers seem to find male rape too unsettling to include). However, the sexual demands of the straight audience seemingly prevented him from giving too much screen time to *this* victim. Instead the movie goes through several scenes in which the sexual horror

that *girls and women* experience as a result of sex trafficking is explicitly revealed. In one unlikely scene, the victim's older brother catches up to his sister just at the very moment that she is forced to pose provocatively for a photo session. (Do not brothers sometimes sneak peeks at their sisters? He does watch the scene from the bushes!)

Wouldn't you know it, the only way for our heroes to rescue the young damsel in distress is for them to pose as sex clients who wish to have sex with her (Relax. I'm sure it has nothing to do with unconscious fantasy, despite the fact that the police know the address of the brothel and—in real life—would raid the place in a second). In the movie, however, the good guys get to participate in an online sex auction, and...they successfully buy the virgin!

Scenes in which real-life 'rescuers' pose as clients as they conduct their 'investigations' are all too common. It is a standard practice of the Christian group International Justice Mission, and *New York Times* editorialist Nicholas Kristof has written numerous times about two Cambodian women whom he 'purchased' before freeing. The possi-

bility that posing as a client—or that ‘buying’ two young women—hides something more than a benevolent desire to help is simply never broached (have none of these people even *heard* of Freud?!). And in real life, the fact that many ‘victims’ fail to share in the erotic fantasy life of their rescuers is revealed by the fact that many run away from the rehabilitation facilities where they are taken in order to return to work in the brothels.

But back to our movie. Having successfully purchased this virgin 13-year-old through the online auction, the Kline character shows up at the brothel where he is told at gunpoint that—get this—he must have sex with the girl directly in front of the traffickers, *or else!* He doesn’t want to, but now...well, *he has no choice!* The script writer, I mean, those evil traffickers are *forcing* him! Fortunately, our hero figures out a way out of this, but not before the helpless heroine ‘mistakenly’ expects him to rape her. Our hero is so tragically misunderstood!

Holly

Holly is a far better movie than *Trade*, but it is even more laden with sexual innuendo. It’s actually quite a good movie if you are looking to see just how creepy the ‘rescuers’ can be. Unfortunately it was not taken this way by CATW, which used the movie as a simple fund raiser, nor by the US State Department’s top anti-trafficking official, Mark Logan, who spoke after the film along with the co-producer and co-screenwriter Guy Jacobson.

Jacobson explained that the movie was based on his experiences in Cambodia, where he ‘happened to stumble upon’ a group of young children (5 to 7-year-olds) who offered to sell him sex and blow jobs. Where one has to be in order to just ‘happen’ across such a scene, I do not know. But I am pretty sure it is not listed in either the *Michelin Guide* or *Lonely Planet*. (The film itself invokes a guilty conscience about this matter. When the hero, played by Ron Livingston, tells off a ‘genuine’ client, saying “I don’t sleep with little girls, you sick fuck”,

the man replies, “I beg your pardon. What are you doing here then?”)

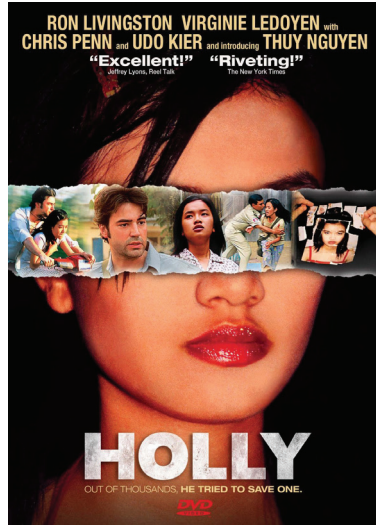
Subsequent to his disturbing experience of being solicited by truly young children, Jacobson did what any normal person would have done: he spent a great deal of time investigating the matter in as close-up and intimate a manner as possible. According to [a review](#) in the *JewishJournal*:

Jacobson drew on his experience in Israeli intelligence during the Lebanon War to research “how a 12-year-old prostitute really feels” in Phnom Penh. While posing as a pedophile client, he chatted with the girls, their pimps and clients in cafes and “bought” a time upstairs with various girls in order to photograph their rooms, which were tiny, dirty, and decorated with magazine cutouts of puppies and kittens (he would ask them to take a shower so he could snap pictures and tell them he wasn’t in the mood when they returned.)

This is the man the CATW wishes to hold up as a role model? *This* is the man the US State Department endorses? Are there any male anti-trafficking crusaders who do *not* find it necessary to pose as clients?

Holly features yet another virgin, this one a 12-year-old (you’d be surprised at how many virgins wind up in the sex biz). This one lives in a brothel, but has not yet been forced to sell sex. Will our hero be able to save this sweet pre-teen before her virginity is sold on the open market? Sadly, no. But along the way he spends a lot of quality time with the still untouched virgin, somehow befriendng this 12-year-old Cambodian girl who speaks little English and initially rejects him. Despite this, she somehow ends up in his arms again and again (was this part based on real life too? No? Just an imaginative plot device? Hmm...).

Livingston's character eventually catches up to the no-longer-virginal girl, paying for the girl's time though she seems to no longer even recognise him. To the hero's horror (*no doubt!*) she treats him like any other client and offers to have sex with him. Livingston's character attempts to win back her friendship, and in a scene that might well have been directly inspired by Nabokov's *Lolita*, he takes the 12-year-old shopping for clothes. These efforts eventually pay off, and the rescuer finally has a 'break-through' moment with the girl. Yelling at her that he only wants to help, he pulls her into the shower in order to wash off her make-up, enabling her to break down and cry despite her initial feeble attempts at resistance (*paging Dr. Freud, there's a shower scene in Theater 2*).



Fair Use.

But the offers for sex are not yet over. The still 'whorish' girl victim soon declares her love for the hero, and suggests marrying him, saying "I want you buy me" and "Go America. I wife you". Good thing Jacobson did all that research in order to make the movie more realistic!. Livingston's character of course rejects these suggestions, but it's truly amazing just how many opportunities for sex with young girls the rescue business offers a guy! The *JewishJournal* adds (apparently without irony) that "the filmmakers included neither sex nor nudity in order to avoid exploiting the subject matter". *Phew!* No nudity = no exploitation. Glad we got *that* cleared up!

There are still more suggestive scenes in *Holly*, to such an extent that at least some reviewers, such as [Jeff Shannon of the Seattle Times](#), note

that the movie “discreetly hints” that the hero’s attraction to Holly is “not entirely platonic”. Nevertheless, these clues seemed entirely lost upon the crowds with whom I saw the movies—at least the point was never brought up in the post-film discussion—and other reviewers offer such oblivious praise as “Holly’ is about what happens when you’re too personally touched to leave it at that” (*LA Times*).

The constitutive power of rescue fantasy

It seems even those who recognise the not-so-hidden desires of the protagonists fail to see how this same illicit desire structures not only the movies but much of the anti-trafficking narrative as a whole.

Despite their deep-seated prurience, both films were presented by feminist, anti-trafficking groups in New York, and both films featured premiere screenings at the United Nations. No one less than Hillary Clinton sat as an honorary member of the host committee for the UN showing of *Holly* (which was also sponsored by the feminist group Vital Voices, a group Clinton co-founded; *Trade*, meanwhile, was co-sponsored by Equality Now, for which Gloria Steinem acts as a trustee).

Far from being treated as the sexual fantasies they so clearly are, these films have been treated as if they were highly realistic instances of investigative journalism. *Trade* is a “so-so” movie, says *Entertainment Weekly*, “but as an exposé of how the new globalised industry of sex trafficking really works, it’s a disquieting, eye-opening bulletin”. *Paste Magazine* claims that “*Holly* exposes child sex trafficking”, while the *New York Times* labels it “a documentary-fiction hybrid”. The *Jewish-Journal* goes so far as to suggest it offers “the hyper-realistic portrayal of such a child’s life”.

Sex workers are usually paid to enact the fantasies of their clients. Here, these fantasies are imposed through both popular acclaim and policy initiative. While I genuinely do not care what gets people off—people enjoy watching horror movies like *Saw* all the time—having a

good nose for the distinction between fantasy and reality should be a prerequisite for fantasy play. Yet none of the people in charge seem to be able to discern the difference. Instead, this prurient trash is passed off as humanitarianism and applauded.

For clarity's sake, let me acknowledge that there are indeed people who suffer enormously within the sex industry, people who are coerced into prostitution and who are kept in conditions that amount to slavery. Perhaps there are even a few kidnapping victims out there. But while these small numbers exist, the vast majority of sex workers experience labour conditions that are entirely unlike these fantasy-fuelled scenarios. As has been documented by the GAATW (Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women) and other researchers, the majority of people who migrate for sex work are well aware of what their future jobs entail. Many, perhaps most, have done the work before in their home countries.

The difficulty with sexual-fantasy-as-news-reportage is that it promotes policies that may help a few individuals—by all means, send in the cops if someone has been kidnapped—but ignore the actual needs of the majority. Indeed, in many ways these policies make the situation worse for the majority and effectively *promote* 'trafficking'. An example would be when anti-trafficking policies take the form of anti-migration laws, thereby pushing migrants directly into the hands of criminal networks to circumnavigate the controls. Even in cases of child prostitution, the projected fantasy life of mass culture does more to generate counter-productive policies than to help genuine victims. The new US focus on 'domestic trafficking', for example, will simply result in even longer prison sentences for black men as 'pimps/traffickers', while doing little to nothing for children fleeing sexual abuse within their homes.

Let us not forget this last point, because—as feminists were keen to point out when they first raised the issue of child sexual abuse—it is

within the family that the overwhelming majority of ‘child sex slaves’ exist. It is ultimately *these* children, the ones who are trapped and effectively enslaved within their homes, who will pay the price for the unrecognised and un-dealt-with sexual fantasy known as ‘child sex trafficking’. It bears repeating again and again: *daddy*, not the man in the bushes, is the biggest rapist.

Those who care about ‘child sex slavery’ would do well to turn their efforts to challenging on-going patriarchy within the home and to offer active support for children who run away from abusers rather than to punish near-mythical (and invariably non-white) offenders. As for the male heroes and rescuers, many of these guys seem like creepy dads to me. The feminists who help enable them to have literal close contact with prostituting girls and young women ought to wake up and notice with whom they’ve gotten into bed.

A version of this review appeared in the Spring 2008 issue of *\$pread*, 3(4): 51-2

‘Irish slaves’: the convenient myth

The conflation of indentured servitude with chattel slavery in the ‘Irish slaves’ narrative whitewashes history in the service of Irish nationalist and white supremacist causes. Its resurgence in the wake of Ferguson reflects many Americans’ denial of the entrenched racism still prevalent in their society.

Liam Hogan

It was with a heavy heart and no small amount of anger that I decided it was necessary to write a public refutation of the insidious myth that the Irish were once chattel slaves in the British colonies. The subject of this myth is not an issue in academic circles, for there is unanimous agreement, based on overwhelming evidence, that the Irish were never subjected to perpetual, hereditary slavery in the colonies based on notions of ‘race’. Unfortunately this is not the case in the public domain and the ‘Irish slaves’ myth has been shared so frequently online that it has gone viral.

The tale of the Irish slaves is rooted in a false conflation of indentured servitude and chattel slavery. These are not the same. Indentured servitude was a form of bonded labour, whereby a migrant agreed to work for a set period of time (between two and seven years) and in return the cost of the voyage across the Atlantic was covered. Indentured servitude was a colonial innovation that enabled many to emigrate to the New World while providing a cheap and white labour force for planters and merchants to exploit. Those who completed their term of service were awarded ‘freedom dues’ and were free. The vast majority of labourers who agreed to this system did so voluntarily, but there were many who were forcibly transplanted from the British Isles to the colonies and sold into indentured service against their will. While these forced deportees would have included political prisoners and serious felons, it is believed that the majority came from the poor and

vulnerable. This forced labour was in essence an extension of the English Poor Laws, e.g. in 1697 John Locke recommended the whipping of those who ‘refused to work’ and the herding of beggars into workhouses. Indeed this criminalisation of the poor continues into the 21st century. In any case, all bar the serious felons were freed once the term of their contract expired.

“White indentured servitude was so very different from black slavery as to be from another galaxy of human experience”, as Donald Harman Akenson put it in *If the Irish Ran the World: Montserrat, 1630-1730*. How so? Chattel slavery was perpetual, a slave was only free once they were no longer alive; it was hereditary, the children of slaves were the property of their owner; the status of chattel slave was designated by ‘race’, there was no escaping your bloodline; a chattel slave was treated like livestock, you could kill your slaves while applying “moderate correction” and the homicide law would not apply; the execution of ‘insolent’ slaves was encouraged in these slavocracies to deter insurrections and disobedience, and their owners were paid generous compensation for their ‘loss’; an indentured servant could appeal to a court of law if they were mistreated, a slave had no recourse for justice. And so on...

A dangerous myth

The prevalence and endurance of this myth is partly due to the fact that it is buttressed by two long-standing narratives. The first narrative comes from the arena of Irish nationalism, where the term ‘slavery’ is used to highlight the political, social, and religious subjugation or persecution that the Irish have historically suffered. In this narrative, the term ‘Irish slaves’ refers specifically to those who were forced onto transport ships and sold into indentured servitude in the West Indies during the Cromwellian era. The ‘innocent’ usage of this phrase is, to a degree, understandable and its conflation with chattel slavery generally occurs due to a mixture of ignorance and confusion. More objectionable is the canon of pseudo-history books like O’Callaghan’s

To Hell or Barbados or Walsh and Jordan's *White Cargo*, which knowingly conflate indentured servitude and chattel slavery. The 'Irish slaves' myth is also a convenient focal point for nationalist histories as it obscures the critically underwritten story of how so many Irish people, whether Gaelic, Hiberno-Norman or Anglo-Irish, benefited from the Atlantic slave trade and other colonial exploits in multiple continents for hundreds of years.



Supplied by the author from Twitter.

The second narrative is of a more sinister nature. Found in the websites and forums of white supremacist conspiracy theorists, this insidiously claims that indentured servitude can be equated with chattel slavery. From Stormfront.org, a self-described online community of white nationalists, to David Icke's February 2014 [interview with Infowars.com](#), the narrative of the 'white slaves' is continuously promoted. The most influential book to claim that there was 'white slavery' in Colonial America was Michael Hoffman's *They Were White and They Were Slaves: The Untold History of the Enslavement of Whites in Early America*. Self-published in 1993, Hoffman, a Holocaust denier, unsurprisingly blames the Atlantic slave trade on the Jews. By blurring the lines between the different forms of unfree labour, these white supremacists seek to conceal the incontestable fact that these slavocracies were controlled by—and operated for the benefit of—white Europeans. This narrative, which exists almost exclusively in the United States, is essentially a form of nativism and racism masquerading as conspiracy theory. Those that push this narrative have now adopted the 'Irish slaves' myth, and they use it as a rhetorical 'attack dog' which aims to shut down all debate about the legacy of black slavery in the United States.

