

## Loose Women or Lost Women?

### The re-emergence of the myth of 'white slavery' in contemporary discourses of 'trafficking in women' by *Jo Doezema*

#### CONTENTS

##### Introduction

##### The Cultural Myth of White Slavery

Regulation, Abolition and Feminism

From abolition to 'white slavery'

From 'fallen woman' to 'white slave': perceptions of the 'victim'

The Maiden Sacrifice

Blacks, foreigners, immigrants and Jews: perceptions of the 'white slaver'

Consequences of the campaign

##### From 'White Slavery' to 'Trafficking in Women'

Evidence of 'Trafficking in Women'

Feminism, neo-abolitionism and 'trafficking in women'

The reconstruction of 'innocence'

Abducted, lured or deceived

Youth and Virginity

Violence and death

Innocent victims vs. guilty whores

The 'colonial gaze'

Unemancipated women

The Trafficker

The myth re -told

##### Moral Panics and Boundary Crises

Behind the myth

Female Migration and Sexual Danger

Maintaining Boundaries

Beyond 'Trafficking'

##### Conclusion abbreviations

##### Endnotes

##### Bibliography

## Introduction

There is a common perception that development policies in the 1980s (in the wake of the debt crisis) such as SAPs, have led to an increase in 'traffic in women', or the forced transport of women into the sex industry. The reasoning behind this assumption is that women, who bear the brunt of economic reform, become 'ready prey' for traffickers with false promises of jobs overseas. Alternatively, development policies are blamed for the impoverishment that causes families to sell their children, especially daughters, into prostitution. Development policies are also seen to encourage 'sex-tourism'. According to this analysis, impoverished women and children 'offer themselves' to wealthy, western, male, tourists, who 'develop a taste' for 'exotic' sexuality, thus creating a market for 'trafficking in women' in the developed world.

The campaign against 'trafficking in women' has gained increasing momentum world-wide, but in particular among feminists in Europe and the United States, in the last two decades.

This current campaign is not the first time that the international community has become concerned with the fate of young women abroad. Modern concerns with prostitution and 'trafficking in women' have a historical precedent in the anti-white-slavery campaigns that occurred at the turn of the century. Feminist organisations played key roles in both past and present campaigns. While current concerns are focused on the exploitation of third world/non-western women by both non-western and western men, concerns then were with the abduction of European women for prostitution in South America, Africa or 'the Orient' by non-western men or other subalterns. Yet, though the geographical direction of the traffic has switched, much of the rhetoric accompanying the campaigns sounds almost completely the same. Then as now, the paradigmatic image is that of a young and naive innocent lured or deceived by evil traffickers into a life of sordid horror from which escape is nearly impossible.

The mythical nature of this paradigm of the 'white slave' has been demonstrated by historians. Similarly, recent research indicates that today's stereotypical 'trafficking victim' bears as little resemblance to women migrating for work in the sex industry as did her historical counterpart, the 'white slave'. The majority of 'trafficking victims' are aware that the jobs offered them are in the sex industry, but are lied to about the conditions they will work under. Yet policies to eradicate trafficking continue to be based on the notion of the 'innocent', unwilling victim, and often combine efforts designed to protect 'innocent' women with those designed to punish 'bad' women: i.e. prostitutes.

In this paper, I examine how narratives of 'white slavery' and 'trafficking in women' function as cultural myths, constructing particular conceptions of the issue of migration for the sex industry. The myths around 'white slavery' were grounded in the perceived need to regulate female sexuality under the guise of protecting women. They were indicative of deeper fears and uncertainties concerning national identity, women's increasing desire for autonomy, foreigners, immigrants and colonial peoples. To a certain extent, these fears and anxieties are mirrored in contemporary accounts of trafficking in women. My intent is to lay the two sets of discourses, as it were next to each other, and compare them, to evaluate to what extent 'trafficking in women' can be seen as a retelling of the myth of 'white slavery' in a modern form.

Until recently, very little examination of the modern anti-trafficking movement from a discourse perspective has been done: that is, a critical examination of the ideology, organisation, and strategies of the anti-trafficking movement. [\[1\]](#) The 'white slavery' campaign, in contrast, has been studied by feminist and non-feminist historians alike (Bristow 1977, 1982; Connelly 1980, Walkowitz 1980, Rosen 1982, Gibson 1986, Corbin 1990, Grittner 1990, Guy 1991, Fisher 1997, Haveman 1998).

The amount of material, in the forms of reports, books, academic papers, newspaper articles, videos, Internet sites, and national and international legislation, concerning 'trafficking in women' is vast, and attempts to synthesise or analyse it nearly non-existent. This paper is not intended to 'close down', or provide definite conclusions, to the analysis of 'trafficking in women' as cultural myth, but rather to begin the discussion. Due to time and space limitations of this paper, I have had to focus on a limited number of key documents. I use reports from anti-trafficking and human rights organisations, a number of newspaper articles, and recent national and international policy documents. There is some danger in basing an analysis on a limited amount of material. Nonetheless, I have chosen documents that I believe give a picture of the current debate, reflecting both similarities and differences in perceptions of the issue.

In the first chapter, a brief history of the anti-white-slavery movement is given, and the core elements of the 'white slavery' myth are set out. The re-emergence of these core elements in the 'trafficking in women' discourse are examined in chapter two. These two chapters are largely descriptive accounts of the history and construction of the 'white slavery' and 'trafficking in women' narratives. In the final chapter, an analysis of the deeper fears and anxieties about sexuality, the role of women, the nation, and 'the other' underlying the myth is made.

[\[CONTENTS\]](#)

## **The Cultural Myth of White Slavery**

It is difficult to define 'white slavery', as the term meant different things to different social actors, depending on their 'location' both geographically and ideologically. The discourse on 'white slavery' was never monolithic, nor was it inherently consistent. For some reformers, 'white slavery' came to mean all prostitution, others saw 'white slavery' and prostitution as distinct but related phenomena (Malverly and Willis 1912). Others distinguished between movement within a country for prostitution (not white slavery) and international trade (white slavery) (Corbin 1990: 294). Nonetheless, it is possible to establish some elements in

perceptions of white slavery that were common to almost all interpreters of the phenomenon (examined below). 'White slavery' came to mean the procurement, by force, deceit, or drugs, of a white woman or girl [2] against her will, for prostitution. [3]

Contemporary historians are nearly unanimous in seeing the actual number of cases of 'white slavery', as defined above, as very few (Walkowitz 1980, Bristow 1982, Rosen 1982 [4], Corbin 1990, Guy 1991). Stories of 'white slavery', were in fact triggered by the actual increase in women, including prostitutes, migrating from Europe to find work (Guy 1991: 7).

If the actual number of cases of white slavery was very small, how did it come about that the issue became so prominent? The extent of the 'white slave panic' in Europe and the United States has been extensively documented (Bristow 1977, 1982; Connelly 1980, Walkowitz 1980, Rosen 1982, Gibson 1986, Corbin 1990, Grittner 1990, Guy 1991, Fisher 1997, Haveman 1998). There were organisations world-wide devoted to its eradication; it received extensive coverage in the world's media; was the subject of numerous novels, plays, and films; and led to a number of international conferences, new national laws and a series of international agreements. [5] The view of 'white slavery' as myth can account for its persistence and power despite the fact that very few actual cases of 'white slavery' existed. According to Grittner, in his examination of the American version of the white slavery panic, myth does not simply mean something that is 'false', but is rather a collective belief that simplifies reality (1990: 7). Grittner explains his conception of myth as follows:

*As an uncritically accepted collective belief, a myth can help explain the world and justify social institutions and actions....When it is repeated in similar form from generation to generation, a myth discloses a moral content, carrying its own meaning, secreting its own values. The power of myth lies in the totality of explanation. Rough edges of experience can be rounded off. Looked at structurally, a cultural myth is a discourse, "a set of narrative formulas that acquire through specifiable historical action a significant ideological charge"* (Slokin cited in Grittner 1990: 7).

## **Regulation, Abolition and Feminism**

The campaign against white slavery needs to be seen in the context of the European and American nineteenth century discourses on prostitution. Two competing views can be distinguished: that of the 'regulationists' and that of the 'abolitionists'.