In the wake of the Ferguson shooting, both of these narratives were conjoined in a particularly ugly fashion. Many social media users, including some Irish Americans, invoked this mythology to chide African Americans for protesting against the structural racism that exists in the United States (see a [collection of tweets](#) on 'Irish slaves', gathered by the author). Furthermore, they used these falsehoods to mock African American calls for reparations for slavery, stating "my Irish ancestors were the first slaves in America, where are my reparations?" Those that share links to spurious 'Irish slavery' articles on social media have also been appending their posts with the hashtags #Ferguson and #NoExcuses. No excuses? This myth of convenience is being utilised by those who are unwilling to accept the truth of their white privilege and the prevalence of an entrenched racism in their societies. There is clearly comfort to be found in denialism.

The conflation present in both narratives has been abetted by the deliberate use of a limited vocabulary. The inclination to describe these different forms of servitude using the umbrella term "slavery" is a wilful misuse of language. It serves to diminish the reality of the chattel slave system that existed in the New World for over three centuries. It is also a reminder that the popular use of such a simplistic term as 'modern-day slavery' can reduce clarity and hinder our collective understanding of both the present and the past.

This piece is based on Liam's longer essay, *'The myth of "Irish slaves" in the colonies'*.



Section two

Challenging the white saviour
industrial complex

The white man's burden revisited

The war on trafficking is a contemporary imperialist move that involves 'the west' saving 'the rest', appearing as a reconfigured version of the 'white man's burden'. Modern-day slavery abolitionism, abolitionist feminism, and celebrity humanitarianism together make up this renewed imperialism.

Kamala Kempadoo

In the early 1990s the debate on human trafficking was restricted to a handful of feminists and revolved around establishing 'the trafficking of women' as a case of labour migration or one of 'female sexual slavery'. Two decades later, the topic has become a household word and involves a more complicated debate. Within this proliferation of attention on trafficking and slavery, a convergence among some of the most vocal and visible campaigns is discernible, looking disturbingly like a reconfigured 'white man's burden'.

The 'burden' has at least two dimensions. One is that the dominant anti-trafficking and anti-slavery campaigns are primarily inspired by, located in, and directed from within racialised 'developed' centres of the world. The antislavery movement, for example, is dominated by white middle-class or elite men—in the US, Britain, and Australia—who founded the majority of international organisations and populate executive boards and directorships. These men have the resources and cultural capital to produce books, news items, and films on the subject. People of colour and non-westerners are positioned in their campaigns as objects for rescue and education, modern-day 'slaveholders', or 'survivor leaders'.

With unquestioned obligation and entitlement to intervene, and convinced of their righteousness, modern anti-slavery men feel free to roam the earth saving poor people. Histories of earlier abolitionist movements as steeped in white guilt, fear of black violence, distrust of



'Proclamation of the Abolition of Slavery in the French Colonies', by Auguste François Biard (d. 1882). Gandalf's Gallery/Flickr. Creative Commons.

black men, paternalism, conservative Christian values, and an uncomfortable politic between whites and blacks over social equality, are not addressed. Instead the campaigns feature the daring white knight morally obligated to save the world—especially Asia and Africa—affirming white masculinity as powerful and heroic.

Abolitionist feminism extends this 'burden' to white middle-class and elite women. Rooted in the nineteenth century white slavery discourse that spawned maternal feminist charitable rescue work, the movement locates its moral obligation and civic responsibility in the rescue of poor 'prostituted' women and children (victims) from male privilege, power, and lust (sex trafficking). It reproduces a colonial maternalism in relation to the impoverished non-western world, while reconfirming the white western middle-class woman as benevolent. The uncomfortable politic between white radical feminism and 'third world', black, and postcolonial feminisms is pushed aside in favour of an essentialising notion of global victimised womanhood.

Both types of abolitionist politics inform celebrity humanitarian campaigns against trafficking, starring Demi Moore, Emma Thompson, Mira Sorvino and more. Celebrity humanitarianism is broadcast widely—hearts are in the right place, pockets deep, and star status focuses attention on a problem believed to be one of the worlds’ most heinous. Yet as Dina Haynes points out (this volume), “their often ill-informed characterisations of the problem and its potential solutions lead to unintended consequences, misallocated funds, and misdirected victim services” even while they are designated “heroes”.

Accolades for such anti-trafficking and antislavery work include a Pulitzer and an Emmy, honorary doctorates, and awards for human rights and peace work. Campaigners in the global north applaud and celebrate each other. White privilege rules.

Second, while global inequality in wealth is acknowledged as the economic context within which trafficking and slavery occurs, global capitalism is not targeted for eradication. Corrupt and greedy individuals, ‘bad’ corporations that violate labour laws, and isolated national governments that oppose ‘the west’ (think Cuba, South Korea, Syria, Venezuela, Zimbabwe, etc.), become the problem. Campaigners work to bring these ‘rogues’ into compliance with hegemonic (western, capitalist) standards and values.

The resulting regulations produce more criminalisation of greater areas of human life, leaving the source of inequality intact. As [one American journalist puts it](#), “more capitalism is needed to bring more people out of poverty, and [it] can also be the most effective tool to bring people out of slavery”. Even so, the ‘big bang approach’—the injection of large sums into poor areas or communities by philanthropists such as Bill Gates or Jeffrey Sachs—is not a workable solution. Charity is not sustainable economic development. But this work propels CEOs into the limelight and alleviates the guilt of those whose grotesque wealth was accumulated off the sweat and blood of millions of others. By natural-

ising neoliberal capitalism as “the only game in town”, as Ilan Kapoor puts it in [*Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity*](#), the ‘white man’s burden’ not only masks but depoliticises the workings of the global economy.

In sum, modern-day slavery abolitionism, abolitionist feminisms and celebrity humanitarianism combine to create a neoliberal white chivalrous crusade across the world, born of a moral sense of goodness, with the ‘developing’ global south and east as the dumping grounds for, what Barbara Heron calls in [*Desire for Development*](#), “helping imperatives” involving rescue and charity. Suffering bodies are captured, rehabilitated, and returned home (preferably with a photo shoot of smiling brown or black children as proof). The fantasy of help legitimises the endeavours as altruistic and humanitarian, obscuring the reliance on and reproduction of racial knowledge about the Other. This knowledge settles around the historical tropes of the hopeless, impoverished victim incapable of attending to their own needs, and of the benevolent, civilising white subject who must bear the burden of intervening in the global south. With no effect on the causes of the problem and, indeed, advocating more neoliberal regulation and stronger corporate capitalism, imperialism is given a new lease of life.

This piece is adapted from a forthcoming article in the *Journal of Human Trafficking*.

From Utah to the ‘darkest corners of the world’: the militarisation of raid and rescue

The evocative imagery used in militant activism fails to address the historical underpinnings of trafficking and slavery while reinforcing neo-colonial representations of the ‘saviour’ and the ‘saved’.

Garrett Nagaishi

Utah-based Operation Underground Railroad (OUR) has attracted a great deal of attention since it was [first endorsed](#) by Glenn Beck, an American conservative political pundit, in 2013. This [new addition](#) to the already crowded field of anti-trafficking organisations “us[es] cutting-edge computer technology and human intelligence [to] go into the darkest corners of the world to help local law enforcement liberate enslaved children and dismantle the criminal networks”. It is this type of language that identifies OUR as yet another disturbing example of a ‘raid-and-rescue’ organisation. As Kamala Kempadoo has demonstrated (this volume), these interventions represent the latest version of the ‘white man’s burden’, with a ‘civilised’ west offering salvation and protection to ‘the rest’. While such sentiments are common, OUR takes things a step further by sending, essentially, gun-toting vigilantes to foreign countries in the pursuit of ‘freedom’ for enslaved children.

A cursory assessment of OUR’s website shows that the organisation is able to capture the public’s attention by exploiting the stereotype of the ‘saviour’ and the ‘saved’. The site’s main page features Tim Ballard, an ex-CIA agent and CEO of OUR, paternalistically stroking the head of a black child. Next to the image is a link to *The Ride to Freedom*, a five-minute vignette discussing the process of posing as child traffickers to free child slaves and arrest the perpetrators. The ‘[Promise](#)’ page presents a photograph of a young girl who may or may not have once been a slave—though her complexion and clothing suggests she is from a ‘third world country’, and hence, vulnerable to enslavement.

The OUR method is marked by armed infiltration and an autonomy of action that comes from not being tied to a government agency. The organisation's [YouTube channel](#) gives viewers an inside look at rescue operations and those who are being 'saved'. The 'Rescue' page features a first-person image of an armed OUR member infiltrating an open-air market and forcing everyone to the ground. Highlighting the practical application of OUR supporters' donations has been a particularly effective tool in garnering financial support. By donating 'a Lincoln' (\$5), one can 'help save a slave'.



OUR CEO Tim Ballard holding a 'liberated slave'. Screenshot from ourrescue.org (17 April 2015). Fair Use.

Operation Underground Railroad has also taken advantage of the public's interest in topics that are 'trending' among celebrities and public figures. On 16 March 2015, OUR [officially announced](#) its merger with the Elizabeth Smart Foundation, to "combine efforts in the fight against human trafficking". Smart, a Utah native kidnapped at the age of fourteen and missing for nine months, has been at the forefront of anti-trafficking activism in the state for several years, making regular presentations at schools, concerts, and conferences. Smart's support for OUR has been a marketing and PR dream for the organisation, as it connects local activism against human trafficking to their established international portfolio. It gives legitimacy and credibility to a business model that might otherwise have attracted more critical analysis.

[YOURrescue](#), the sister site of OURrescue, offers a particularly shocking outlet for 'kickstarter' campaigns aimed at funding rescue missions. A quick glance at the on-going campaigns elicits such quaint phrases as 'rescue their innocence', 'liberate the captive', and even 'rescuing 40 child slaves for Katie's 40th' (see below). These campaigns not



YOURrescue campaign.
Screenshot from
yourrescue.org. Fair Use.

only perpetuate the image of the slave (who is almost always non-Caucasian) as an 'Other', but they also satiate the public's appetite to 'get something done'. This in turn reinforces the delusion that all it takes to save the world from slavery is money and guns.

The popular appeal of OUR and its humanitarian visage needs to be examined further. The organisation's 'on the ground' team consists of mostly ex-military personnel, while the office staff focuses on business, marketing, and international relations. Given that Operation Underground Railroad gets its name from the nineteenth-century effort to assist slaves in the American South fleeing to the north, one would expect this organisation to place more interest on the historical, political, and economic context in which various forms of unfreedom thrive today. Indeed, the website's '[Become an Abolitionist](#)' page features images of Abraham Lincoln with a caption describing the president as the 'original abolitionist', disregarding any anti-slavery efforts pre-dating Lincoln. Such misconceptions place American—or, more broadly, western—ideals at the forefront of international humanitarian efforts.

Operation Underground Railroad has taken the model of 'raid and rescue' to its logical conclusion, with ex-CIA agents engaging in covert operations and militarised interventions. OUR shares very little in common with historical abolitionists, but instead forms part of a larger trend where militarised 'solutions' have been applied to an ever increasing range of cases. Militant activism disregards a variety of domestic and international political and social concerns, particularly regarding sovereignty and personhood. As NGOs such as OUR vie for power and influence with governments and local authorities both home and abroad, we need to encourage a broader public discussion of these 'raid and rescue' groups and their destructive repercussions.

Fielding the wrong ball: culture as a cause of 'modern slavery'

Attributing trafficking in certain areas to 'cultural attitudes' explains away the legacies of colonialism and falsely differentiates between exploitation in 'bad' parts of the world and similar practices in western countries.

Sam Okyere

New abolitionists such as the [Abolish Slavery Coalition](#), [Walk Free Foundation](#) and [Free the Slaves](#), among others, have described modern-day slavery as a rapidly growing moral affront that requires urgent redress. The responsibility to rid the world of this scourge, according to the group [Made in a Free World](#), falls on all shoulders and not just those of [gold wearers](#), [chocolate consumers](#), [football players](#), [wearers of cotton and other garments](#), or [fish eaters](#). Apparently [we are all 21st-century slave owners or have slaves working for us](#). Slavery is a word with which no one wants to be associated. Thus, the message that somehow we are all beneficiaries of 'slave labour' and therefore complicit in the others' enslavement is highly evocative and powerful. Indeed, a recent UK Home Office campaign suggests that individuals are being enslaved [right in our neighbourhoods](#) and we need to help free them. The modern-day slavery campaign has gained significant traction. It now counts [presidents and global leaders](#), [celebrities](#) and [self-professed slave hunters](#) among its ranks, and informs national legislation with efforts such as the [Modern Slavery Act in the UK](#).

The idea of 'modern slavery' is challenged however when certain critical questions are asked about it. [Research evidence](#), 'victims' accounts, and [media reports](#) have cast doubts on: the basis upon which certain phenomena are deemed to constitute modern day slavery; the figures quoted in support of the supposedly pandemic levels of slavery today; [the narratives of victimhood and freedom](#) promoted by the discourse; and [the credibility and actions of some](#) individuals who have

shaped the modern-day slavery agenda. These doubts are linked to more fundamental questions regarding the supposedly clear-cut distinction between phenomena that attract the ire of new abolitionists, and those producing similar or worse human suffering that we are asked to discount from the list of evils. For example, what distinguishes the conditions endured by ‘victims of human trafficking’, who are often regarded as modern-day slaves, from the experiences of women held at immigration detention facilities? The latter are also subjected to [physical, psychological, and sexual abuse](#) before being moved against their will to destinations where their safety, well-being, and livelihoods are seriously compromised.

The picture becomes murkier still when the main reasons given by new abolitionists for the existence of ‘modern-day slavery’ are scrutinised. The [Global Fund to End Slavery](#) attributes the cause and scale of modern day slavery to three main points: transnational crime, corruption, and cultural attitudes. For sure, raising funds to support those deemed to be enslaved is laudable. But the reasons offered for their enslavement woefully fail to capture the complex dynamics pushing people into the conditions defined as modern day slavery by new abolitionists. Deliberately or otherwise, new abolitionists like the [Walk Free Foundation](#) shy away from acknowledging more fundamental political and historical points, such as the deleterious impacts of global capitalism on people’s lives and the legacy of colonialism in the developing world. Indeed, some supposed ‘cultural attitudes’ are inextricably linked or traceable to colonial policies.