'Regulation' refers to the state system of licensed brothels, in which prostitutes were subjected to various forms of regulation, such as forced medical

examinations and restrictions on mobility. The ideology behind 'regulation' was that of prostitution as a 'necessary evil'. Pre-Victorian regulation of prostitution was based on the religious/moral notion of the prostitute as a 'fallen woman' (Guy 1991:13). In the Victorian age, new rationale was found for regulation in the 'science of sexuality' (Foucault cited in Walkowitz 1980: 40) in which the prostitute was constructed as a sexual deviant and spreader of disease (Walkowitz 1980: 40).

'Abolitionism' arose as a specific response to the Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts enacted in England in 1864, 1866, and 1869, which epitomised the regulationist approach to the control of prostitution through medical supervision. Under the acts, any woman who was suspected of prostitution could be detained by the police and forced to undergo an internal examination. Josephine Butler famously led a 16-year feminist campaign to abolish the acts, which were repealed in 1886. Butlerite feminists opposed the then-current views of the prostitute as 'fallen woman' or 'sexual deviant'; placing the blame for prostitution squarely on the shoulders of unbridled male lust. Prostitutes were seen as victims, who should be rescued or rehabilitated, rather than policed and punished. Feminists in Butler's repeal movement objected to the CD Acts for what they saw as official state recognition of the 'double standard' of sexual behaviour for men and women. They also objected to the way the CD Acts gave the state additional powers to police and control the lives of women, especially working class women. [\[6\]](#)

The feminist abolitionist campaigners were joined in the campaign against the CD Acts by 'social purity' reformers. Social purity reformers, many of them male, wanted not only to abolish prostitution, but also aimed to cleanse society of vice through a repressive programme focusing on, in particular, the sexual behaviour of young people (Coote 1910: 5).

### **From abolition to 'white slavery'**

Almost as soon as women began to migrate in great numbers (see above), stories of 'white slavery' began to circulate (Guy 1992: 203). A number of highly-publicised 'exposes' of the traffic served to generate wide-spread public attention for the issue (Grittner 1990: 41). As Grittner remarks, social purity reformers 'soon discovered the rhetorical power that "white slavery" had on their middle-class audience' (Grittner 1990: 41).

Butlerite feminists supported the social purist campaign against 'white slavery', as they believed that the system of licensed brothels abroad furthered the traffic in women (Walkowitz 1980, Gibson 1986). They also supported the social purists' agenda of a single standard of chastity for both sexes and shared their concern with youthful sexuality (Bristow 1977, Walkowitz 1980). Eventually, the abolitionist campaign was eclipsed by the campaign for social purity, as the emotive issue of 'white slavery' succeeded in whipping up public concern to a fever pitch.

The repressive nature of the social purity campaign was recognised and condemned by some feminists of the time. Theresa Billington-Grieg published an article in the English Review in 1913 in which she argued that feminist anti-white slavery activists had 'provided arms and ammunition for the enemy of women's emancipation' (p.446). Josephine Butler publicly condemned the repressive aspects of the social-purity movement, but many of her erstwhile followers joined the ranks of the social purists (Walkowitz 1980: 252). In other European countries and the United States as well, feminists initiated or became involved in the drive to abolish prostitution and 'white slavery'. And, as in England, these campaigns were increasingly dominated by repressive moralists, as alliances were forged with religious and social purity organisations (Gibson 1986, Grittner 1990, Haveman 1998).

### **From 'fallen woman' to 'white slave': perceptions of the 'victim'**

An essential aspect of the abolitionist campaign against white slavery was to arouse public sympathy for the victims. Neither the pre-Victorian 'fallen women' nor the Victorian 'sexual deviant' was an ideal construct to elicit public sympathy. Only by removing all responsibility for her own condition from the prostitute could she be constructed as a victim to appeal to the sympathies of the middle-class reformers, and public support for the end goal of abolition be achieved. The 'white slave' image as used by abolitionists broke down the old separation between 'voluntary' sinful and/or deviant prostitutes and 'involuntary' prostitutes, construing all prostitutes as victims, and removing the justification for regulation.

The 'innocence' of the victim was established through a variety of rhetorical devices: by stressing her youth/virginity; her whiteness; and her unwillingness to be a prostitute. The 'innocence' of the victim also served as a perfect foil for the 'evil trafficker'; simplifying the reality of prostitution and female migration to melodramatic formula of victim and villain (Gibson 1986, Corbin 1990, Grittner 1990).

### **The Maiden Sacrifice**

Deceit, force and/or drugging featured heavily in the accounts of 'white slavery.' Some accounts reported women and girls kidnapped outright, others focused on 'deceit', with violence entering in after the 'victim' became aware of what was expected of her, to ensure compliance and prevent escape. This process was referred to as being "broken in" (NVA 1910: 15).

The horror of the supposed trade in 'white slaves' was magnified by stressing the youth of the victim. As Walkowitz (1980: 246) points out, by the time the English abolitionists had seized on 'white slavery' as an issue, the image of the 'victim' was several years younger than in earlier decades. The two extremely emotive issues of 'white slavery' and 'child prostitution' were linked, as exemplified in W.T. Stead's "The Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon" published in the Pall Mall Gazette in 1885. In this fantastically sensational piece, he claimed to provide investigative evidence of hundreds of young English girls

deceived, coerced and/or drugged into prostitution and accused of poor parents of selling their daughters to 'white slave traders' (Stead cited in Fisher 1997: 130-2).

In other countries, as well, the extreme youth of the victim was stressed in campaigns against 'white slavery'. According to Corbin, in French accounts,

*the victim is always young- even very young, hardly past childhood-considered a virgin even when her innocence is not self-evident* (1990: 291).

In the US, the primary narrative motif was that of the 'innocent country girl' lured to the dangerous and corrupt city (Grittner 1990: 62), a theme with resonance in Europe as well (Bristow 1982: 24).

Linked to the youth of the victim was her 'purity' and virginity. The image of 'innocence debauched' has a particularly strong and prurient content. As Corbin notes:

*[it was] the martyrdom of virginity... not the fact of women being sold, but the idea of the virgin ravished that aroused its rather salacious disapproval* (1990: 277).

The titles of books and newspaper articles attest to the fascination with the despoiling of youthful purity: Stead's "The Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon" (see above) conjures up images of virgin sacrifice, as did constant comparisons in French newspapers to the myth of Greek girls sacrificed to the Minatour (Corbin 1990: 291).

Another reoccurring motif, related to the narrative devices of sacrifice, youth and virginity was that of disease, in particular syphilis, and death. As a member of the Argentinean Societe de Protection et de Secours aux Femmes expressed it:

*And what is the end of their career? When their health is broken down, their bodies utterly ruined, their minds poisoned and dulled, they are thrust out into the streets to perish there, unless some hospital ward opens its door to them. What else could happen to them?* (NVA 1910: 18)

As Grittner remarks of this rhetorical repetition:

*The emphasis on inevitability of disease, degradation, and death, and the totality of the slave experience, led to the inescapable conclusion that women were helpless victims* (1990: 68).

### **Blacks, foreigners, immigrants and Jews: perceptions of the 'white slaver'**

The image of the migrant prostitute as 'white slave' fit in to racist conceptions of Americans and Europeans. For many Europeans, as Guy points out,

*it was inconceivable that their female compatriots would willingly submit to sexual commerce with foreign, racially varied men. In one way or another these women must have been trapped and victimised. So European women in foreign bordellos were construed as "white slaves" rather than common prostitutes*

(1992: 203).

Accounts of the day stressed the 'whiteness', equated with purity, of the victim:

*The traditional Western connotation that whiteness equals purity and blackness equals depravity flourished in a myth that appealed to the moral and prurient natures of its audience (Grittner 1990 :131).*

Only 'white women' were considered 'victims'; [7](#) for example, campaigners in Britain against the 'white slave trade' to Argentina were not concerned about the situation of native born prostitutes (Guy 1991: 24), nor were American reformers concerned about non-Anglo Saxon prostitutes (Grittner 1990: 56).

The 'white slave' had as her necessary opposite the 'non-white slaver'. 'Non-whiteness' was usually literally represented, but also figuratively, with 'otherness' from whichever social group conducting the campaign serving as a marker of 'non-whiteness'. The very name 'white slavery' is racist, implying as it does that slavery of 'white women' was of a different, and worse, sort than 'black' slavery. In America, in particular, this contrast was explicitly used to downplay the black slavery experience (Grittner 1990). In both Europe and the United States 'foreigners', especially immigrants, were targeted as responsible for the traffic. Jews, in particular, were seen as responsible [8](#) (NVA 1910, Bristow 1982, Grittner 1990, Guy 1991). According to Bristow, the term 'white slavery' first appeared in 1839, in an anti-Semitic context (1982: 34).

### **Consequences of the campaign**

The original, emancipatory thrust of the abolitionist movement, dedicated as it was to decreasing state control over poor women, ironically evolved to support a 'social purity' agenda that would give the state new repressive powers over women and subaltern men. The campaign against white slavery led to the adoption of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill of 1921 (The White Slave Act) in Britain that was used against prostitutes and working class women, rather than 'white slavers' (Walkowitz 1980). In the US, the Mann Act of 1910 was used by police as excuse to arrest prostitutes and persecute black men (Grittner 1990: 96-102). Greece fought 'white slavery' by passing legislation in 1912 forbidding women under 21 to travel abroad without a special permit (Bristow 1977: 178). After 1914, when migration effectively halted, the anti-white slavery campaign lost momentum. After a period of nearly 70 years of relative silence, the issue of women being forcibly transported to the sex industry is once again the subject of a massive international campaign. In the next chapter, I examine the emergence of the new campaign against 'white slavery', now called 'trafficking in women', and compare its discursive structure to that of 'white slavery'.

[\[CONTENTS\]](#)

## **From 'White Slavery' to 'Trafficking in Women'**

The re-emergence of 'white slavery', now called 'trafficking in women' as a political issue for feminists, human rights organisations, religious groups and others, and its reappearance on national and international political agendas can be dated from the beginning of the 1980s. While originally the focus was on the 'traffic' from Latin America and Asia to western Europe, increasingly, it is on women from Russia, the NIS and Eastern Europe being 'trafficked' to Western Europe, the United States and Asia (GSN 1997, Weijers and Lap-Chew 1997). There is also an increasing focus on inter-regional 'traffic' such as from Nepal to India (HRW 1995), and Burma to Taiwan (HRW 1995), and rural to urban 'trafficking' within Asian countries (Weijers and Lap-Chew 1997).

Modern accounts of 'trafficking in women' vie with 'white slavery' stories in their use of sensational descriptions and emotive language, though the 'victims' are no longer white, western European or American women, but third-world/non-western women.

*Trafficking Cinderella features gut wrenching testimonies of broken dreams, withered illusions, rape and humiliation from six Eastern European girls sold as prostitutes throughout the world. This film was made on behalf of all these lost girls; confused by the crumbling post-communist reality they became an easy prey for pimps, procurers and sex-traffickers.*

[\[9\]](#)

*Think of it. You're a young girl brought from Burma, you have been kidnapped or bought. You're terrified....if you haven't already been raped along the way (or sometimes even if you have) you're immediately brought to the "Room of the Unveiling of the Virgin". There you are raped continuously-until you can no longer pass for a virgin. Then you are put to work (Mirkenson 1994: 1).*

It is possible to see in these stories the re-working of several of the motifs identified in the first chapter: innocence; youth and virginity; deception and violence. If 'white slavery' has been shown to be a cultural myth with repressive consequences for women, especially prostitutes, what are the implications of this for the current campaign against 'trafficking in women'? In this chapter, I examine how the myth of 'white slavery' has been reconstructed in a modern form.

### **Evidence of 'Trafficking in Women'**

It is not my intent, I wish to emphasise, to indicate that all accounts of trafficking, including those referred to in this paper, are 'false' by calling

'trafficking in women' a myth. Women who travel for work in the sex industry are often lied to about the conditions they will work under, and in a number of cases are subjected to violence and/or find themselves working in slavery-like conditions. Some women are also lied to about the type of work they will be doing (GSN 1997, Weijers and Lap-Chew 1997). The repetition of the discursive foundations of 'white slavery' do, however, lead to the question of the extent to which the campaign against 'trafficking in women' revolves, like that on white slavery, around a relatively few number of cases that conform to the stereotype of the innocent girl lured or abducted into the sex industry. A systematic investigation of reports and statistics of 'trafficking in women', similar to those undertaken by chroniclers of the white slavery panic, has yet to be done. However, there are reasons to question the reliability of evidence of 'trafficking in women'. Firstly, evidence of 'trafficking' is often based on unrevealed or unverifiable sources. The Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW), who undertook a year-and-a-half-long investigation into 'trafficking in women' internationally at the request of the UN Special Rapporteur On Violence Against Women, stated that finding reliable statistics on the extent of trafficking in women was virtually impossible, due to a lack of systematic research, the lack of a 'precise, consistent and unambiguous definition of the phenomena [of trafficking in women]' and the illegality or criminal nature of prostitution and 'trafficking' (Weijers and Lap-Chew 1997: 15). However, this does not stop 'experts' and journalists from quoting huge numbers. For example, a recent working paper prepared for the UN Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery quotes an estimate of one to two million women and children trafficked each year, but the figure is not referenced, nor is any research cited (IMADR 1998:1). Secondly, as the writers of the GAATW report note, when statistics are available, they usually refer to the number of migrant or domestic sex workers, rather than cases of 'trafficking' (Weijers and Lap-Chew 1997: 15). Statistics on 'white slavery' to Buenos Aires were based on the numbers and nationalities of registered prostitutes (Guy 1991: 7). In a striking parallel, a Global Survival Network (GSN) report (1997) uses the rise in numbers of Russian, Eastern European and NIS women in the sex industry in western Europe and the US as evidence of 'trafficking' (p. 5,7). But even these figures are not to be trusted: Kempadoo notes the extreme variations in estimates of numbers of prostitutes in Asia -- estimates for the city of Bombay alone range from 100,000 to 600,000 (1998a: 15). As she remarks:

*To any conscientious social scientist, such discrepancies should be cause for extreme suspicion of the reliability of the research, yet when it comes to sex work and prostitution, few eyebrows are raised and the figures are easily bandied about without question (1998a: 15).*

Thirdly, and most significantly, there are emerging indications that it is sex workers, rather than 'coerced innocents' that form the majority of this 'traffic'. GAATW, whose report is based for a large part on responses of organisations that work directly with 'trafficking victims', found that the majority of 'trafficking' cases involve women who know they are going to work in the sex industry, but are lied to about the conditions they will work under, such as the amount of money they will receive (Weijers and Lap-Chew 1997: 99). They also conclude that abduction for purposes of 'trafficking' into the sex industry is very rare (p.99). GSN (1997) also relates the testimonies of a number of 'trafficked' sex workers in their report. Research by the foundation for Women in Thailand found that by far the majority of women migrating from northern Thailand to Japan were aware that they would be working in the sex industry (Skrobanek 1997). This conclusion is supported by Watenabe (1998) who worked as a bar girl herself in Japan in the course of her research into Thai women migrating to the Japanese sex industry. Other research, such as that by Brockett and Murray (1994) in Australia, Anarfi (1998) in Ghana, Kempadoo (1998b) in the Caribbean, COIN (1998) in the Dominican Republic and the Salomon Alapitvany Foundation in Hungary (1998) [\[10\]](#) indicates that women seeking to migrate are not so easily 'duped' or 'deceived', and are aware that most jobs on offer are in the sex industry.

### **Feminism, neo-abolitionism and 'trafficking in women'**

The modern feminist anti-trafficking campaign is split along ideological lines on their views of prostitution. One side is represented by the 'neo-abolitionists', whose most important text is Kathleen Barry's 1979 *Female Sexual Slavery*. The organisation founded by Barry, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) is one of the largest and most influential international anti-trafficking organisations. The neo-abolitionist view of prostitution, as the name suggests, descends from that of the turn of the century Butlerites (see section one). Prostitution is considered violence against women and defined as 'sexual exploitation': 'prostitution vicimizes all women, justifies the sale of any woman, and reduces all women to sex' (CATW 1998: 2). According to this definition, there can be no such thing as 'voluntary' prostitution, as all prostitution is a violation of human rights, and 'trafficking in women' is taken to mean any migration for prostitution (CATW 1998).