An example can be drawn from Ghana. Although [research evidence](#) has painted a different and more complex picture, the independent migration of young people from Northern Ghana to seek income and other opportunities elsewhere in the country is often held up as evidence of child trafficking. This is particularly the case if they are found working in [cocoa farming](#) or [fishing](#). This situation is attributed to the cultural attitudes of those involved, in line with the position of the

[Walk Free Foundation](#), but history offers a more informed rationale. Under British colonial rule, the northern part of Ghana was denied roads, schools, hospitals, factories, and other infrastructural development. A stated policy of the British colonial administrators was to starve that part of the country of resources and developmental projects in order to force northerners to move down south to work in the mines, farms, and factories which had been established there. A cycle of poverty and deprivation was started by this colonial policy that has been difficult to reverse even after independence. Indeed, with subsistence farming as the people's mainstay, socio-economic deprivation in the three northern regions worsened throughout the 1980s when Ghana was compelled by IMF structural adjustment conditionalities to remove subsidies from agricultural products. Conditions have not improved much since. For many in the northern part of the country, both old and young, moving in search of work is mainly a response to hardship and a lack of opportunities. It is not simply because of a 'cultural predisposition' to move.

It is particularly instructive to note that new abolitionists tend to roll out the cultural attitude explanation only in cases such as bonded labour in India, child brick manufacturing in Pakistan, and other forms of exploitation that occur in the developing world. Similar human suffering in western societies, such as the [widespread and persistent abuse of migrant domestic workers](#), are not seen as 'culture' or as modern slavery, even though the evidence ticks all the criteria identified by new abolitionists. This creates an impression that situations labelled as modern slavery mostly happen in the 'dark', developing world where abuse and exploitation are part of the everyday way of life. This is put in contrast to 'modern' western societies, where no such 'cultures' are assumed to exist. More significantly, the emphasis on culture, corruption, and transnational organised crime as the underlying reasons for the existence of the conditions identified by new abolitionists serves to hide what is truly at issue: the need to address social, economic, and political power imbalances and injustices both locally and globally.

Residual causes: Wilberforce and forced labour

William Wilberforce is held up as a hero of the contemporary anti-slavery movement, but his legacy is tainted by his participation in government repression and his opposition to labour rights.

Vanessa Pupavac

Anti-slavery campaigns commonly hold up William Wilberforce as a hero of the anti-slavery movement. In this vein, [Free The Slaves](#) offers [William Wilberforce awards](#) to individuals who have “moved a major institution, government, business, or large groups of people to take significant action to fight slavery”. Wilberforce was undoubtedly a key figure in the drafting of the 1807 Abolition Act, and the Antislavery Society [favourably compares](#) his and other abolitionists’ activities to common forms of political activism today:

Wilberforce and his fellow abolitionists introduced a variety of new tactics, which today are common to all campaigning, ranging from holding public meetings to publicising powerful images...

Here the Antislavery Society suggests Wilberforce shares common political cause with other progressives past and present. Yet Wilberforce was a much more ambiguous figure in the history of anti-slavery and activity against forced labour than we normally choose to remember.

Wilberforce was actively involved in government repression in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Wilberforce helped draft the Sedition legislation and opposed a public inquiry into the Peterloo Massacre, as the historian E.P. Thompson outlines in his seminal [The Making of the English Working Class](#). His Society for the Suppression of Vice and Encouragement of Religion was active in suppressing the nascent working class, the trade union movement, and their demands

for political and labour rights. Political criticism of Wilberforce is not simply the condescension of history, but was made by contemporaries. The radical writer William Hazlitt scathingly writes of Wilberforce in his 1825 book *Spirit of the Age*:

Mr. Wilberforce's humanity will go all lengths that it can with safety and discretion; but it is not to be supposed that it should lose him his seat for Yorkshire, the smile of Majesty, or the countenance of the loyal and pious. He is anxious to do all the good he can without hurting himself or his fair fame...Mr. Wilberforce is far from being a hypocrite; but he is, we think, as fine a specimen of moral equivocation as can be conceived.

Lord Byron's poem 1821 *Don Juan* links Wilberforce to the conservative figure Malthus rather than progressive figures and ironically described the price of slaves being doubled by Wilberforce's abolitionism:

Twelve negresses from Nubia brought a price
Which the West Indian market scarce would bring;
Though Wilberforce, at last, has made it twice
What 't was ere Abolition.

So how do we explain that a figure closely identified with the emancipation of slaves should be at the forefront of suppressing political and civil rights? Wilberforce's abolitionist philosophy was essentially a spiritual concern for religious salvation, both of a slave-owning society and the slaves themselves. Indeed, Wilberforce advocated gradual emancipation of slaves, fearing immediate emancipation would lead to "universal anarchy and distress". The slaves had to first be educated for (moral) freedom, just as the population domestically had to first be educated before any expansion of the franchise.

Such was Wilberforce's concern with spiritual well-being, he feared

improved living standards might make the poor more sinful. But Wilberforce's vision of spiritual improvement inevitably had an apologetic air to a population suffering pauperisation and whose social demands he sought to suppress.

Furthermore, anti-slavery has been analysed as a residual progressive cause among the rising middle classes now fearful of radical political change following the French Revolution. The writer William Cobbett observed in 1824:

Rail they do...against the West Indian slave-holders; but not a word do you ever hear from them against the slave-holders in Lancashire and in Ireland. On the contrary, they are continually telling the people here that they ought to thank the Lord (Cobbett in E.P. Thompson).

Anti-slavery could give a sense of moral purpose to, and answer the psychic needs of, the progressives otherwise indifferent to the poverty around them because Wilberforce's welfare concerns were essentially about the spiritual, not the material.

Similar contradictory impulses may be seen in today's human trafficking campaigns. They too have come to prominence in a period of political retreat, and may represent a residual progressive cause against the demise of labour activism and more radical political movements. Moreover policies against human trafficking may undermine individuals' freedom of movement and make them more at risk of exploitation. Wilberforce's politics helped hold back labour rights for decades. If we want to prevent exploitation of migrants, challenging migration controls and supporting freedom of movement is crucial.

Feminism's undeservedly bad reputation in anti-trafficking discourse

Feminists promoting the rescue industry are a small but vocal community of activists. Treating them as the voice of feminism silences competing voices.

Ingrid Palmary

Trafficking has been a central preoccupation in South African public discourse since 2006, when the US State Department first included it as a 'problem' country in its annual *Trafficking in Persons (TIPs)* report. Fierce debate broke out about the source and accuracy of the figures following the report's release, but nevertheless it gave rise to a significant counter-trafficking programme and the development of what has since become the Trafficking Act. The Trafficking Act set a record for the fastest piece of legislation ever to make its way through parliament, a remarkable feat given the extent of legislative change in South Africa since the end of apartheid. It however stalled, in part because of the debates outlined below, and only became law in 2013.

Much of the debate centred on sex work, in part because the 2000 Palermo convention against transnational organised crime (see Prabha Kotiswaran, *BTS Short Course* Vol. 3) emphasises sexual exploitation of women and girls, and in part because sex work and trafficking are frequently conflated in South Africa. Much work has been done trying to untangle these two, mostly by sex worker rights groups, but in the meantime a polarised debate has broken out between two camps of activists. One side, driven by local sex worker organisations and representatives, espouses a human rights perspective that is critical of counter-trafficking interventions and pro-decriminalisation of sex work. The other camp, spear-headed by US and occasionally European activists, has been labelled the 'feminist' perspective. It supports the rescue industry, the counter-trafficking campaigns associated with it, and the criminalisation of sex work. Those campaigning under the

banner of human rights have levelled a withering critique against the 'feminist' perspective, suggesting it is just another colonial project to rescue naïve Africans. In doing so they elide a number of very important nuances that I highlight in this article. One is that there is no one 'feminist' perspective. The very vocal position described above comes from a minority of activists in America and Europe, and in no way represents the positions of many other feminists either there or in South Africa itself. This critique furthermore fails to account for support within South Africa for the rescue industry with anything more than blithe dismissal. Finally, it attempts to globalise a set of ideals with little concern for local circumstances.

There is great diversity in feminist approaches to trafficking and exploitation. The position held up as 'feminist' is a minority position that ignores the debates within postcolonial feminism and indeed African feminism. Since Gayatri Spivak first caricatured western feminism as "white men are saving brown women from brown men", the post-colonial feminist movement has responded to the representation of Africans as lacking agency and in need of saving from themselves. We should not allow a minority of activists to claim sole representation of the feminist position(s). This is crucial as their perspective reinforces the perception that feminism is somehow unAfrican, a very colonial idea given that it imagines African women to be so saturated in their oppression as to be unable to critique the forms of patriarchy that shape their lives. This minority perspective also silences the continent's very active feminist movement that has very bravely challenged the growing repression of non-conforming sexualities in Africa today. In this way further power is given to the kinds of western feminism that have been unable to recognise or respect the diversity of feminist voices.

The claim that counter trafficking interventions are solely western feminist impositions ignores the remarkable enthusiasm that South African organisations have shown for the trafficking interventions and the rescue industry. Indeed, entire organisations have sprung up in

response to this discourse. Thus, notwithstanding the influence of US *TIPs* reports on South Africa and the similarities of the counter-trafficking industry to colonising projects, it is wrong to write off local groups as simply puppets of a western campaign. Rather, we need to engage with how global ideas about trafficking gain currency locally and with what consequences. Post-apartheid South Africa is caught in the grip of a 'moral regeneration' campaign, driven by multiple crises including the spread of HIV, the perception that families have been destroyed, growing youth unemployment and crime, and a strong Christian fundamentalism. These conditions make a ripe environment for counter trafficking campaigns, and they need to be understood rather than cast off as ignorant Africans who obey the western master.

This leads me to my third point, which is that one of the consequences of a global campaign against trafficking is that it erases the nuances of context. Campaigners who insist on universal understandings of trafficking disregard local dynamics as well as local forms of exploitation when they force both victims and perpetrators into existing categories and definitions. This is dangerous, as it inexorably leads to the invisibility of some and the incorrect labelling of others. For example, when debating the Palermo convention with magistrates in South Africa, a long debate was held about whether a mother who sends her child across a border to beg on the streets is trafficking her child. Such a scenario does not fit easily into any universal definition of trafficking, and thus calls them all into question. However, in the polarised fight between human rights and feminism, the same universal traps have been reproduced in which local debates are erased and the loudest global voices are presented as the only positions.

So in spite of feminism being presented as part of the reason why the counter-trafficking campaigns have been so problematic, I argue that we need is a feminist analysis of trafficking. However, such analysis needs to spring from the branches of feminist thinking that refuse universal claims and allow space for individual rights.



Section three

The mythology of a ‘few bad apples’

The politics of exception: the bipartisan appeal of human trafficking

Contemporary abolitionism garners strong bipartisan support because it does not challenge major economic and political interests. But slavery, trafficking and forced labour are rooted in global patterns of injustice. For the movement to be effective it must sacrifice some of its support in order to speak truth to power.

Joel Quirk and Annie Bunting

The last two decades have seen a whole host of political leaders, including both George W. Bush and Robert Mugabe, publically declare their support for the global cause of combating human trafficking.

Politicians on the left and right rarely agree about anything these days, yet there have recently been many occasions where anti-trafficking laws and policies have secured high-level, bipartisan support. This diverse political coalition has helped to promote a misleading image of human trafficking as a ‘non-ideological’ issue that transcends ‘normal’ politics, with conservatives, liberals, traditionalists, and progressives all coming together under the banner of a common global cause.

To help make sense of the issues involved here, we need to reflect on why political and ideological adversaries have often been able to reach—or at least appear to reach—an unusual degree of common ground when it comes to combatting trafficking.

Who gets what, when

Politics has often been defined in terms of who gets what, when, and how. The question of who gets what frequently boils down to political competition over the distribution of wealth and power. Politicians and political parties generate at least part of their support via their capacity to protect and promote the interests of key economic and social

groups. In many countries, this often involves an expectation that politicians on the left will support the interests of workers and the public sector, while their counterparts on the right support corporations and the private sector. While not everything can be explained in terms of interests, there is no doubt that interests matter a great deal when it comes to shaping political behaviour and political outcomes.

This familiar model of politics can be usefully applied to recent efforts to combat human trafficking. Since the mid-1990s, a growing number of researchers have linked anti-trafficking efforts to larger political interests. These links are said to be strongest with regard to the relationships between trafficking and the legal status of prostitution, and between trafficking and the expansion of border protection measures.

These are not topics that we propose to revisit here, since they have been already covered in considerable depth. Instead, we are chiefly interested in why anti-trafficking efforts have frequently been able to secure an unusual level of bipartisan political support in many countries.

One key issue is the degree to which human trafficking has been closely associated with prostitution. While commercial sex work is a topic that generates strong emotions, it is not an issue that directly threatens dominant economic and political interests (although larger gender relations within society are definitely a major part of the equation here). This political profile is important, because it helps to explain why anti-trafficking has often been able to command an unusual level of bipartisan support. In stark contrast to historical campaigns to end legal slavery, which were firmly aimed at the profits and privileges of the rich and powerful, more recent global 'anti-slavery' campaigns targeting human trafficking only rarely pose a direct threat to major political and economic interests.

Competition between different interests is a routine feature of political and economic life. When unions campaign to improve wages

and working conditions for their members, commercial interests concerned with rising costs routinely oppose their efforts. When human rights activists campaign to end serious abuses associated with the abuse of state power, such as torture and extrajudicial killings, they are opposed by government officials and security hawks. When Occupy Wall Street challenges the excesses of global capitalism, their political opponents are corporations and their government enablers.

In contrast, when anti-trafficking campaigns target abuses associated with commercial sex, their efforts do not directly challenge major economic and political interests. There may well be occasions where individual elites are implicated in specific abuses, but the criminal nature of their activities seriously curtails significant public opposition.

Combating organised crime

Criminality is another key ingredient in the bipartisan appeal of human trafficking. Combating human trafficking is widely understood to involve combating organised crime, which in turn requires governments to prosecute villains and protect victims. While not all governments live up to their anti-trafficking obligations, those who do take steps to combat human trafficking can expect to receive praise for their efforts.

This happens most notably via the [Trafficking in Persons Reports](#) compiled by the United States government, which tend to give highest marks to western governments. This can be contrasted with the poor human rights records of states in many other areas, such as extrajudicial killings and drone strikes, or state sanctioned abuses associated with migration and asylum. Combating trafficking is a cause that often casts governments as protectors, rather than villains, which is a role with considerable bipartisan appeal for politicians.

The politics of exception

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the bipartisan appeal of combating human trafficking can also be traced to the fact that human traf-

ficking is widely understood to be confined to a fairly small number of 'aberrant' and 'exceptional' cases. It is here that references to the history of slavery and abolition become particularly significant. Building upon images linked to trans-Atlantic slavery, references to human trafficking and modern slavery generally involve an assertion of exceptionality, wherein slavery and trafficking are promoted as unique and exceptional evils standing apart from other 'lesser' human rights abuses.

One of the main attractions of this hierarchical model is that it can have the effect of tacitly legitimating, or at least de-prioritising, numerous abusive practices and patterns of inequality and poverty that are said to fall short of 'true' or 'genuine' slavery.