The second position in the feminist campaign against 'trafficking' is one that makes a distinction between 'trafficking in women' and 'forced prostitution' on the one hand, and 'voluntary prostitution' on the other. GAATW is the primary exponent of this position. According to GAATW,

*traffic in persons and forced prostitution are manifestations of violence against women and the rejection of these practices, which are a violation of the right to self-determination, must hold within itself the respect for the self-determination of adult persons who are voluntarily engaged in prostitution (GAATW 1994: par. 111.1).*

In adopting this view of prostitution as work, GAATW and other feminists were heavily influenced by the sex worker rights' movement, whose contemporary organisation began in the mid 1970s. [\[11\]](#) Sex workers themselves are a completely

new entry to the debates about their livelihood: in the 'white slavery' debates, no prostitutes took part. Sex worker rights' activists are increasingly wary of the split between 'victims of trafficking/ forced prostitution' and 'voluntary prostitution'. Too often, the distinction is interpreted in such a way as to deny sex workers' rights, as in the regulationist reasoning : 'innocent girls' need protecting, 'bad women' who chose prostitution deserve all they get (Doezema 1995, 1998; Murray 1998, Weijers 1998).

In the following section, I begin to identify and analyse some of the motifs in the myth of white slavery as they reappear in discourses on 'trafficking in women'. It is by no means an exhaustive list.

### **The reconstruction of 'innocence'**

The first mythic element of white slavery narratives that is immediately recognisable in 'trafficking' stories is that of the 'innocent victim'. As with white slavery, 'innocence' is established in a number of ways: through stressing the 'victims' lack of knowledge of or unwillingness to accede to her fate; her youth -- equated with sexual unawareness and thus purity; and/or her poverty.

#### **Abducted, lured or deceived**

In the typical 'trafficking' narrative, the village girl or girl from a third-world/non-western country is abducted or 'lured' to the city/the west by promises of well-paid jobs or marriage:

*Seeking financial security, many women are lured by traffickers' false promises of a better life and lucrative jobs abroad (Wellstone and Feinstein 1998).*

*Jewelleries (sic), money, fancy clothes and Hindi movies are luring girls to the cold city of neon lights away from the warm lap of the cool mountains (Kathmandu Post, 27-10-1997).*

*each year tens of thousands of mostly rural Chinese women are abducted or lured way from their homes by criminal networks promising work or travel (Coalition Report 4:1 1997 p. 1).*

As explained above, there is some recognition that the majority of 'trafficking' cases involve women who are aware that they are going to work in the sex industry but are unaware of the conditions under which they will work. How does the deceived sex worker fit into the myth of innocence in peril? In the first instance, she would seem to radically contradict the construction of the 'innocent victim'. However, a closer reading indicates that this potentially myth-busting perception is coated with a dusting of victimisation to make it more palatable. The sex worker who is a 'trafficking victim' is rendered innocent by the ritual invocation of her poverty and desperation.

*Susie is the face of contemporary poverty. That her job as a debt-bonded sex-worker is the best economic option available to her is a metaphor for most of the world's women, whose grinding impoverishment in the Third World is accelerating (Matheson 1994:1).*

Who could blame a mother for 'turning to prostitution' to feed her children? I would not argue that poverty and a lack of economic opportunities do not influence a woman's decision to become a sex worker. (Of course, this begs the question of why all poor women don't choose sex work). I am interested here in the rhetorical use of 'poverty' to make the sex worker fit the mythical image of deceived innocence.

### **Youth and Virginity**

As with white slavery narratives, the 'innocence' of the victim is further established by emphasising her youth and virginity. The sensationalist use of the highly emotive and sexually charged image of 'despoiled virginity' plays on prurient fascination at the same time as it whips up public indignation.

*Nations struggle to address the problem [of trafficking] -- yet the practice continues-- actually increases, with younger and younger girls being sought for this lucrative business (Captive Daughters 1998: 1).*

*Actually to call most of them women is a misnomer, for often they are young girls, ages 10 - 15. Some have not even reached the age of menstruation, many have no idea what sex is (Mirkenson 1994: 1).*

Distinctions between child and adult are blurred in order to encourage the view of the 'trafficking' victim as young and helpless. A UNICEF report states that the majority of 'girls' trafficked from Burma to Thailand 'are between 12 and 25 years old' (UNICEF 1995: 38). No indication is given as to what percentage of these 'girls' are actually under 18. A particularly crass attempt to link the issues of 'child' and 'prostitution' in an emotive way is evident in a photo-series included in the GSN report (1997). The caption reads:

*"Sveta", a 15-year-old Muscovite, works as a prostitute. Here we see her picking up a Russian policeman. Below, at home, she brushes her doll's hair (GSN 1997:9).*

### **Violence and death**

The victimisation of the 'trafficked woman' is reinforced through the repetition of stories of horrific violence. According to a Ukrainian parliamentarian:

*many Ukrainian women seeking jobs abroad "are raped, beaten and drugged" while being coerced into being prostitutes (quoted in Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 14-04-98).*

The term "broken in", familiar from accounts of 'white slavery', also makes a reappearance:

*Most girls and women start out in these cheap brothels, where they are "broken in" through a process of rapes and beatings (HRW 1995: 232).*

As in 'white slavery' narratives, the emphasis on violence serves to underscore the complete victimisation of the woman: the more violence, the more helpless and truly victim she is (Grittner 1990: 68). It also titillates by presenting a popular sexual fantasy in a culturally acceptable manner. Headlines such as "\$1m Trade in Sex

Slaves," (The Australian, 23-02-98), "The Selling of Innocents" (Kathmandu Post 10-27-97); "Sex Slaves: Fodder for Flesh Factories," (Toronto Sun 05-10-98) pander to prurient interest.

Just as the 'white slave' was doomed to misery, disease and death as a result of her loss of virtue, today's 'victim of trafficking' shares the same inevitable fate:

*From desperate mothers to sex masters, they do not experience anything but humiliation, diseases, and death* (Seraphini 1998:2).

*A woman tries to stand up, saunters [sic] and falls back...She doesn't say anything... can't say it... the words don't come out. She's embarrassed. She's sick. She's a sex worker* (Kathmandu Post, 27-10-97).

This is particularly striking in light of the AIDS pandemic: the 'white slave' was condemned to syphilis, her modern counterpart to AIDS.

### **Innocent victims vs. guilty whores**

The effect of these motifs of deception, abduction, youth/virginity and violence is to render the victim unquestionably 'innocent'. Desperately poor, deceived or abducted, drugged or beaten into compliance, with a blameless sexual past, she cannot have 'chosen' to be a prostitute.

*Maya Tamang... was a victim of ignorance, poverty, and the greed of an unscrupulous relative who sold her to a brothel in Bombay...Her story is not much different from hundreds of similar horror stories surrounding once beautiful and innocent young Nepali girls* (Peoples Review, 25-01-96: 7).

*It happens every single day... throughout the world, where selling naive and desperate young women into sexual bondage has become one of the fastest-growing criminal enterprises in the robust global economy* (New York Times 11-01-98).

'Innocent' 'naive' and 'desperate' in these accounts are code for 'non-prostitute'. The construction of a 'victim' who will appeal to the public and the policy makers demands that she be sexually blameless. This is illustrated by a journalist's perceptive reaction to reports of a Toronto 'sex slave' ring:

*The day they were arrested, last fall, they were the darlings of the media and a favourite porn fantasy, all wrapped up in one righteous story of salvation: 22 victims of "sex trafficking" liberated from their debasement in Toronto's suburbs by a carefully planned police raid. Everywhere... they were droolingly described as "sex slaves," conjuring up a vision of exotic but helpless beauties. A day or two later, police revealed that the 22 women, mostly Thai or Malaysian, had willingly come to Canada to ply their trade; wiretaps caught them boasting, long distance, about the amount of money they were earning. Public opinion did an instant about-face. Now the women were hardened delinquents, illegal immigrants, tawdry, dismissable, selling their bodies of their own free will. Phew! No need to fret about their fate* (Toronto Star 19-04-98).