This language of exception often has the effect of consolidating—rather than challenging—dominant political and economic interests, especially in the global north. Instead of focusing upon global patterns of exploitation, violence, and discrimination, combating human trafficking commonly involves a more narrow focus upon specific cases of the 'worst of the worst'. Moreover, these exceptional cases are usually said to be mainly concentrated within 'backward' countries in the global south, and at the 'irregular' margins of the global economy.

This politics of exception is particularly significant in relation to labour trafficking and forced labour. In this area, modern slavery has been widely understood to primarily involve a series of deviant and isolated exceptions within otherwise entirely legitimate global supply chains and 'free' labour relations.

Take, for example, the recent ranking system developed by the NGO [Free2Work](#), which ranks corporations from 'A' and 'F' based on a limited assessment of their record in terms of forced labour and child labour. Rather than challenging the systemic problems and abuses associated with global supply chains more generally, Free2Work primarily focuses upon identifying specific 'bad apples'. Most corporations are

assigned passing grades. Companies with records deemed acceptable include footwear giants Reebok/Adidas (B+) and Nike (B), which have long been heavily criticised for regular labour abuse and dangerous working conditions. The threshold for legitimate corporate conduct becomes little more than not actively practicing slavery.

Combating human trafficking is a cause that is in need of substantial redefinition. This requires the dissolution of many existing models and the promotion of a larger political vision. We have no doubt that human trafficking, forced labour, and slavery are all serious problems. But they are problems that need to be understood as extreme manifestations of global patterns of injustice, exploitation, discrimination, and inequality, rather than as isolated and deviant exceptions.

It is also essential to recognise that these patterns frequently persist because of—rather than in spite of—government actions. While the political rhetoric associated with combating trafficking can sometimes be radical, the overall effect of recent policies and practices has too often been conservative. It is likely that a more robust and politically ambitious vision of anti-trafficking—or anti-slavery—will lose support from governments and corporations who benefit from the politics of exception.

This is a price worth paying, as the cost of bipartisan political support has been a cause that rarely threatens the interests of the rich and the powerful, and thereby fails the test of speaking truth to power.

This article draws on material from a forthcoming book: Annie Bunting and Joel Quirk (eds.), *Contemporary Slavery and Human Rights*, University of British Columbia Press.

Slavery and trafficking: beyond the hollow call

Reports on modern slavery miss the target when they place the blame on individual actions and 'a few bad apples'. For a systemic problem the only solution can be a complete system overhaul.

Neil Howard

The Guardian's investigations this past summer into 'slavery' and 'trafficking' in the Thai fishing industry brought a welcome renewed focus on the brutal working conditions faced by many at the bottom of the global economic ladder. *Guardian* reporters revealed that migrant labourers from across southeast Asia are often tricked or coerced into accepting highly exploitative contracts, face daily dangers at sea, and are prevented from escape either by violence or the threat of it.

Importantly, *The Guardian's* analysis focused on the links between labour conditions at the bottom of the chain and the multinational corporations perched at its top. The prawns caught by these labourers ultimately end up on the shelves of large western retailers including Wal-Mart, Tesco, and Carrefour. Those retailers are aware of the labour conditions producing the commodities they sell, and despite their predictable response to the latest revelations, it is clear that their supply chain monitoring is, at best, ineffective.

What, then, can be done? "It is important not to be utopian", *The Guardian's* editorial reads. "Our addiction as consumers to cheap things and the addiction of our corporations to excessive profits are the main drivers of this process of immiseration". Although "we are not going to lose our obsession with shopping anytime soon", what we can do is demand that "the big chains...use their considerable power to wake up their Asian suppliers, who in turn can upset the criminal labour brokers and gang masters who manage this vicious business".

Though understandable and perhaps even intuitive, this response is at once misplaced and ultimately likely to be futile. Its fatal flaw is that it individualises both the problem and the solution. In doing so, it fails to identify the *systemic* nature of what we face, and thus the *systemic* nature of any genuinely constructive way forward.

Let us be clear: the existence of extreme labour exploitation, ‘trafficking’ and ‘slavery’ is *not* the result of individual consumers being “addicted to cheap things”. Nor is it the result of individual multinationals being “addicted to excessive profits”. It is an intrinsic and *structural* component of globalised capitalism, and is endemic to the low-cost, high-volume retail business model that currently reigns. It is therefore *only* by being utopian that we’ll be able to overcome it.

Capitalism runs—and is said to be effective because it runs—on the coercive law of competition. Individual firms are *required* to compete against each other in order to survive in the world of the market. The firm which can lower its overhead and increase its profits the most, by technological innovation, by producing on larger scales, or by reducing the cost of labour, *is* the firm which will be able to survive and flourish. It will be able to sell its commodities at the lowest price and thereby capture the lion’s share of the market at the expense of its rivals.

Downward pressure on labour conditions is thus written into the very DNA of the system. At every level of the chain of commodity production, myriad firms compete against each other to turn a profit and retain a slice of the market. All of them have an incentive to skim ever more surplus off their workers. When market power is so concentrated that those at the top of the chain can effectively set the price for those at the bottom, as is the case for those producing primary commodities for giant western retailers, often those at the bottom can only remain in business by using unfree or unpaid labour. What we are witnessing in Thailand’s fisheries, therefore, is no different to what we already witness every day in [Ghana](#), Bangladesh, or [southern Spain](#).

For *The Guardian* to lament the behaviour and culture of corporations or consumers is thus to miss the point entirely. Criticising firms for seeking profits that are ‘excessive’ and consumers for buying commodities that are ‘too cheap’ applies a *moral* analytical framework to a political economic system that is *essentially a-moral*. *The Guardian* needs to recognise this and also its logical implication—that ridding the world of trafficking and slavery *requires us to be utopian* in our thinking. It requires us to re-design the rules of the game itself, rather than merely lambasting its individual players.

As long as relations of production and exchange are determined by the demands of profit and competition under conditions of extreme inequality, then slavery and trafficking will always be with us. It is time to go beyond hollow [calls for better behaviour](#), and to re-embed those relations in the domain of morality.

Q&A: Extreme exploitation is not a problem of human nature

Extreme exploitation is a structural problem, not a problem of human nature. Unless we deal with the 'root causes', which I locate in inequality, then it will continue. And global inequalities are growing.

Bridget Anderson

Beyond Trafficking and Slavery: According to politicians and the popular media, the kinds of extreme exploitation evoked by words such as 'slavery', 'trafficking' or 'forced labour' has been on the rise for some time. Do you think this is so? What factors explain it?

Bridget Anderson: The concern with trafficking and the column inches devoted to it has certainly been on the rise for some time. Relations that might previously have been given some kind of description like 'severe exploitation' or 'abusive' or 'debt bondage' or even 'belonging to a cult-like group' are now brought together under the heading of trafficking, modern day slavery etc. It is a relatively recent and burgeoning category that brings together a wide range of phenomena, but I don't think that should lead us to think that extreme exploitation is recent.

We also have to watch falling into the trap of reifying trafficking. What factors explain it? Partly the very slipperiness of the definition. These terms are used to describe an ever-growing range of situations, so numbers can be demonstrated as increasing. As states pump ever more money into 'anti-trafficking', NGOs desperate for funds will don the mantle of 'anti-traffickers' even though they are doing the same work they always did. This is NOT to say that there aren't a whole range of unspeakable working conditions, desperately poor wages, and other abuses. But we need to be cautious about labels and quantification which can obscure more than they reveal.

BTS: What do you think of current protection and prevention policies? The last ten years have seen a huge spate of anti-trafficking and anti-slavery legislation, as well as large amounts of money spent on policies and projects. Do they work?



Bridget Anderson

BA: Perhaps it's obvious from my previous answer. To evaluate these policies we need to be clear about what exactly is the problem that they are attempting to prevent. Extreme exploitation is a structural problem, not a problem of human nature. Unless we deal with the 'root causes', which I locate in inequality, then it will continue. Data suggest that global inequalities are growing. If more than half the world lives on less than \$2.50 a day, and 80 percent of the population live in states where inequalities are widening, then what do we expect?

BTS: What about 'root causes'? We often hear about the need for policy to 'address root causes', but are there any policies that truly tackle the systemic basis of severe exploitation?

BA: Yes—universal basic income (UBI), or even, to be stratospherically utopian, a world where the role of money is drastically reduced. And a world where we do not limit our imaginations to 'the job'. The job is not the answer to everything. Getting us all into alienated 'productive' labour, even if we are all earning the same, will not excite human potential. That's where the UBI can be of help I think. But this requires a world without borders. Because global inequality now, unlike a few hundred years ago, depends so much on where you're born rather than if you are a master or a servant.

BTS: On the subject of root causes, there are those who argue that crimes like forced labour are inevitable under capitalism, just as trafficking is inevitable in a world of closed borders. What do you think? Can you imagine any utopian solutions, like the Universal Basic Income?

BA: See above! I think that gross exploitation comes along with inequality. So our response to end inequality is indeed utopian, but it must also be to think big. We are too constrained by pragmatism, by the sense that this is the way things have to be. Going against the status quo—whether it was fighting trans-Atlantic slavery, organising for votes for women, etc.—has always risked being called ‘utopian’ and unrealistic. Well, these were not unrealistic. But what is clear is that they were not asking enough. So let’s be stratospherically utopian and imaginative. The possibilities are enormous.

BTS: In contrast to the utopian, there’s been a real emphasis lately in policy and business circles on the importance of voluntary ‘codes of conduct’. The idea is that in an age of competitiveness-focused, ‘light-touch regulation’, companies should be left to police their own supply chains and manage their labour relations independently. What do you make of this? Is there any real chance that severe exploitation can be overcome by leaving businesses to themselves?

BA: No.

BTS: Why do you think that slavery, trafficking, and forced labour have become such celebrity issues? Figures from Bono to Blair now line up to condemn, and new abolitionism in the US is really big business. What explains this?

BA: Interesting question. In part it must be to do with celebrity culture and the ways that charities dealing with a range of (usually ‘third world’) issues front with a famous face. I think that perhaps in part

it is because a lot of wealthy people—by which I don't just mean the one percent, which always seems to me to get the middle class out of an ethical hole—feel uncomfortable about inequality and injustice and want to do something about it.

I think it's good that people want to change things because they feel that it doesn't seem right. The problem with the current situation is that it means that people can continue to pay their domestic worker below the minimum wage because they are not beating her. That is the stereotype of the evil trafficker, which is so removed from most people's daily lives that it means we don't have to reflect on our own behaviour, which is obviously so much 'better' than theirs.

In many ways trafficking saves the market. It suggests that it is possible to have a non-exploitative, capitalist, bordered system where everyone just gets along fine. So it makes sense that it has become its own business, as an extension I suppose of ethical trading.

Immigration politics, slavery talk: the case for a class perspective

The UK Modern Slavery Bill, and UK politicians' obsession with immigration, risk undermining political moves to greater solidarity among all those—migrant and non-migrant—experiencing abuse or unfreedom in their employment.

Ben Rogaly

Entrapment, threats of violence against workers, non-payment of wages and debt-bondage are all alive and well, not only on [Qatar's construction sites](#) but in the [vegetable fields of Lincolnshire](#). The UK's [Modern Slavery Bill \(now Act\)](#) attempts to address such extreme levels of abuse by making it an offence to “[hold] another person in slavery or servitude”, and to “[require them] to perform forced labour”. Moreover, former leader of the Labour Party Ed Miliband gave [a speech on immigration control](#) within the context of the UK's 2015 General Election, in which he promised to “end the epidemic of exploitation” and to “stop people's living standards being undermined by scandalous undercutting”.

On the face of it these are all important initiatives. Yet, the conflation of worker abuse, slavery, and trafficking in legislation such as the Modern Slavery Act may move public attention away from the range of ways in which capitalism itself creates, perpetuates, and relies on forms of unfree labour. As Bridget Anderson and I argued in a [report](#) for the Trades Union Congress (TUC) a decade ago, connecting forced labour/slavery with trafficking/breaking of immigration law can make the unfreedom of workers seem a residual issue, thereby reducing scrutiny of how, or if, employment law is enforced in capitalist workplaces. Instead forced labour and slavery become part of the immigration control agenda; indeed in some cases ‘victims’ of trafficking become viewed as perpetrators of immigration-related offences.

The same year that the TUC report was published, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) brought out a landmark [report](#) on forced labour. The latter omitted any analysis of capitalism and, in particular, of the connections between specific forms of capitalism and unfree labour relations. In a critique of this report, I [argued](#) that the first steps in such an analysis would be to differentiate between the interests of individual businesses and those of capital more generally, as well as the often contradictory agendas of large-scale, monopoly capital and small-scale capital. Such an analysis must also lay plain the relations between capital and the state.

The ILO report missed an opportunity to advocate against those economic relations that produce unfree labour because it implicitly denied the interrelation of government, intergovernmental, and private corporate actions. In the case of employment in the food sector, this included ignoring the conflictive relations between differently positioned businesses in the supply chain, [for example between large retailers and individual small-scale producer/employers](#).

A further major problem with the ILO report was its resort to a discourse of victimhood—[found in the rhetoric of many campaigners against slavery and trafficking today](#), as well as in the Modern Slavery Bill—making for unjustified assumptions about the agency of migrant workers themselves. Paid work carried out by migrant workers was not analysed in relation to the unpaid reproductive work [on which it relied](#), nor did the report seek to understand recruitment or workplace bargaining, cooperation, or conflict from the perspective of individual workers. As a result policy prescriptions emerged that did not reflect or give space to the interests migrant workers may have had, say, in keeping hold of a short-term tie to a particular employer, nor to the apparently small but often meaningful ways in which workplace arrangements may have been subject to continual (re)negotiation by workers.

Ed Miliband's emphasis on "scandalous undercutting" is not so much

aimed at improving employment conditions for all workers as at demonstrating that the Labour Party can sound tough on immigration. The effect, no doubt unintended, may be to stigmatise migrant workers themselves, rather than the companies that are responsible for widespread employment abuse. It is also likely to deflect attention away from the state's complicity in producing [hyper-precarious lives](#) through its hierarchy of immigration-linked socio-legal statuses, a system which it—like Qatar, though in different ways—has proved reluctant to reform. Both states have sought to curtail certain workers' freedoms in the labour market, Qatar through its insistence that workers see out their contracts with the same employer, and the UK through its [refusal since 2012](#) to allow international domestic workers to switch employers.

Instead of using a discourse that singles out international migrant workers, which only adds to existing divisions within workforces, those seeking to fight abusive employment relations and harsh working conditions should work to enhance solidarity among workers of different ethno-national heritages, migration histories, and socio-legal statuses. A more class-based approach, emphasising unity rather than division among dispossessed people—both migrant and non-migrant—is the best chance of directing public attention back to addressing the causes of unfree labour.