As with the public outcry against 'white slavery', the real concern for public and

policy-makers is not with protecting women in the sex industry, but with preventing 'innocent' women from becoming prostitutes (Doezema 1998, Weijers 1998). A 'guilty' prostitute cannot be a 'victim of trafficking': as expressed by delegate to recent conference on trafficking: [\[12\]](#) "How can I distinguish an innocent victim from a sex worker?" (Weijers 1998: 11). Thus women who knowingly migrate to work in the sex industry and may encounter exploitation and abuse, are not considered to have a legitimate claim to the same sorts of human rights protections demanded for 'trafficking victims' (Doezema 1998, Weijers 1998).

### **The 'colonial gaze'**

The overt racism in the 'white slavery' campaigns is largely absent from anti-trafficking campaigns. However, an implicit racism is still evident. It finds its expression most fully in the construction of the non-western 'trafficking victim', while in 'white slavery', it was most evident in the view of the foreign 'white slaver'. Modern accounts do however, to some extent, have a racist interpretation of the causes of contemporary 'trafficking' as explored below. It is a complex mix, for western countries, and western men, come in for their share of the blame, as well, as trafficking is linked to western development policies and western clients and sex tourists (Weijers and Lap-Chew 1997).

### **Unemancipated women**

Pictured as poor, naïve, and 'unempowered', third world/non western women are perceived as unable to act as agents in their own lives or to make an uncoerced decision to work in the sex industry (Doezema 1995, Murray 1998).

*The Los Angeles activist wants to shed a different kind of light on the allure of this and other large American cities to young girls-from backcountry and backward countries alike (The Christian Science Monitor, 12-03-98).*

*Many, in their naiveté, believed that nothing bad could happen to them in rich and comfortable countries such as Switzerland, Germany, and the United States (GSN 1997:1).*

Presenting 'non-western' women as helpless, childlike creatures is both a result of and perpetuates what Chandra Mohanty has identified as the 'colonial gaze' of western feminists:

*third world women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as: religious (read 'not progressive'), family oriented (read 'traditional'), legal minors (read 'they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights), illiterate (read 'ignorant'),[and] domestic (read 'backward') (1988: 22).*

This tendency is particularly pronounced in the works of 'neo-abolitionist' feminists like Kathleen Barry. Kamala Kempadoo analyses the racism inherent in Barry's 1995 book *The Prostitution of Sexuality: The Global Exploitation of Women*:

*She [Barry] constructs a hierarchy of stages of patriarchal and economic*

*development, situating the trafficking in women in the first stage that "prevails in pre-industrial and feudal societies that are primarily agricultural and where women are excluded from the public sphere" and where women, she states, are the exclusive property of men... At the other end of the scale she place the "post-industrial, developed societies" where "women achieve the potential for economic independence" (Kempadoo 1998a: 11).*

This perception reinforces the assumption 'that people in the third world have just not evolved to the extent that the west has' (Mohanty 1988: 22).

### **The Trafficker**

Western development policies and western 'sex tourists' are blamed for being at least partially responsible for 'trafficking in women' (Mirkenson 1994, IMADR 1998, Weijers and Lap-Chew 1997). However, as in 'white slavery' accounts, to western eyes, the 'traffickers' themselves are seen to be foreigners. According to Cheryl Harrison of GAATW/Canada, media reports of the 'trafficking' of 14 Thai women to a Toronto brothel painted Asians as criminals (GAATW Bulletin, March 1998: 5). Usually the 'traffickers' are portrayed as mafia-like 'foreign criminal gangs', often working in collusion with 'corrupt' (read-they can't manage their own affairs) third world/post-communist governments (HRW 1995: 196-273; GSN 1997: 33-46).

The other 'villains' to whom the finger is repeatedly pointed as the cause of 'white slavery' are third world villagers who reportedly sell their daughters to 'traffickers'.

*People sell their daughters because they are poor and materialistic -- they might want a television, good clothes (Worker for the French organisation Action for Women in Danger (AFESIP) quoted in Reuters 25-02- 98)*

Human Rights Watch sees villagers selling of daughters, linked to a preference for sons, as a major cause of trafficking (1995: 196).

### **The myth re-told**

From tales of deceived innocence to reports of the poor selling their daughters, contemporary accounts of 'trafficking in women' make use of many of the discursive foundations of the 'white slavery' myth. Similarly, the consequences of the 'anti-trafficking' campaign are proving to be disastrous for women, especially sex workers. Increasingly, countries are restricting women's migration possibilities, and policing and deporting sex workers. These consequences, and the assumptions, fears and anxieties underlying the structure of the 'white slavery/ trafficking in women' myth are examined in the next chapter.

[\[CONTENTS\]](#)

## Moral Panics and Boundary Crises

In this chapter, I examine some of the deeper meanings behind the common themes identified in chapter two. In particular, I will focus on how 'white slavery' and 'trafficking in women' narratives express deeper fears and anxieties about women's sexuality and independence, and racist and nationalist fears of 'the other'. There are other fears and anxieties that are important but beyond the scope of this paper to address, including the link between 'trafficking in women' discourses and a wider repressive moral agenda, particularly around child sexuality; and the intersections between discourses of disease -- syphilis and AIDS -- and 'white slavery' and 'trafficking in women'.

### Behind the myth

The trigger for the 'white slavery' panic was the huge increase in migration between 1860 and the outbreak of the first world war, of which women formed a large part. The campaign against 'white slavery' coincided with the mass migration of thousands of women from Europe and Russia to the America's, South Africa, other parts of Europe, and Asia (Bristow 1982, Guy 1992). This increase was facilitated by the colonialism of the 'Pax Britannia', which made travel from the centre to the periphery a possibility for millions of working class people. It was also facilitated by new technology, especially the steamship and telegraph (Bristow 1977: 177). Another factor contributing to the widespread panic was the calculated use of the emotions generated by images of 'white slaves' to garner support for the repression of prostitution (Walkowitz 1980, Gibson 1986, Corbin 1990, Grittner 1990). Because of the lurid nature and sensationalism of 'white slavery', it gained more support than abolitionism ever could:

*Transformation of an individual concern into a "public problem" and onto the political agenda is never easy, but the ability to tie an issue to symbolically charged language can improve its chances of success (Grittner 1990: 7).*

But behind these material/political realities, other, deeper fears underlay the 'white slavery' panic. Grittner, in his analysis of the American myth of white slavery, describes it in terms of a 'moral panic' as defined by Stan Cohen:

*Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) reverted to. ... sometimes the panic is passed over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself (Cohen cited in Grittner 1990: 64).*

While the discourse on white slavery ostensibly was about the protection of women from (male) violence, to a large extent, the welfare of the 'white slaves' was peripheral to the discourse. A supposed threat to women's safety served as a marker of and metaphor for other fears, among them fear of women's growing independence, the breakdown of the

family, and loss of national identity through the influx of immigrants.

### **Female Migration and Sexual Danger**

As in 'white slavery' campaigns, the 'trigger' for the 'anti-trafficking' campaigns is actual female, and especially prostitute, migration. A 1996 IOM report noted the 'feminisation' of international labour migration (cited in Kempadoo 1998a: 15), and the nearly half of the migrants world-wide are women (Weijers and Lap-Chew 1997: 44). Recent studies indicate that sex workers are increasingly mobile (Skrobanek 1997; Watenabe 1998; Brockett and Murray 1994, Brussa 1998).

What is behind the new wave of migration by women? In contemporary analysis of 'trafficking', the changing economic situation for women in former communist and third world countries is presented as a 'push' factor for 'trafficking', as the west's 'development' policies and the chaotic post-communist economies are seen to leave women with little choice other than to accept malafide offers of employment elsewhere (GSN 1997, HRW 1995).

*Each day, thousands of women and girls are lured into the international sex trade with promises of a better life and a lucrative job abroad. These false promises are especially appealing to the scores of unemployed and underemployed women struggling to survive in impoverished regions and in societies facing post-communist transition (GSN 1997: III).*

Analysed in this way, female migration is seen in exclusively negative terms, a desperate flight from intolerable conditions, with no agency credited to the woman. Weijers contrasts this with views of male migration:

*Whereas men [who migrate] tend to be viewed as active, adventurous, brave and deserving of admiration, for the same behaviour women are pictured as passive, foolish and naive, deserving either rescue or punishment (1998: 12).*

Other, such as GAATW, stress that the increase in female migration, including migration for sex work, is in part due to women seeking increased autonomy and economic independence (Weijers and Lap-Chew 1997: 43). Watenabe, referring to her interviews with Thai sex workers in Japan, writes that 'According to Lak, Sai, and Meow, sex work assured them of freedom from marriage and men' (1998: 120). While economic motives often predominate, for many, sex work is seen as a route to amassing capital or ensuring later economic independence, rather than as a last resort from dire poverty. Anarfi (1998) found that Ghanaian sex workers who migrate to Côte d'Ivoire hoped to gain enough capital to buy houses or set up as market traders. Kempadoo observes that for women in the Caribbean:

*it is not always clear that it is due to abject poverty, or lack of other skills and possibilities that women turn to this particular income-generating activity (1998b: 128).*

Rather, sex work is one of a number of 'sources of livelihood' utilised by women (Kempadoo 1998b: 128).

During the 'white slavery' era, the 'moral panic' was in part provoked by the desire of women for increased independence. Accounts of white slavery served as 'cautionary tales' for women and girls (Guy 1991: 6), with a message of sexual peril as inevitable fate of women who leave the protection of the family. As Guy observes:

*Fears of white slavery in Buenos Aires were directly linked to European disapproval of female migration. Racism, nationalism, and religious bigotry fuelled anxieties. Men could safely travel abroad, but unescorted women faced sexual danger (1991:7).*

This disapproval was linked to insecurities about urbanisation and the appeal of city life to single women seeking independence, and the perceived disintegration of family, exacerbated by rapid processes of industrialisation (Bristow 1982, Grittner 1990). Women's independence was, and is, seen as a threat to the stability of the family and by extension, of the nation. Contemporary efforts to stop trafficking draw on underlying moral values of feminine dependence and ideals of women's role in the family. Sometimes this is made explicit, as in IMADR's report for the UN Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery. Referring to state policies that support the export of female labour, the report says:

*State sponsored export of labor to foreign countries places increasing numbers of women at risk for sexual exploitation. Additional negative aspects... are linked to erosion of the family. Prolonged separation of husbands and wives can lead to divorce. Children left unattended and unguided may lapse into juvenile delinquency or fall victim to traffickers and paedophiles (IMADR 1998: 15).*

More often, however, it is implicit. Most anti-trafficking campaigns target the west's development policies as a cause of 'trafficking', pointing out that women bear the brunt of poverty in the third world/former communist states. They also stress the need to develop more economic opportunities for women in the third world and in former communist countries. NGOs in trafficking 'origin' countries accuse governments of failing to direct development efforts at rural areas, forcing women to migrate to the city or abroad in search of work (India Abroad 06-06-97). But these laudable aims link all too easily into fears about women, and women's sexuality, running wild once away from family supervision.

During the 'white slavery' panic, leaflets and posters at railway stations were produced to warn girls off venturing abroad or to the city (Coote 1910). Today, prevention efforts also concentrate on warning women of the sexual dangers of life away from home and hearth. Numerous videos and pamphlets directed at 'vulnerable' young women are produced by anti-trafficking organisations. Even some feminist organisations support the agenda of convincing women that they are safest at home. La Strada, a Polish anti-trafficking organisation connected with GAATW, recently produced a video in which the horrors awaiting unwitting girls who were lured to the west were shown in graphic detail (La Strada Poland, 1998).

### **Maintaining Boundaries**

The perceived sexual threat to women travelling abroad is linked to women's role as bearers of their families', and the nation's, honour. Grittner analyses the 'moral panic' around white slavery in terms of Kai Ericson's notion of a 'boundary crisis'; in times of cultural stress, a community 'draws a symbolic set of parenthesis' around certain human behaviour, limiting the range of acceptable action (Ericson cited in Grittner 1990: 7). According to Grittner, white slavery was part of a larger boundary crisis in America

involving 'women, sexuality, and the family' (1990: 8).

The notion of 'boundary crisis' is particularly pertinent when looking at the role of women in a community. Drawing her earlier work, Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) analyses the intersections between discourses of nation and gender at four levels: women as biological reproducers of the nation; women's role in cultural construction of nations; gender relations, citizenship and difference; and the gendered character of the military and of wars. It is at the second level, that of women's role in the cultural construction of nations, that a link can be made between Grittner's use of the concept of a 'boundary crisis' and constructions of gender/state relations in discourses of 'white slavery' and 'trafficking in women'. According to Yuval-Davis:

*Women especially are often required to carry this 'burden of representation', as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of collectivities' identity and honour, both personally and collectively... Women, in their 'proper' behaviour, their 'proper' clothing, embody the line which signifies the collectivities' boundaries (1997: 45-46).*

Donna Guy (1991) drawing on the earlier conceptions of gender/state relations in Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989), signals this link as well:

*The central issue that united anti-white slavery campaigns in Europe and Argentina was the way unacceptable female sexual conduct defined the behaviour of the family, the good citizen, and ultimately national or religious honor... Rather than reflecting a completely verifiable reality, white slavery was the construction of a set of discourses about family reform, the role of women's work in modernizing societies, and the gendered construction of politics (1991: 35).*

Today, laws and practices link national honour and female sexuality, particularly in so-called 'countries of origin'. The Third City Mission, campaigning against trafficking of Nigerian and West African women, advocates for a return to the traditional values of pride in female virginity. [\[13\]](#) In Romania, police officers have started targeting suspected sex workers in response to reports of Romanian women being trafficked:

*The women are told that for the protection of Romania's international reputation they will be denied travel documents and that they must surrender their passports or be prepared to be arrested and imprisoned for any number of fabricated offences relating to domestic prostitution. [\[14\]](#)*

As national honour is dependent on women's sexual purity, 'impure' women forfeit the right to protection by the state. Prostitutes have for centuries been subject to laws which give them less rights than even the limited ones granted 'good' women (Walkowitz 1980, Guy 1991, 1992). Emigrant women are expected to carry the nation's honour abroad: when 'impure' women travel, they can be under no illusion of

protection. Not surprisingly, then, a women's 'virtue' is at the heart of state laws and practices against 'trafficking.' In Germany, the penalty for trafficking is reduced when a the woman knew she was going to be a prostitute or is deemed 'not far from being a prostitute.' Other countries, including Columbia, Uganda, Canada, Japan, and Brazil have similar provisions (Weijers and Lap-Chew 1997: 128-130). When cases of trafficking are brought to court, defence lawyers attempt to discredit the victim by focusing on her sexual history:

*The fact that a woman's alleged character and sexual history is relevant in deciding whether or not she can be a victim of trafficking exemplifies the widespread and deep-rooted notion that only "decent", that is "innocent" or "chaste", women can claim protection against violence, rape, or abuse (Weijers 1998 :11).*

The policies of so-called 'trafficking destination countries' reflect another aspect of 'boundaries': the fear of the racial/cultural 'other'. During the white slavery panic, people in the United States felt under threat from waves of immigrants (Grittner: 1990). In Europe, the perceived threat from socialism and the proletariat threatened the cultural hegemony of the middle class (Walkowitz 1980). Today, in western Europe and in the United States, there is a growing feeling that 'the community' is under threat by the importation of new cultural norms through immigration. The worsening economic situation for many countries, and the growing polarity between rich and poor countries, has led inhabitants of rich countries to feel that they are under threat from hordes of 'economic migrants' out to grab what they can.

Yuval-Davis analyses the backlash to 'multiculturalism' in the west in terms of the desire for the re-establishment of a cultural identity perceived to be under threat (1997: 55-64). Grittner (1990) and Stoler (1987) demonstrate that it is precisely in these times of crisis, when community identities are threatened, that the policing of boundaries becomes paramount. These boundaries are laid out along class, race and gender lines, with sexual behaviour as a crucial marker of community inclusion or exclusion. Stoler analyses how concern over protection of white women increased in times of perceived crises of colonial control, and argues that 'sexual control... was... a fundamental class and racial marker implicated in a wider set of relations of power' (1987: 366). [\[15\]](#) During the 'white slavery' era, restricting immigration was seen

as a solution to the problem:

*By blaming foreign villains, native-born Americans affirmed the basic purity of the nation and simplified the solutions to white slavery and vice: immigration should be restricted and undesirable aliens deported* (Grittner 1990:130).