Modern slavery, child trafficking, and the rise of West African football academies

Ghanaian football academies have been accused of exploiting talent and promoting trafficking in search of profit, but the quest for social mobility is what drives young footballers into the industry in the first place.

James Esson

Football administrators, academics, and human rights activists have recently drawn attention to some unsavoury activities taking place in West African football academies. Analysts are concerned that the academy system has become a vehicle for [neo-colonial exploitation](#) that fuels human trafficking. They argue that European clubs and speculators take ownership or executive control of African-based academies to sidestep certain regulations, such as the ban on the international transfer of minors, in order to sign African talent at an early age and then profit from their subsequent sale to rich, typically European, clubs. Some commentators, including former [FIFA President Sepp Blatter](#), have gone as far as to label this situation a modern-day slave trade. Meanwhile [UEFA President Michel Platini](#) has suggested this transfer process is tantamount to child trafficking.

It is true that a dynamic relationship exists between capitalism, colonial pasts, and some current practices in the football industry. However I want to use this brief contribution as an opportunity to move away from headline grabbing hyperbolic statements, and towards a more critical reflection of events taking in place in West African football. To do so I will draw on my recent field research in Ghana, one of the top five exporters of African football players.

The exponential growth of Ghana's football academies

Some scholars of African football have highlighted how football academies have been a constant in post-independence Ghana's footballing

landscape. In Ghana, like other parts of the world, these academies take a variety of forms. They range from well-funded establishments affiliated with professional clubs to amateur, neighbourhood teams set up on an informal basis and lacking qualified staff or proper infrastructure. Researchers have drawn attention to the transfer practices of professional teams and a handful of other high profile, corporately sponsored academies, and it is here that debates over neo-colonial exploitation tend to emerge. Less well documented are the changes taking place at smaller academies associated with amateur youth football or, as it is colloquially known in Ghana, Colts football (under twelve, fourteen and seventeen years of age).

The last two decades have witnessed a significant increase in the establishment of clubs and academies for youths, and an even more notable increase in player registrations. According to the Ghanaian Football Association (GFA) regional office in Accra, approximately 700 clubs in 12 regional zones are in the national 'Colts' league. In Accra alone there are 240 clubs, and combined they boast a registration list of more than 20,000 players. These figures constitute a significant increase when compared to the previous decade, and there is genuine concern among administrators that this growth is unsustainable due to shortages in referees and playing pitches.

This increase in the establishment of academies is being driven by unemployed and precariously employed youth in their twenties and early thirties who see themselves as entrepreneurs. They view owning a Colts team as more than a hobby. It is a window of opportunity, a chance to be self-sufficient and economically active. They take financial risks and invest in Colts football in the hope of making a profit.

Somewhat ironically, this situation is linked to the international transfer regulations introduced by FIFA in 2001. FIFA attempted to limit the international migration of minors by deterring rich—i.e. European—clubs from signing talented young players based in the global south.

A ruling was made stipulating that clubs involved in the training and education of players between the ages of 12 and 23 must receive financial compensation from the buying club. This compensation can range from hundreds to millions of US dollars.

The 2001 FIFA regulations thus give the labour and investment spent training a youth player monetary value. This makes footballers at academies more than human resources. They are also a potential source of capital. Crucially, this financial value can only be realised when a player is transferred or sold to another club. This has resulted in intense financial speculation and increased trading of young Ghanaian players by academy owners, who are searching for a star to sell at a profit to a foreign club. This means that football academies no longer exist to merely create players for Ghanaian leagues, but are increasingly geared towards the grooming and export of players to foreign clubs.

Young aspirant footballers are not oblivious to the financial rewards football provides. In today's era of worldwide information streams, Ghanaian youth are not only captivated by the performances of the players who adorn their television screens, they are also made aware of the wealth and lifestyles associated with professional football. Yet we should look beyond the bling, glitz, and glamour because this explanatory crux leaves much unexplained.

Football as a perceived path out of poverty

The idea that a career in football is a viable livelihood strategy capable of lifting an individual and their family out of poverty has emerged in certain strata of society, especially among young, poorly-educated Ghanaian males from low-income families. These youths are acutely aware that they either currently are, or eventually will become, solely responsible for ensuring their future economic wellbeing. They are also well aware that financial support in the form of state welfare is unlikely to be forthcoming.

Alongside this construction of young Ghanaians as responsible for their future life chances is a widespread belief that migration, preferably to Europe, offers a solution to economic uncertainty and marginalisation. Problematically, this migratory disposition is accompanied by a realisation that obtaining a visa for Europe is easier said than done.

To many young Ghanaians, the rags to riches stories of the professional football player who used sport as a vehicle for migration offers a blueprint for obtaining the trappings associated with a successful life. In a context where youth are frequently encouraged to be job creators rather than job seekers, the idea that the answer to economic uncertainty resides within your own body is a particularly appealing proposition. In order to turn such ambitions into realities, entering the Ghanaian football industry and joining football clubs appear as obvious next steps. The increase in the number of youths involved in Colts football, as well as the upsurge in the number of football academies, both result from the convergence in the Ghanaian football industry of economic liberalisation with migration-based efforts at upward social mobility.

This is no trivial matter, because a generation of male youth are diverting their energies and attention to a profession that is unlikely to reward their devotion with the employment and social status they so desperately crave. As the Ghanaian Football Association executive Herbert Adika succinctly put it, “presently everybody wants to play football by force but all of us cannot be footballers”. This quote encapsulates one of my concerns with headline-grabbing, hyperbolic statements about neo-colonial exploitation, slave trades, and child trafficking. These narratives divert attention away from the broader structural conditions that funnel youth into the football industry in the first place. Finding solutions to the issues raised here will require looking beyond the football industry and asking some tough questions about the state of play in Ghanaian society more generally, but that is what makes such an endeavour worthwhile.



Section four

Sex work and sensationalism

Domestic sex trafficking and the punitive side of anti-trafficking protection

Despite efforts to automatically label teen and youth sex workers as 'victims' of trafficking, and thereby prevent their prosecution, their often extensive interactions with the legal system leave lasting marks.

Jennifer Musto

Domestic sex trafficking is a decidedly American invention. Legally codified in [federal](#) and several other state laws, sex trafficking in general and domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) in particular rebrands an old trend—underage children and teens' forced involvement with commercial sex—and reframes it as a form of modern-day slavery. While prostitution facilitated by pimps or other third party actors isn't new *per se*, what is novel is the viewpoint that sex trafficking, which includes but isn't limited to American youth and teen girls, is a localised manifestation of a global forced labour problem. Equally recent is the idea that anti-sex trafficking initiatives are able to produce more 'victim centred' results than criminal justice interventions of the past.

I research the evolution of domestic sex trafficking in the United States and tracked different state and non-state collaborative interventions authorised in its name. What has emerged is that youth deemed 'at risk' of domestic sex trafficking may be arrested, charged, or placed in detention in order to be protected by law enforcement. Relatedly, many adults are only recognised as victims of sex trafficking after they have been processed as criminal defendants, a problem acknowledged by the existence of special court initiatives to identify "[defendants who have been trafficked](#)". These are initiatives pitched as alternatives to more typical criminal justice responses like arrest, detention, and prosecution, yet they still situate the criminal justice system as the main conduit through which victims of domestic sex trafficking gain access to services, programmes, and some modicum of protection.

There is growing recognition among anti-trafficking actors, particularly with respect to youth, that calling kids victims in name but continuing to treat them like juvenile offenders is deeply flawed. One response has been for many states—28 so far—to implement some version of Safe Harbor laws. ‘Safe Harbor’ refers to laws that recognise youth as victims and aim to bring state laws ‘into line’ with the federal Victims of Trafficking Victim Protection Act. Another response has to do with language, and one recent effort has sought to change how we talk about sex trafficking situations involving youth. In January 2015, advocacy groups in the United States along with members of Congress launched the ‘No Such Thing’ campaign, an effort that seeks to change the treatment of victims of child sex trafficking by calling for the eradication of the term ‘child prostitute’. The campaign links a shift in language to changes in how youth are legally treated, implicitly suggesting that referring to girls as ‘trafficked’ rather than ‘child prostitutes’ will set the stage for their treatment as victims rather than offenders.

I welcome a change in how we talk about youths’ experiences with exploitation, no matter its form. I also wholly agree that a departure from the current paradigm, in which youth in some jurisdictions may be subject to some version of a [detention-to-protection](#) pipeline, is desperately needed. Yet whether passing more laws or striking ‘child prostitute’ from the vernacular will substantively change how youth are treated remains to be seen, especially if such efforts aren’t accompanied by a critical evaluation of the ‘trafficking’ part of the equation and the interventions it has produced.

Indeed, for all of the recent claims that terms like ‘sex work’ and ‘child prostitute’ mask conditions of exploitation assumed to undergird all commercial, transactional, and survival sexual arrangements, it is striking that a commensurate degree of public outcry has not been lodged against the fraught term ‘trafficking’. Equally troubling is that collective concerns haven’t been raised about anti-sex trafficking campaigns’ attachment to [carceral feminist](#) sensibilities, or about the

uneven and sometimes punitive effects that anti-sex trafficking efforts have on migrants, voluntary sex workers, and now domestic youth and adults in the United States.

If there is a language change I'm calling for it is for students of forced labour and exploitation to become more fluent in speaking the language of collateral consequences. Criminologists and sex workers' rights groups use the term collateral to frame the effects of the carceral state and anti-sex trafficking initiatives. Many scholars of the US carceral state have focused on the [collateral consequences of mass incarceration](#) on individuals and [communities](#), particularly communities of colour. Similarly, sex workers' rights groups have pointed to the collateral [impact of anti-trafficking efforts](#) on migrants who have endured 'rescue' [raids](#), [shelter-detention](#), and, more generally, born the [punitive brunt](#) of anti-trafficking laws. People now seen as at-risk of domestic sex trafficking in the US must similarly contend with the collateral consequences of the criminal justice system, [criminal convictions](#), and the anti-trafficking interventions designed to help them.

For example, youth may be referred to anti-sex trafficking initiatives through an arrest, which introduces them into the system and opens up access to services or specialised programming. Even though this may not lead to a prosecution *per se*, it may still produce a criminal record that cannot be expunged, to use a legal postconviction term, without extensive effort. As an [August 2014 Congressional Research Report](#) on domestic sex trafficking explains:

These [diversion] programs generally defer prosecution on the condition of successful completion of a treatment program. At that point, charges *may* be reduced or dismissed. This *may or may not* involve records being expunged" (emphasis mine).

Though new anti-trafficking programmes appear, on the surface, to

depart from more punitive juvenile justice interventions of the past, the devil is in the details. Even when youths are recognised as victims of domestic sex trafficking, their protracted involvement in the justice system may still result in criminal records. Their status as victims may not protect them from the consequences of this, including limits on “future education, employment, housing, financial, and other life opportunities”.

I agree that it is time to move beyond trafficking and to address its structural roots. In the interim, attention to domestic sex trafficking in the United States presents a timely opportunity to take stock of the collateral consequences the current framing has had on those migrants and domestic populations most directly affected, and to cultivate less punitive ways of interacting with them. This is crucial, as at the end of the day the purpose of anti-trafficking is to ameliorate systems that make people vulnerable to exploitation. This includes challenging the laws, systems, language, and state-sponsored interventions that fail to adequately protect people in the first place.

This article draws upon insights from a previously published article “Domestic Sex Trafficking and the Detention-to-Protection Pipeline”, *Dialectical Anthropology*, 37.2 (2013): 257-276, and a forthcoming book by Jennifer Musto, *To Control and Protect*, under contract with the University of California Press for release in 2016.

From HIV to trafficking: shifting frames for sex work in India

The conflation of trafficking and prostitution in anti-trafficking discourses not only frames all sex workers as victims in need of rescue, but elides the reasons many include sex work within their complex livelihood strategies.

Svati P. Shah

NGOs focusing specifically on ‘sex work’ and ‘trafficking’ (where ‘trafficking’ is conflated with prostitution) in India have only been around since the mid and late 1990s. There has been a steep rise in their numbers in the last decade. Previously, if organisations addressed the needs of sex workers, they did so within the rubric of HIV/AIDS. Indian HIV/AIDS organisations were spurred into existence by the flow of international aid dollars that increasingly became available to organisations working in Asia, Africa, and Latin America during the first decade of the AIDS pandemic (1985-1995). Funds for HIV-related work in India came from the European Union, Sweden, Norway, and Canada into then relatively new entities like India’s National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO). This money provided the infrastructural support for both governmental and nongovernmental efforts to surveil, control, and eventually treat HIV and AIDS. Local organisations also emerged as a result of this new funding to provide HIV-related services to sex workers, men who have sex with men, and *hijras* (people assigned male sex at birth who live as a ‘third sex’ in the feminine range of the gender spectrum).

By the late 1990s, thanks to feminist debates on pornography and prostitution, an anti-trafficking framework—composed of laws, policies, and theories that used prostitution as an allegory for women’s oppression by men—was taking hold within some national governments and segments of the international policy-making community as a primary lens for understanding sexual commerce. This framework

now largely dominates the discussion, having become the ‘common sense’ of sexual commerce and even, to a degree, migration among poor and working class people. This is despite the fact that the trafficking framework has been repeatedly criticised for conflating human trafficking with prostitution, and for failing to provide clear parameters for tracking the phenomena it aims to describe. It remains, for the moment, a significant but contested lens on sexual commerce for international policy, especially with respect to interventions crafted for countries in the global south.

The rise in the explanatory power of the anti-trafficking framework for understanding phenomena like migration and the exchange of sex and money in the global south paralleled an increase in the significance of prostitution in the global image and imaginary of India, usually as the dark foil of India’s buoyant economic growth rates. By 2007, ‘prostitution in India’ had become a categorical focus for charitable organisations, an object of study for filmmakers, a worthy cause for politicians and celebrities, and a Wikipedia entry. This was not due to the discourse on HIV *per se*, nor was it due to an increase in the proliferation of HIV in India (the national rate of new infections decreased by half between 2000 and 2009). Rather, the increased significance of prostitution to the idea of India itself was linked with the increased global significance of the anti-trafficking framework.

While this framework is far from being unequivocally dominant in managing and understanding prostitution, its increased significance in the halls of international policy formulation has helped position prostitution as particularly important to understandings of women in the global south. This conflation of trafficking and prostitution is contextualised by a number of historical trends, including the ways in which discourses of venereal disease have figured female sex workers as infectious vectors since the nineteenth century. It is also contextualised by the altered conditions for labour migration brought about in the late 1980s and early 1990s due to the adoption of neoliberal

economic policies in many parts of the world; the well-rehearsed histories of feminist pornography debates in the United States; and the confluence of interests between governments and some segments of women's movements in seeking to eliminate illegal and undocumented cross-border migration. While migrancy has changed dramatically in the era of neoliberalism, such that economic migrants are vulnerable to wage theft, debt bondage, and exploitation in new and unprecedented ways, we may ask whether the frame of 'trafficking' accurately tracks and addresses these vulnerabilities, or whether it is more effective in protecting states' interests in securing and monitoring borders?