Today's policies differ little in form or intent. A recent paper on European anti-trafficking legislation is entitled, with knowing irony, "Keep your women home" (Weijers 1998). Once again, measures to protect 'innocent' women are being used to counter the supposed threat to society posed by 'bad' women and racial/cultural 'others'. Repressive immigration measures enacted to stop 'trafficking' include limiting the number of visas issued to women from 'origin' countries, increased policing of borders and high penalties for illegal migrants and those who facilitate their entry or stay (Weijers 1998). For example, in Macao, the government has decided to combat 'trafficking' by refusing to issue visas to Russian women (GSN: 7); in Australia, 67 illegal sex workers had been deported between July 1997 and February 1998 (The Australian, 23-02-98).

### **Beyond 'Trafficking'**

In line with their views on sex work, GAATW has been attempting to alter the paradigmatic view of the 'trafficking victim'. As mentioned above, they stress that the majority of women who end up in 'trafficking' situations are, or know they will be sex workers (Weijers and Lap-Chew 1990: 99). They also broaden the focus of 'trafficking in women' to include domestic labour and marriage, and link it to larger issues of labour migration and the lack of informal-sector labour regulation.

The reality of female labour migration for the sex industry and other industries is complex, messy, and resists easy explanations and solutions. It certainly has very little to do with the stereotypical interpretation of 'trafficking in women'. Myth, on the other hand, is persistent precisely because it reduces complex phenomena to simple causes and clear-cut solutions: the victim and the villain.

The myth of trafficking both creates and at the same time limits the discursive space around which these issues can be aired. The term 'trafficking in women' is laden with mythical resonance, and when an organisation like GAATW uses the term, it is not the complexity of women's work and migration that is pictured in the mind of the listener/reader, but the

'erotic-pathetic' (Murray 1998: 60) sex slave. The strategy of continuing to use the term 'trafficking in women' to get publicity and funding, a defence often used by feminist organisations who recognise the inaccuracy and damaging effects of the stereotype, [16] uses the discursive space created by the trafficking myth. However, attempts to combat the myth while using the terminology of trafficking are doomed by the limits to the discursive space imposed by the myth. Each repetition to the effect that 'trafficking in women' is a huge problem serves merely to reinforce the myth that campaigners are also attempting to break down, thus turning this into a futile effort.

This damaging effects of continuing to view female labour migration for the sex industry through the lens of 'trafficking in women' has been recognised by sex worker rights activists (Doezema 1998, Murray 1998, PROS et al 1995), and by some anti-trafficking activists, such as Marjan Weijers of GAATW, as well:

*Moreover, given the history of the use of anti-trafficking measures to police and punish female migrants and female sex workers and to restrict their freedom of movement rather than to protect them from violence and abuse, serious doubts are raised as to appropriateness of the existing anti-trafficking framework (Weijers 1998: 26).*

As a consequence, the search is on to find a new framework to cover human rights and labour abuses in female migration, both within and between countries, for work in the sex industry, as well as other informal labour sectors (Leigh and Weijers 1998).

An essential element in this new framework is the improvement of the legal and social position of sex workers. Sex workers' organisations have long argued that viewing prostitution as work is a necessary first step in protecting the rights of women and men involved in the sex industry. [17] The social stigma and legal restrictions surrounding prostitution mean that women and men in the sex industry are denied the legal protection granted others as citizens and as workers. Many of the problems described by anti-trafficking campaigners, including debt bondage, illegal confinement, coercion in the process of migration, deception and extortion are, in fact, covered by existing international and national labour and human rights standards, yet are not applied in the case of the sex industry (Bindman and Doezeema 1997). The inclusion of women's work

in prostitution and other informal labour sectors in existing labour and human rights mechanisms offers the most in terms of ensuring the rights of those involved in it (Bindman and Doezema 1997, Weijers and Lap-Chew 1997, Haverman 1998, Weijers 1998).

Rather than new laws that target 'guilty' women at the expense of 'innocent' ones, that restrict women's ability to migrate and are based more on states' interests in controlling immigration and women's sexuality, policies towards trafficking must be based on women's interests:

*upon women's rights to control their own body, life, work and specifically, to migrate, to decide for themselves whether or not to work in prostitution and under what circumstances, and to be free from violence and constraint (Weijers and Lap-Chew 1997: 208).*

[\[CONTENTS\]](#)

## Conclusion

The repetition of core elements of the 'white slavery' myth in accounts of 'trafficking in women': innocence deceived, youthful virginity despoiled, the motifs of disease and death, the depraved black/Jewish/foreign trafficker, point in the direction of a new telling of an old myth. 'Trafficking in women' is the re-telling of the myth of 'white slavery' in a modern form, a new 'moral panic' arising in the context of 'boundary crises' involving fears of loss of community identity. In the west, communities feel under threat through immigration and multiculturalism; in the third world, communities worry about the perceived threat to tradition by encroaching western values; while in former communist countries, stress is caused by the difficult transition from communism to market economies. All over the world, communities are caught up in identity crises in the face of displacement, mass migration and globalisation. The myth of 'trafficking in women' is one manifestation of attempts to re-establish community identity, in which race, sexuality and women's autonomy are used as markers and metaphors of crucial boundaries. Thus, while incidents reported in accounts of 'trafficking' may be 'true', they may be at the same time mythical, to the extent that the events are (re)constructed in such a way as to conform to the framework established by the myth.

In the face of the often horrific reports of violence that occur when women migrate for work in the sex industry, it may seem unaffordable luxury to step outside and examine 'trafficking in women' as a discourse, rather than to campaign for policies to stop it. Yet the consequences of failing to recognise the fears and anxieties that underpin the myth of 'trafficking' are severe. One of the most damaging effects of the myth is the 'spin' it puts on the experiences of women who migrate for work in the sex industry. Migration for the sex industry is, for some third world/non-western women, a way of expanding life choices and livelihood strategies. Insisting on viewing these women as victims means denying that they can have agency in their own lives. To the myth of the white slave's innocence has been added the 'third world difference' (Mohanty 1988: 22) of supposed ignorance, faithfulness to tradition, and sexual backwardness.

The myth of 'white slavery'/'trafficking in women' is ostensibly about protecting women, yet the underlying moral concerns are with controlling them. Policies adopted to stop 'trafficking'

that are based on the mythical notion of the 'coerced innocent' and the 'evil foreign trafficker' serve to reinforce the construction of state/gender relations that determine that women's purity and dependence are essential to family well being and national honour. Once it is recognised that debt-bondage and other slavery-like practices, when they occur, are actually problems for women who are already sex workers or who plan to be, it is impossible to get around the fact that these are abuses of sex workers' rights. However, this is unpalatable to many in anti-trafficking campaigns and in governments: it is one thing to save 'innocent victims of trafficking'; quite another to recognise that 'guilty' sex workers deserve respect for their rights as workers, as women, and as migrants.

Women who migrate for the sex industry can only be freed from violations of their human rights if they are first freed of their mythical constraints. They must no longer be used as the canvas upon which societies' fears and anxieties are projected; be defined no longer as innocent, sexless, 'non-adults' or as the oppressed sex of backward countries; but as agents endowed with the ability to think, to act and to resist.