At worst, the rise in the explanatory power of 'trafficking' for prostitution consists of an elision of political economy within discourses of sexuality, contributing to the reproduction of the idea that sexual freedom, autonomy, expression, and even sexual subjectivity are all luxury goods, available only to those whose access to food and shelter is secure. This form of depoliticisation within sexuality politics in the United States and elsewhere has attracted much scholarly and activist attention, as well as criticism from both the mainstream left and the LGBTQ left. In my view, a sustained scholarly engagement with sexual commerce in the global south would not only offer a way to critique prostitution *per se*. It would also demonstrate the kind of discussion of sexuality, politics, and power that is possible when sexuality is not primarily or exclusively understood as a form of individuated, innate human expression.

The result of this depoliticisation in understandings of sexual commerce has been the subjection of women and girls selling sexual services to a discourse in which prostitution is a state of being from which they must simply be rescued. In this discursive trajectory, sexual commerce is never figured as a livelihood strategy that is part of a complex set of negotiations for daily survival that include, but cannot be reduced to, violence and precarity. Just as identitarianism marginalises questions of political economy with respect to LGBTQ politics, the



'Women in the brothel' by Jackie Streng. [ywammadison/Flickr](#).
Creative Commons.

conflation of selling sexual services with human trafficking deprioritises and, in some spaces, erases the question of survival with respect to sexual commerce. This individuated frame reifies the idea of origins, on the moment in which an individual subject *knew, came out, was forced*, was called into being, within a fixed subjective matrix.

My book *Street Corner Secrets* takes up this critique by asking what an analysis of sexual commerce would be if it were to use a framework other than trafficking, one that focuses instead, for example, on the relationship between sexuality and livelihood? How would such an analysis account for violence, without conflating the exchange of sex and money with violence? The book does this by emphasising the idiosyncratic and extremely local ways in which laws and criminality are interpreted and enforced as part of a larger focus on migration and daily economic survival. This emphasis is able to account for the relationship between sexual commerce and the profoundly uneven and inadequate access to water and land among poor migrants living in Mumbai. Here, the difference between living in a brothel and a slum

is, among another things, the relatively higher access to municipal services like water and government-run schools among brothel-based sex workers, compared with those eking out a living in the slums at the edge of the city.

The emphasis in the book on livelihood, economic informality, housing and the liminal legal zones migrants must navigate in the city opens up a number of questions that are subsumed, or unasked, when abolitionism imbricated with trafficking serves as the primary interpretive frame for sexual commerce. What, for example, could a critical examination of sexual commerce reveal about the politics of day wage labour? What would it show about the exercise of state power on the urban street? What could it reveal about economic survival, in the Indian context or in any other? Addressing these questions brings us closer to discursively repositioning violence, such that we may account for violence as it is meted out in myriad forms by police, housing authorities, and clients against people selling sexual services, while also explaining why sexual commerce endures as a livelihood strategy among people who are extracting survival from an shrinking field of economic options.

Excerpted and condensed from the Preface and Introduction of *Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work and Migration in the City of Mumbai*, Duke University Press, 2014

A guide to respectful reporting and writing on sex work

Journalists and researchers must stop treating sex work as an area of exception to their journalistic ethics. They must respect the humanity and dignity of sex workers, otherwise they risk doing long-lasting damage to the men and women they source for their stories.

Marlise Richter, Ntokozo Yingwana, Lesego Tlhware & Ruvimbo Tenga

The South African press—like its international counterparts—are often guilty of misrepresenting sex workers and sex work. The majority of articles on sex work are sensationalistic in nature and emphasise salaciousness and lewdness over the more mundane aspects of sex work. Few journalists or writers go to the trouble of interviewing sex workers or asking for their input into articles or investigations, while generally privileging the voices of authorities, residents, or the general public. Embarking on the often difficult task of locating sex workers, gaining their trust, and interviewing them in a respectful manner do not characterise most popular writing on sex work.

The writers of this article work for NGOs in South Africa that advocate for sex worker rights, and specifically the decriminalisation of sex work. In our work, we have come across dangerous journalistic practices and unethical behaviour by journalists, writers, editors and researchers. We are part of a consortium of organisations that compiled a resource for journalists and writers entitled *Sex Workers and Sex Work in South Africa – A Guide for Journalists and Writers*. This chapter summarises some of the main issues that this guide contains. We furthermore illustrate some of the pitfalls of popular reporting on sex work with a case study of a tabloid newspaper article in South Africa:

Case study: *Everyday News* on sex work and HIV

Authors' note: The names of the tabloid and sex worker have been changed to avoid possible re-victimisation of the complainants.

In May 2014, three *Everyday News* journalists approached Angel, a sex worker in the informal settlement of Blikkiesdorp in Western Cape, South Africa, for interviews. Angel agreed to do the interviews on condition that her photograph would not be published and that a pseudonym would be used. Her family did not know that she is a sex worker and that she is HIV positive. Angel also told the journalists that she did not want details of her gang rape revealed.

On 17 June 2014, *Everyday News* published a two-page article titled, 'AIDS in Blikkiesdorp', with a sub-heading 'Prostitutes living with HIV is on the rise'. The article included a photo of Angel standing in the road, taken from the back, but not blurred as had been agreed before the interview. Angel could therefore be identified by community members, and thus linked to being a sex worker and having HIV. The article also included the fact that Angel had been raped.

Angel approached the [Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce \(SWEAT\)](#) and the [Women's Legal Centre \(WLC\)](#) for assistance. These organisations filed a complaint with the Press Ombudsman outlining the breached verbal contract, and the social implications of the newspaper's actions.

The South African Press Code states that the identity of rape victims shall not be disclosed without their consent, and neither shall a person's HIV status. Since the publication of the article, Angel has been afraid to leave her home because of threats of violence from community members. This has put her health at risk, as she no longer collects her antiretroviral medications from the local clinic.

The press code is clear that "headlines and captions to pictures shall

give a reasonable reflection of the contents of the report or picture in question”. The content of the article provided no evidence that sex workers with HIV were increasing, as the subheading suggested. The press also has an obligation to protect sources and not to publish information that would constitute a breach of confidence, which was clearly violated in this case.

The Press Ombudsman agreed with the WLC’s analysis on this case, and instructed the *Everyday News* newspaper to publish an apology. On the 21 August the *Everyday News* published the following:

“On [the] June 17, the *Everyday News* published an article titled, ‘Sex and Aids in Blikkiesdorp’. The article included information, which indirectly made it possible to identify the complainants mentioned in the article. Furthermore, the co-operation of the complainants was contingent on their anonymity. Due to the abovementioned, the *Everyday News* would like to apologise to the individuals mentioned in the article and to the community of Blikkiesdorp in respect of the harm the article may have caused the complainants. The *Everyday News* takes this opportunity to assert its view that HIV/AIDS remains a very sensitive issue in the community and respect should be maintained for vulnerable persons such as women and children when reporting on this issue”.

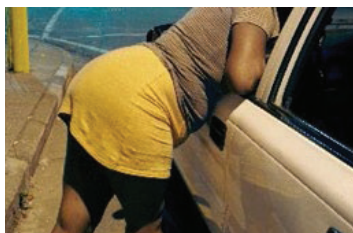
Regrettably, this apology does not undo the damage to Angel’s dignity and well-being. The publication of her identity alongside sensitive information about her health will likely have long-term, negative consequences for Angel and her reputation. Such a result could have been avoided if the *Everyday News* journalists had adhered to the conditions agreed upon before the interviews.

Trust between sex workers and journalists is vital for ensuring respect-

ful and fair reporting. This example of professional misconduct shows the opposite: how poor journalistic practice increases sex worker distrust and reluctance to engage with journalists.

Cliché visuals perpetuate stereotypes

When one conducts an internet image search with the keywords ‘sex worker’ or ‘prostitute’, the majority of images relate to selected body parts of women only—usually a woman’s exposed breasts, bums or legs—such as the images below. These images reduce sex workers to certain body parts only. They fail to portray the multiplicity and complexity of sex worker lives and reinforce negative stereotypes that sex workers are money-hungry alcoholics and drug addicts. Responsible journalists would avoid the reproduction of such images as they encourage intolerance towards sex workers and stereotype them.



Examples of disrespectful or de-contextualised images of sex workers. Telegraph.co.uk (left); Mpumalanganews.co.za (right). Fair Use.

Protecting sex worker identities

Particularly in a context where sex work is criminalised, sex workers are often reluctant to have their faces photographed or filmed as it may expose them to a range of risks. There are a number of well-established journalist techniques that could disguise the identity of sex workers, such as blurring their faces or distorting their voices if they are being filmed. These options should be discussed with the interviewee to establish what s/he would prefer. Proper consent should then be obtained, preferably in the form of a written agreement, with signed copies to both the interviewer and the interviewee.



Examples of successful disguising of sex worker identities.

Special Assignment producer Amos Phago interviews sex workers for the episode, 'Surviving the streets', aired February 2013. Fair Use.

Conclusion

Much of the harm in sensationalist and impertinent reporting on sex work would be avoided if journalists challenged their own preconceived ideas about sex workers as undeserving of their humanity and dignity. Guiding principles common to journalistic ethics—accuracy, objectivity, freedom from bias, integrity, and respect—apply to writing on sex work. In fact, in light of their marginalised position in society, sex workers deserve journalists', writers', and editors' utmost consideration for their safety, well-being, and reputation.

Sonke Gender Justice "Sex Workers and Sex Work in South Africa – A Guide for Journalists and Writers", A joint production of Sonke Gender Justice, Sisonke Sex Worker Movement, Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce, and Women's Legal Centre, December 2014.

The full guide is available at www.genderjustice.org.za

Rescuing the market? Comparing Agustin's *Sex at the Margins* and Bales' *Understanding Global Slavery*

Sex at the Margins and *Understanding Global Slavery* are markedly different treatments of modern trafficking. However, their common undercurrent is their defence of the market and neoliberal agendas.

Bridget Anderson

The past decade has seen concerns about the exploitation of migrant labour increasingly discussed in terms of 'trafficking' and 'forced labour'. This is particularly true of public discourse and policy documents, and arguably this has been strongly influenced by the International Labour Organisation's [2005 report on forced labour](#). While some welcome this interest in trafficking as offering possibilities for public sympathy and common ground with government, others like [Nandita Sharma](#) (*BTS Short Course*, Vol. 3) are more sceptical, pointing to the dangers of annihilation of migrant agency in the rush to 'help' vulnerable victims.

Laura Maria Agustin's *Sex at the Margins*, and Kevin Bales' *Understanding Global Slavery* ostensibly come from opposing positions on this question. *Sex at the Margins* is highly critical of anti-trafficking. It aims to bring the voices of migrants to the fore and to rectify the silence of migration studies around the issues of sex work. Agustin examines the intersection of migrants and those people seeking to protect and support them. The book asserts that, particularly in the case of sex and care workers, these 'helpers' have singularly failed to make any difference in the lives of the people about whom they purportedly care. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Spain, she argues that 'social helpers' in fact perpetuate victimising identities of those they 'help', in this case the trafficked victim. *Sex at the Margins* emphasises the importance of recognising the agency of migrant sex workers, and of respecting their decisions and their understandings of their choices.

In contrast, *Understanding Global Slavery* is clearly written by a person committed to ‘helping’. The collection as a whole takes the position that rescuing slaves is a moral obligation. Ending slavery is eminently feasible, according to Bales, and will bring with it multiple economic and social benefits. Slaves are denied ‘free will’ and therefore require the assistance of rescuers. In the worst-case scenarios, these are ‘redeemers’, or people who buy ‘slaves’ in order to set them free. There is a lack of reflexivity, of consideration for the power-laden relation between victim and rescuer. While this gives a moral assuredness and clarity to the volume, it oversimplifies and at times topples over into moralising.

At first glance then it seems as if *Sex at the Margins* and *Understanding Global Slavery* are coming from opposing viewpoints. The former affirms agency and gives voice to migrants, while challenging the motivations and the responses of ‘helpers’. The second is concerned with rescuing slaves and with the moral obligation to help. Yet there is a strange similarity between the two. They are both, at the end of the day, concerned with rescuing the market.

Bales is quite explicit when he says, “it doesn’t take a revolution to set slaves free”, pricing the cost of freeing all 27 million slaves in the world at \$945 million. Markets can function morally and it is possible to be moral agents in capitalist markets, he assures us, but we must stamp out those evil employers who are more concerned with profits than people. Indeed, he suggests we see ‘freeing the slaves’ as more an investment than a bargain, as ex-slaves will contribute to economies by becoming consumers.

Agustin has little time for such moralising arguments, but the market remains triumphant. People are actors in a crude, rational choice driven world. Helpers deceive themselves, but migrants and sex workers know they inhabit a Hobbesian state of nature where every woman, man, and child fend for themselves. “Everyone becomes an

opportunistic... everyone looks for chinks to exploit for their personal benefit”, she says. Those who think otherwise are not even idealistic romantics. They simply refuse to acknowledge their own self-interest. Agustin paints a bleak world, in which everyone finds ways to do the best they can for themselves in the end.

For Agustin and Bales, states are largely let off the hook. They may have a stated commitment to end slavery, but they either find this difficult to implement (Bales), or they fail to incorporate certain individuals into their polity—and the individuals may not want to be incorporated anyway (Agustin). Thus despite the surface differences of these two books, the politics of rescue and the celebration of agency both lead to a focus on individuals that, far from being marginal or challenging, sit well within neoliberal agendas.

A longer version of this review article appeared in *Global Networks* (2008) 8(3).



Section five

The politics of numbers, or
quantification without foundation

Mapping the politics of national rankings in the movement against “modern slavery”

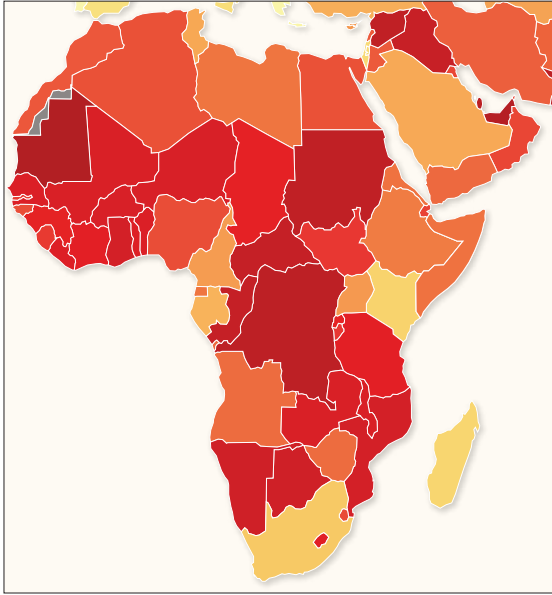
The Global Slavery Index uses questionable data and ignores global interdependence to frame modern slavery as an issue rooted in the global south. It exculpates the global north of its continuing role in extreme exploitation and perpetuates a politics of rescue.

Siobhán McGrath and Fabiola Mieres

Africa is bleeding red.

We refer to the image on page eight of Walk Free’s [Global Slavery Index \(GSI\) 2014](#): a map depicting the estimated prevalence of ‘modern slavery’ in 167 countries. ‘Modern slavery’ is understood by Walk Free to include trafficking, forced labour, and forced marriage. At a glance, the map shows the Middle East and most of Asia in shades of red and orange, faring hardly better than the African continent. Lighter shades in Latin America seem to indicate progress in comparison. In turn, Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand tend towards pale yellow. Such an image suggests the global north metaphorically shedding light onto the dark parts of the world where slavery still flourishes. The image troubles us. It is replete with colonial overtones, ones which have been carried into the modern project of development. Thus, rather than providing an exhaustive critique of the methodology behind the GSI, we explore some of the politics of the report and of its methodology.

Over the past decade and a half, the counter-trafficking and anti-slavery movements have rapidly grown. Concerns around trafficking and slavery have also resulted in a number of new government policies and programmes, NGO projects, and business initiatives seeking to address the problem. Walk Free is a relatively new NGO working on the issue, founded by Australian mining magnate Andrew Forrest and Nicola



Cutout from the 2014 *Global Slavery Index* (p.8). Fair Use.

Forrest. One of Walk Free's key activities is the GSI. Released in early November 2014, the second annual report estimates that 35.8 million people are trapped in modern slavery, a much higher figure than their 2013 estimate, and also higher than the [International Labour Organization's 2012 estimate](#) of 20.9 million people in forced labour.

Yet [critiques about what is being done](#) in the name of fighting trafficking and slavery have also grown in recent years. The counter-trafficking/anti-slavery movement is far from homogenous. There are examples on the ground in many places of work being done to challenge bondage, unfreedom, and exploitation where the frame of fighting 'slavery' or 'trafficking' is used while the work nonetheless forms part of broader movements for justice. On the whole, however, the broader counter-trafficking / anti-slavery movement has a widely recognised problem, and that is the drive towards a politics of rescue. Sex workers

and migrant workers are all too often seen as needing to be ‘rescued’—regardless of what these workers want—even if their ‘rescue’ leads to a worse economic situation or to encounters with potentially abusive officials. The raft of laws and programmes instituted around slavery, trafficking and forced labour in recent years, mentioned above, can be counted as successes for the movement. Yet over the same period, anti-worker and anti-migrant laws and policies have also generally continued to gather pace, creating the vulnerabilities within which ‘victims’ are created. Indeed, [Bridget Anderson](#) and others have argued that counter-trafficking initiatives have been used by national governments in the global north to justify anti-migrant policies.

Where, then, does the GSI fit into this political landscape? The GSI creates rankings of countries based on the prevalence of modern slavery, the vulnerability of each country’s citizens to slavery, and government responses to modern slavery. There is already a ranking system in relation to the latter aspect, however. The US State Department’s annual *Trafficking in Persons* (TIP) report [classifies countries’ efforts](#) to combat trafficking (used synonymously with ‘modern slavery’) according to a scale from Tier 1 (the best), through Tier 2 and the Tier 2 watch list to Tier 3 (the worst). Why, then, create an alternative ranking system? Given that the US has been [accused](#) of allowing its diplomatic alliances and conflicts to influence its rankings, an alternative ranking by an NGO might be seen as more neutral and independent. Yet, Walk Free uses the TIP reports as a source of data for creating their indices. There are no drastic departures from the tier rankings. Nine of ten countries deemed to be taking the most action have most recently been ranked Tier 1. Eight out of ten countries deemed to be taking the least action have most recently been ranked Tier 3. Rather than a competing perspective, the report reinforces the legitimacy of the TIP reports’ Tier rankings. Whatever the politics of Walk Free, they do not appear to be politics of opposition to the US government’s self-declared leadership on the issue.

In attempting to meet the challenge of measuring a ‘hidden problem’, the methodology itself includes some questionable assumptions. The estimated prevalence of modern slavery for most countries is calculated primarily on the pervasiveness in a set of countries deemed to be similar, which are thus used as ‘proxies’. This use of ‘proxy’ countries creates the greatest doubt as to whether the resulting estimates should be treated as legitimate. The ‘hard data’ from nineteen surveys are also questionable in terms of what is actually being measured (as well as the fact that the institutionalised population, including prisoners, is not among the respondents). But, ironically, the least data is available for those countries characterised by the authors as “wealthy, democratic nations with stable governments”. The only ‘data point’ we could trace for a Western European country was a [UK Home Office](#) statement that “in 2003 there were up to 4,000 women in the UK that had been trafficked for sexual exploitation” (the methodology behind this estimate is unclear). Hence the rankings based on the shakiest data are for those countries which, overall, are declared to be doing the best job: with supposedly the lowest prevalence of modern slavery, citizens who face less vulnerability, and the best government responses.

It is no accident that ‘developed’ countries are ranked favorably, with comparatively low ‘vulnerability’ to modern slavery: indicators of ‘development’ are used to create a composite variable which in turn is part of the calculation for the vulnerability index. Yet, development also seems to explain more than vulnerability. Nine out of ten governments “taking the most action” are OECD countries. No OECD countries are among the ten countries with the highest prevalence of modern slavery, nor are any OECD governments among the ten seen to be “taking the least action”. In contrast, some least developed countries appear on both of these lists.

What is the lesson to be learned from the fact that ‘developed’ countries have less slavery among their citizens and take more action against slavery? Unfortunately, there is no radical call for redistribu-

tion of global wealth here. Instead, the ranking system implies that the blame should be placed squarely on the national governments of the less ‘developed’ countries for the plight of their citizens (even, in most cases, when these citizens travel abroad). The map hides the interdependence of regions and countries in many domains, and the ways in which the ‘developed’ and the ‘developing’ world interact with and affect each other. The stigmatisation of certain countries suggests that the problem at hand has only ‘national roots’, narrowing the debate towards ‘national solutions’ in the form of development. ‘Developed’ countries are presented largely as the model for the lower-ranked to aspire to—a model of wealth, stability, and freedom from corruption and poor governance, along with protection and assistance for citizens.

Further, it is an aspiration which the ‘developed’ countries are characterised as ready to assist with. The sources of their development, the ways in which development has been attained through histories of colonialism, imperialism, debt servicing, and unequal exchange (the latter increasingly within global supply chains) are absent from the analysis. “There are very few countries”, the report claims, “with a history so intrinsically linked to slavery as Sudan”. Such a statement is not applied to other countries such as Haiti or the United States, for this might illuminate the problematic ways in which the global north achieved its ‘development’.

In the map created by Walk Free, we see the politics of rescue projected onto the global scale. We see slavery framed as a problem of development, development as a problem of nation states, and development as something that the civilised world (i.e., the global north) can bring to those who need it. The map suggests the fight against modern-day slavery may be used in part to recover the project of development—a project which has been threatened on many fronts of late, not least due to the financial crisis and the growing influence of rising power countries.

The report, then, may be seen as reflecting the ‘anti-politics’ that characterises a large part of the counter-trafficking/anti-slavery movement. For the issue of modern slavery is one that is inevitably posed as transcending politics. The strength of this discourse is that it is difficult for politicians and business to dismiss. But this strength is inextricably linked to the trouble with such a framing, which is that explanations and responses must necessarily also be framed as transcending politics. In the Global Slavery Index report, it is a *notion of development stripped of its politics* which is implied as the solution. In contrast, if the prevalence of ‘modern slavery’ is taken to indicate that there may actually be high incidences of severe exploitation and abuse of workers (particularly migrants) who have limited bargaining power, then both the causes and the responses are necessarily political. We suggest a politics of development is the wrong path, and what is needed is to forge a politics of solidarity.

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Miscounting human trafficking and slavery

Two recent 'studies' have attracted a lot of international attention. Each presents incredibly flawed findings.

Ronald Weitzer

The conventional wisdom is that human trafficking is a major problem today, victimising millions of people every year. The estimates range widely: from 600,000 to four million annual trafficking victims and eight to 27 million persons in slavery. In 2010, the US State Department asserted that 1.8 per 1,000 persons in the world (0.18 percent) are trafficked every year. No sources have ever been provided to document any of these figures, yet they were quickly recapitulated in the media and by various government and international agencies, giving them the veneer of credibility.

However humanitarian their goals, many of the agencies and interest groups involved in anti-trafficking efforts have a vested interest in inflating the magnitude of the problem. The larger it appears, the greater the amount of attention human trafficking receives from the media, politicians, and the public. Government financial contributions to organisations involved in the trafficking arena, some of which have little or no expertise in the area, also increase with the exposure. Many independent analysts have criticised the lack of documentation for the estimates, but they have been completely overshadowed by those who insist the magnitude of the problem is both *huge* and *growing* worldwide.

Two recent trafficking reports

Two recent 'studies' have attracted a lot of international attention. Each presents incredibly flawed findings.

The first is the [Global Slavery Index \(GSI\)](#) produced by the Walk Free

Foundation. The report ranks 162 nations on the prevalence of slavery, which is defined rather broadly as human trafficking, forced labour, and slavery. The slavery index draws from a mix of unstandardised and thus non-comparable sources, including population surveys, estimates by governmental agencies and NGOs, and reports in the media. It also, rather bizarrely, ‘extrapolates’ from nations where some kind of estimate is available to ‘similar’ nations lacking such estimates. “For example, the prevalence ratio from the UK study was assumed to be relevant to other European island nations such as Ireland and Iceland, whereas the prevalence ratio for USA was assumed to be relevant to developed western European countries such as Germany”. Why the United States is ‘relevant’ to Europe is not revealed.

Imputing ‘similarity’ to different nations ignores their particularities, and such ‘extrapolation’ runs the risk of grossly distorting the prevalence of slavery in any given country. For countries for which no extrapolation was possible, the creators of the GSI state that “it was necessary to fall back on secondary source information”, which are often anecdotal (NGOs, media reports, local ‘experts’). These sources are especially problematic when we remember that modern slavery and trafficking are underground practices and very difficult to detect.

The Walk Free report names what its authors consider the ten ‘worst’ nations on the slavery scale. Five of these are in Africa (Gabon, The Gambia, Ivory Coast, Benin, Mauritania) where information is lacking and hardly sufficient to justify such categorisation, and the other five are Haiti, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Moldova. Some analysts would argue that we cannot have *any* confidence in estimates drawn from such societies, as the data are so unreliable. The authors also identify the ten ‘best’ nations, meaning those with the lowest slavery rates. All of these are rich nations in Western Europe plus New Zealand.

Concluding that there are 29.8 million persons worldwide who are victims of forced labour, human trafficking, and slavery, the report seeks

to lend empirical credence to the dubious estimate by the organisation Free the Slaves that there are 27 million persons enslaved throughout the world. When the 27 million figure was first proposed, by Free the Slaves founder Kevin Bales, he justified it as simply a 'guess'. Given the incredibly unstandardised and fragmented information on which the Global Slavery Index is based, it has no more reliability than the 27 million figure. Yet, many media sources and government agencies (including the US State Department) have embraced these figures.

The second report, '[Does Legalized Prostitution Increase Human Trafficking?](#)', seeks to determine whether countries where prostitution is legal have better or worse trafficking records than countries where prostitution is illegal. Using a report on 161 countries from the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), economists Seo-Young Cho, Axel Dreher, and Eric Neumayer ranked countries and tried to determine if their prostitution laws were related to their alleged prevalence of human trafficking. In doing so, they ignore the UNODC's caution *against* using its report as a measure of the number of victims in any given country. UNODC highlighted the absence of a standard definition of trafficking across countries, the lack of transparency in data collection and reporting in many nations, the diverse nature of the sources, and the conflation of smuggling, trafficking, and irregular migration numbers by some countries. Cho and her colleagues acknowledge that their figures do "not reflect actual trafficking flows" and that it is "difficult, perhaps impossible, to find hard evidence" of a relationship between trafficking and anything else.

They nevertheless use the UNODC report to draw bold conclusions about the relationship between trafficking and national prostitution laws. Even more problematic, the authors rely on aggregate national human trafficking figures, which *combine* labour, sex, and other kinds of trafficking, in their attempt to assess whether legal prostitution makes a difference. Thus, there is an *embarrassing mismatch* between the generic trafficking figures and prostitution law (for which only sex

trafficking figures should have been used). By way of analogy, imagine using an analysis that compares national-level drug trafficking prevalence—all illegal drugs, that is—with the legal status of one drug, marijuana possession.

This is not the only problem with the Cho study. Its authors examine trafficking at a single time point, which is something that should be tracked over time to include data from before and after the legal institutionalisation of prostitution. They furthermore ignore the important question of whether, and how, prostitution laws are actually enforced. Their analysis is confined to ‘law on the books’, ignoring the ways in which the law is, or is not, implemented on the ground.

Why these ‘studies’ matter

First, both the GSI and the Cho report received a lot of favourable coverage. They were embraced by policy makers in some countries, especially those seeking greater criminalisation of prostitution.

Second, if the claims or ‘findings’ are unfounded they risk diverting attention and funding from other worthy causes. A ton of money has been spent by governments and the international community on anti-trafficking programs over the past fifteen years. Yet, compared to the claimed high magnitude of the problem, few victims have been located and similarly few traffickers have been prosecuted worldwide.

Third, even if claims about national-level victimisation rates were roughly true, their macro-level nature means that they have no practical utility on the ground, where trafficking matters most. Micro-level studies (in a city or town) have clear advantages. They can provide: 1) more reliable victimisation numbers because of the limited parameters; 2) insights regarding the actual organisation and dynamics of trafficking rings; and 3) the potential for identifying ‘hot spots’ for targeted deployment of enforcement resources.

How big is the trafficking problem? The mysteries of quantification

Wildly different numbers circulate about the number of trafficking victims and modern-day slaves. Victims are hard to count because they are hidden and definitions are ambiguous, yet efforts to quantify them shape what we know and do about trafficking.

Sally Engle Merry

Horror stories of innocent young women tricked or sold into prostitution by unfeeling parents, carted across international borders, and thrown into slave-like conditions in brothels have made human trafficking one the hottest topics of the decade. This conception of trafficking has all the trappings of a popular issue: the innocent girl, sexually abused, and the villainous perpetrator, an organised crime boss. It invites a saviour mentality and acts of rescue. The rhetoric of trafficking has been augmented as of late by the concept of slavery, a hot-button idea that generates even more public outrage and donor support. But how accurate is this picture and how widespread is the abuse?

Ethnographic studies of sex workers and trafficked victims show a far more complex picture, one in which migrant smuggling and labour migration blur with what is labelled as trafficking. A young woman may leave her village in search of a job that will support her family or her children, expecting to work in a factory but discovering that sex pays better. Alternatively, she may take a job in a bar only to learn she is expected to do sex work as well. Women may be trafficked by neighbours or relatives as well as by organised crime bosses. Moreover, it appears that the majority of exploited labour do jobs other than sex work, and that they are coerced by a range of factors including poverty, kinship obligations, fear of violence, debt, and even the desire for the trappings of modernity.



Illustration by Cameron Thibos. Creative Commons.

The movement into victim status is often a complicated process. Some steps might be made on the basis of consent while others are relatively less free. What makes labour exploitative is similarly diverse and hard to specify. To add to the definitional morass, there are currently efforts to re-frame trafficking victims under new labels such as ‘modern-day slavery’. The US State Department, for its part, no longer includes the criterion of cross-border mobility in its definition, even though this has long been a core principle of trafficking.

Not only are these definitions vague, overlapping, and even contradictory, but they are changing over time. This creates clear difficulties for determining who should be considered trafficked, yet agencies and advocates continue their attempts to tabulate numbers of victims and traffickers. Some count forced labourers, some sex workers, some cross-border labour migrants, and some a combination of these and other statuses such as involuntary domestic servitude and child marriage. Practical obstacles to finding people in the shadowy conditions in which such workers exist only exacerbate these problems of defini-

tion. Big numbers are necessary to draw attention to the problem, even though they are acknowledged as guesses, and they vary wildly.

For example, the US State Department estimated in its 2005 *Trafficking in Persons Report* that 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across borders every year, of whom 14,500 to 17,500 are trafficked into the US. Approximately 80 percent are women and girls and up to 50 percent are minors. Of these, there are “hundreds of thousands used in prostitution”. In the same year, the International Labour Organisation *estimated* that 2.45 million people are trafficked and 1.05 million are trafficked into sex work from a global population of 12.3 million forced labourers. Meanwhile, Kevin Bales estimated in his 2005 book *Disposable People* that there are 27 million modern-day slaves.

However, the number of identified victims is a great deal smaller. For example, according to the State Department *TIP Reports* there were only 30,961 identified victims in 2008, the first year for which this information is provided. By 2012, there were 46,570. As of 2009, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) had about 13,500 trafficked persons representing more than 90 countries in its database of registered victims.

Despite this diversity of these numbers, a few of these estimates of trafficking victims circulate widely, gaining credibility through repetition. Some are repeated over and over in various documents until they acquire an aura of truth and are commonly cited simply as, for example, ‘US government’ data. Clearly, this is a hidden population and hard to count. Yet the vast disparity between estimates and counts of actual victims raises questions about how these numbers are produced and how big the problem is. There are undoubtedly some people victimised by the processes defined as trafficking and slavery, but how many is still unknown. The proliferation of large numbers does little to clarify the picture.

Any system of measurement confronts problems in determining how to reduce the buzzing confusion of social life to categories amenable to counting. The many systems employed today to count trafficking victims use different conceptions of trafficking and different measurement protocols. Each has an underlying theory about what the problem is and how it should be solved. Under conditions of uncertainty of this kind, a social phenomenon will ultimately come to be defined by whatever system of measurement prevails. In other words, the act of measurement creates the object of measurement. We may not know what intelligence is, but we do know that there is something that IQ tests measure that we call intelligence. Similarly, concepts such as the rule of law or failed states are broad and multi-faceted, yet are given more specific content by projects that claim to measure them in ways that permit comparisons across countries.

Thus, as scholars, international and national governments, and NGOs measure trafficking, they define it. The definition of the problem implicitly determines which policy should address it, whether rescues, labour regulations, migrant visas, information flyers at airports, or poverty reduction programmes. How things are counted has clear consequences for understanding what the problem is and what should be done about it.

Human trafficking and Africa's 'pornography of pain': the pitfalls of CSR

LexisNexis South Africa has mined its newspaper archives to produce a deeply flawed 'human trafficking awareness index' which draws upon sensationalised 'research' to create more false information on trafficking.

Marlise Richter & Joel Quirk

LexisNexis is an internationally renowned company that specialises in providing research and information for legal and corporate clients. It is especially popular amongst law students, who routinely use its user-friendly search engines to write assignments and briefs. While these search engines can be an invaluable source of information, they have also unfortunately been put to use to support sensationalism, myth-making, and poor 'research'.

This is because LexisNexis recently sponsored the publication of a new 'human trafficking awareness index' (HTA index), which *seeks* "to analyse the volume of news related to human trafficking" in Africa. This index uses information from their media database to "highlight emerging trends and patterns of awareness within and across national borders", and *attempts* to produce insights that will enable anti-trafficking activists "to monitor and drive the anti-trafficking agenda".

The inaugural awareness index was published in *November 2013*, and since then two further reports focusing on media coverage from *September-December 2013* and *January-December 2014* have been published. These reports follow a common logic, with media references to human trafficking being treated as a proxy for public awareness of human trafficking in South Africa as well as in Africa more broadly. The main thrust of all of these reports is not only that human trafficking is insidious and increasing, but that public awareness would assist in uncovering a multitude of cases that are assumed to go undetected.

Thus, through public awareness more trafficking victims will—somehow—be saved.

The reports do not reflect critically on the [power of sensationalist media coverage](#) to distort the public's perception of the problems associated with human trafficking. This omission is all the more glaring given the now extensive body of research that suggests relevant media reports routinely suffer from [dubious statistics](#) and classifications, unrepresentative or uncorroborated [anecdotes](#), and self-serving statements from 'experts' with a vested interest in exaggerating specific problems.

While journalists often have a great deal to say about trafficking, this emphasis can often come at the expense of other more pervasive forms of violence and exploitation. Most obvious of these is domestic violence, a devastating (but mundane) epidemic that has prompted an estimated [third of all women](#) who have been in a relationship to report that they have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence by their partner.

Sensationalised reporting on human trafficking also tends to exaggerate the reach and content of trafficking, and to present often self-serving speculation as 'fact'. This does a disservice to victims of trafficking, and can increase burdens faced by already marginalised groups such as sex workers and migrant populations, for example when [trafficking raids](#) take place.

In a recent report on [Trafficking and Gender](#), the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, warns:

Exclusive focus on trafficking without a social analysis also contributes to sensationalism. It creates the false impression that trafficking is a problem that can be solved by merely taking a few legal measures and providing assistance to those identified as trafficked. Thus, the long term

goal of advocating for systemic and structural changes in society gets overlooked.

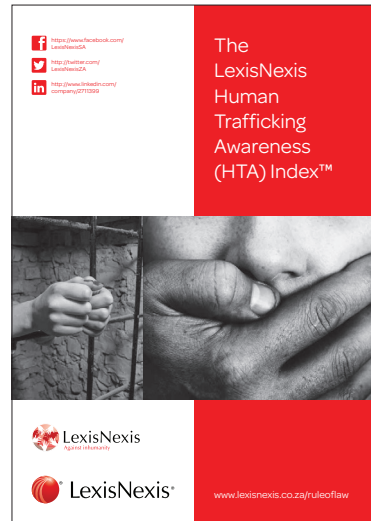
It is therefore highly debatable whether the HTA index brings us closer to either a clearer understanding or an effective response.

Stylised images and dubious ‘statistics’

All three HTA index reports are attractively designed, ten to 24-page documents packed with highly stylised images of white women bound with ropes and sad black children peering through rusty fences or scratching at walls. Especially troubling within the context of post-apartheid South Africa is the cover of the second report, which has an image of a mouth of a white person being smothered by a black hand. These types of visual images not only run the risk of falling subject to what historians of slavery have described as a ‘pornography of pain’, they also present a racially coded image of menace and physical constraint that does not adequately capture the challenges and complexities associated with migration and exploitation.

This visual presentation is accompanied by the use of dubious statistics. Especially prominent here is the figure of 2,958, which the most [recent report](#) calculates is “the number of potential trafficking victims reported on by African media during the period [January – December 2014]”. This figure is in turn drawn from 1,838 “unique African media articles on human trafficking, captured by the LexisNexis database during the period”. Yet the report contains no definition of trafficking, has no methodology section, and includes no indication of the original source of media articles or how they were located, or indeed how the report drew its conclusions. Furthermore, what is reported on by the popular media as ‘trafficking’ frequently has little resemblance to the technically complex and serious crime of human trafficking as written into law. As such, counting the number of individuals labelled ‘victims’ by the media does nothing but produce yet another inflated and inaccurate statistic.

These methodological difficulties do not prevent the 2013 and 2014 reports from making bold claims about ‘notable trends’. The 2014 report highlighted that child trafficking is ‘a pervasive problem’, while the September -December 2013 report includes a section titled ‘Murky Waters – Forced Labour (in the maritime industry)’ despite the fact that this trend does not feature in the media reports considered. While some might consider that a red flag, the report asserts:



Cover of the second HTA index report.
Fair Use.

this type of trafficking remains under-reported in the media, although the number of victims assisted in individual cases tends to be higher than those of sexual exploitation. [...] Elsewhere in Africa, ‘deep sea’ child sex tourism is becoming more widespread and entrenched in Kenya, as ‘clients’ rent boats to sail out to sea with children of their choice.

Sex work in South Africa and Nigeria

All three reports contain a variety of anecdotes and case studies from various parts of Africa. The 2014 report noted the death of Desiree Murugan in Durban, South Africa. Murugan was a 39-year old mother of one, who worked as a sex worker in Durban. In August 2014, she was found stabbed to death and decapitated in Chatsworth. This brutal murder sent shockwaves through the sex worker community, and a memorial was held by her family and supported by sex workers and sex worker advocates. The 2014 report classified this murder

as “Body Part Trafficking/Ritual Killing” and provided the following description:

Indian sex worker killed and beheaded for muti [an isiZulu term for traditional medicine]. Stabbed 195 times; brain, ear, nose, flesh and skin from face removed. Body found in Shallcross, Chatsworth. 6 arrested, including a traditional healer, 2 men, and 3 minors (a girl and two boys). Co-accused claimed they were offered R2m for the head of an Indian, Coloured or White woman with long hair by the traditional healer, who pleaded guilty and received a life sentence.

South Africa has no category of crime for ‘ritual killing’. The scenario described above also does not fulfil the definitional requirements of [trafficking for organ trade](#), as laid out by the United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UN.GIFT). It is not clear at all, apart from its sensationalism, why this brutal killing was not simply labelled as ‘murder’ in the 2014 HTA index report.

Similarly, the same report contained a section titled ‘Plight of migrant women – Nigerian women take risks crossing the Mediterranean to Italy only to become sex slaves.’ There is no reference to the original source, a problem found throughout the report, so one is left to wonder how many of the women labelled sex slaves actually became sex workers, something very different. One also cannot know from the report how many of these women saw sex work in Italy, which has legalised the occupation in contrast to Nigeria, [as a step up from their previous conditions](#).

There is little ambiguity over the definition of trafficking internationally. It is clearly set out by the United Nations Palermo Protocol and includes the essential element of movement by means of coercion or deception for the purposes of exploitation. The two case studies above,

and many others described in all three reports, do not seem to pass definitional muster according to the evidence that is provided.

Potential trafficking victims?

The first HTA index report warned that “the information and numbers provided in this report are only as accurate as the way in which the media reports this heinous crime”, and that many references to trafficking cases explicitly include the phrase “potential trafficking victims”. However, these cautionary notes were not uniformly included throughout the reports. A useful summary page with a table and bullet points—particularly valuable for busy journalists—instead proclaimed that there was a total of 5450 victims of trafficking in the period August 2011-2013 and that 2971 victims were children. This ‘fact’ was subsequently reproduced in a report on the [SADC Gender Protocol 2014 Barometer](#).

This conflation of potential victims with real victims (as defined by journalists) is further encouraged by LexisNexis’ public relations work. For example, the [press release](#) accompanying the 2014 report noted:

At least 2,958 people were trafficked through African countries outside of South Africa over the 12 month period from January to December 2014 for unjust purposes including sexual exploitation, domestic servitude and forced recruitment as child soldiers.

A representative from LexisNexis South Africa repeated this statement in an article written for *the [Cape Times](#)*, a popular South African daily newspaper. This sort of repetition serves to give weight to the result and to persuade the public that a reputable law research firm confirms the extent of human trafficking.

Making responsible choices

Recently, the CEO of LexisNexis South Africa proudly [noted](#) that his

company had directed all its corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds towards combating human trafficking. At a global level, LexisNexis has also chosen to support a range of anti-trafficking organisations, including the now notorious Somaly Mam Foundation in Cambodia. This foundation [closed down](#) in October 2014, after its namesake was exposed in [Newsweek](#) for having fabricated a history of being sold into sexual slavery by her grandfather. Mam also allegedly instructed Cambodian girls to lie about their lives as sex slaves in order to bolster the credibility and stature of her foundation.

Africa does not need false or misleading claims about trafficking that gain undeserved credibility through their association with a well known corporation. These claims are especially problematic when they harness the mutilated bodies of sex workers like Desiree Murugan towards dubious ends. Africa is currently plagued by a virulent mix of gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS, TB, and malaria. There is consequentially an urgent need for companies like LexisNexis to invest their substantial CSR funds towards practical efforts to prevent gender-based violence, as well as for sustained government, private sector, and civil society engagement with violence at the community and policy levels. It is fundamentally irresponsible to instead choose to fund glossy reports that fail to enlighten anyone.

This article draws on a response written to the release of the HTA report in 2015, entitled Marlise Richter "Evidence-based, truthful reporting needed on human rights violations" *Cape Times* 16 April 2015.

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Much of what people think they know about human trafficking and ‘modern-day slavery’ is inaccurate, incomplete, or unfounded. In order to help get their messages out, political activists and government officials have repeatedly turned to a range of simplistic and misleading images, dubious ‘statistics’, and self-serving narratives. These narratives have had all kinds of negative consequences. Thanks to an often voyeuristic interest in commercial sexual abuse, much less interest has been directed towards ‘unsexy’ problems and practices. Thanks to the construction of migration as a problem and threat, policy responses have focused upon telling migrants to ‘stay at home’. Thanks to the popularity of ‘slavery as exception’, global patterns of systemic abuse, exploitation, and discrimination have been routinely dispatched to the margins of political conversations. Thanks to the depiction of trafficking victims as ‘exotic outsiders’ in need of rescue and salvation, there has been an uncritical return to some of the worst tropes of the colonial ‘civilising mission’. This must change.

“Essential reading for students of gender politics and for all those concerned with social justice. Provides critical tools for deciphering contemporary imagery around ‘trafficking’ and ‘slavery’, and for responding to global inequities in more progressive ways”.

—Elizabeth Bernstein, Associate Professor of Women’s Studies
and Sociology, Columbia University

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