[\[CONTENTS\]](#)

## Abbreviations

**CATW** - Coalition Against Trafficking in Women

**CD Acts** - Contagious Diseases Acts

**COIN** - Centro de Orientacion Integral

**GAATW** - Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women

**GSN** - Global Survival Network

**HRW** - Human Rights Watch

**IMADR** - International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism

**IOM** - International Organization for Migration

**NIS** - Newly Independent States

**NVA** - National Vigilance Association

**SAP** - Structural Adjustment Programme

[\[CONTENTS\]](#)

## Endnotes

1. Some beginning analyses have been made, see my own 1995, 1998; Kempadoo 1998; Murray 1998. [\[back\]](#)
2. Men were not considered victims of the 'white slave trade,' though the U.S. Immigration Commission Report of 1914 noted that young men were being imported from Europe for 'unnatural practices.' This was a reference to the supposed European perversion of homosexuality and the threat of its importation to the U.S. (Grittner 1990; 1991). In today's discourse on 'trafficking in women,' very little mention is made of men being trafficked. Campaigns that focus specifically on child prostitution, in contrast, often highlight the presence of boys, reflecting an anti-gay bias. [\[back\]](#)
3. Grittner defines the American myth of white slavery as 'the enslavement of white women or girls by means of coercion, tricks or drugs by a non-white or non-Anglo-Saxon man for purposes of sexual exploitation' (1990: 5) My definition differs slightly; while the non-white, non-Anglo-Saxon character of the white slaver was often a feature of white slavery reports, it was not always so, particularly in Europe, where the 'otherness' of the white slaver was also established by making him a 'foreigner' or from a different class than that of the reformer. I have also avoided the use of the term 'sexual exploitation' as it is both ambiguous and introduces a concept with no currency at the time of the panic. [\[back\]](#)
4. Rosen (1982) takes a rather contradictory position -- though she concludes that the actual number of cases of white slavery were very few, she also devotes an entire chapter to establishing that white slavery existed, quoting many of the sources discredited by other historians such as Connelly (1980) and Grittner (1990). [\[back\]](#)
5. The International Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Trade, 1904, and the International

Convention for the Suppression of the White Slave Trade 1910. [\[back\]](#)

6. See Walkowitz (1980) for an in-depth analyses of feminism and the repeal of the CD Acts. [\[back\]](#)
7. Some American social purity groups drew attention to the presence of Chinese women in California brothels, but this merely served to reinforce the notion of the depraved habits of Chinese men, who were the supposed 'slavers.' (Grittner 1990). [\[back\]](#)
8. Bristow (1982) details the anti-Semitism of the anti white-slavery campaign. [\[back\]](#)
9. Publicity flyer for the documentary 'Trafficking Cinderella,' dir. Mira Niagolova, distributed at the Transnational Training Seminar on Trafficking in Women, June 20 - 24, Budapest; italics added. [\[back\]](#)
10. Presented at the Transnational Training Seminar on Trafficking in Women, June 20 - 24, 1998 Budapest. [\[back\]](#)
11. For documentation of the sex workers rights movement, see P. Alexander and F. Delacoste (eds.) 1987, *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, Pittsburg, PA; Cleiss Press; G. Pheterson, 1989 (ed.), *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, Seattle, WA; Seal Press; W. Chapkis, 1997, *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor*, New York: Routledge; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998. [\[back\]](#)
12. See footnote 9. [\[back\]](#)
13. Third City Mission, personal correspondence (1998). [\[back\]](#)
14. Salomon Alapitvany Foundation, personal correspondence (1998). [\[back\]](#)
15. Stoler (1987) and Yuval-Davis (1997) analyse the myth of the rape of white women by black men, a myth also archtypical in the U.S. (see Grittner 1990), as an example of a sexual/racial demonisation of the 'other.'

Like 'white slavery' and 'trafficking,' the myth of black men raping white women was based on a nearly non-existent number of cases, and served the same function of boundary marking. [\[back\]](#)

16. In discussions at two recent conferences on 'trafficking in women': The European NGO Conference on Trafficking in Women, Noordwijkerhout, 5 - 7 April 1997 and Budapest (note 10). [\[back\]](#)

17. See note 11.

[\[CONTENTS\]](#)

# Bibliography

## PRIMARY SOURCES

### Internet sources

Captive Daughters Web site: [www.captive.org](http://www.captive.org)

CATW Website:

[www.uri.edu/artci/wms/hughs/catw](http://www.uri.edu/artci/wms/hughs/catw)

GAATW Website: [www.inet.co.th/org/gaatw](http://www.inet.co.th/org/gaatw)

### News services

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newsline

Reuters ([www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com))

### Newsletters, statements and proposals

Captive Daughters, 1998. Statement at GABRIELA Speakout, Columbia University, March 8, 1998, at [www.captive.org](http://www.captive.org)

Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), Philosophy of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, at [www.uri.edu/artci/wms/hughs/catw](http://www.uri.edu/artci/wms/hughs/catw).

Coalition Bulletin

GAATW Bulletin

GAATW, 1994. "A proposal to replace the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others," Utrecht: GAATW

Leigh, C. and Weijers, M., "Statement on Trafficking, Stigmatisation and Strategies for Alliances," prepared for the Transnational Training Seminar on Trafficking in Women, June 20 - 24, 1998, Budapest.

Prostitutes Rights Organisation for Sex Workers (PROS), et al, 1995, "Alleged Trafficking of Asian Sex Workers in Australia," Sydney: PROS et al, discussion paper for Beijing.

Seraphini, M., Captive Daughters Pioneer Columnist, 1998, "Why Not Call it Sexual Slavery," at

[www.captive.org](http://www.captive.org).

Wellstone P., and Feinstein D., U.S. Senators, 1998.

Letter to Senate colleagues asking support for legislation against trafficking in women, March 5, 1998.

### Newspapers and Periodicals

The Australian

The Christian Science Monitor  
India Abroad  
Kathmandu Post  
New York Times  
People's Review  
Toronto Star  
Toronto Sun

## **Video**

La Strada Poland, 1998. *Your Right to Dream, Your Right to Know*, Warsaw: La Strada Poland

## **SECONDARY SOURCES**

### **Published before 1917**

Billington-Grieg, T., 1913. "The Truth about White Slavery," *English Review*, June 1913 pp. 435 - 446.  
Coote, W.A., 1916. *A Romance of Philanthropy*, London: The National Vigilance Association.  
Coote, W.A., 1910. *A Vision and Its Fulfilment*, London: The National Vigilance Association.  
Malvery, O. and Willis, W.N. , 1912. *The White Slave Market*, London: Stanley Paul and Co.  
The National Vigilance Association, 1910. *The White Slave Traffic*, London: M.A.P.

### **Published After 1917**

Anarfi, J.K., 1998. "Ghanaian Women and Prostitution in Côte d'Ivoire," in K. Kempadoo and J. Doezema (eds.), *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, London: Routledge.  
Barry, K., 1995. *The Prostitution of Sexuality: The Global Exploitation of Women*, New York: New York University Press.  
Barry, K., 1979. *Female Sexual Slavery*, New York: Avon.  
Bindman, J. and Doezema, J., 1997. *Redefining Prostitution as Sex Work on the International Agenda*, London: Anti-Slavery International and the Network of Sex Work Projects  
Brockett, L. and Murray, A., 1994. "Thai Sex Workers in Sydney," in *Sex Work and Sex Workers in Australia*, R. Perkins et al (eds.) Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.  
Bristow, E.J., 1982. *Prostitution and Prejudice: The*

Jewish Fight against White Slavery 1870 - 1939, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Bristow, E.J., 1977. *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan; Rowman and Littlefield

Brussa, L., 1998. "The TAMPEP Project in Western Europe," in K. Kempadoo and J. Doezema (eds.), *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, New York and London: Routledge.

Centro de Orientacion Intergral (COIN), 1994. *La Industria del Sexo por Dentro*, Santo Domingo: COIN

Connelly, M.T., 1980. *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era*, Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.

Corbin, A., 1990. *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, trans. Alan Sheridan

Doezema, J., 1998. "Forced to Choose: Beyond the Voluntary v. Forced Prostitution Dichotomy," in K. Kempadoo and J. Doezema (eds.), *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, New York and London: Routledge.

Doezema, J., 1995. "Choice in Prostitution," in *Conference Book: Changing Faces of Prostitution*, Helsinki 3 - 5 May, 1995. Helsinki: Unioni, The League of Finnish Feminists.

Fisher, T., 1997. *Prostitution and the Victorians*, New York: St. Martins Press.

Gibson, M., 1986. *Prostitution and the State in Italy, 1860 - 1915*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Global Survival Network (GSN), 1997. *Crime and Servitude*, Washington, D.C.: GSN.

Grittner, F. K., 1990. *White Slavery: Myth, Ideology and American Law*, New York and London: Garland.

Guy, D.J., 1992. "'White Slavery,' Citizenship and Nationality in Argentina," in A. Parker, et al (eds.), *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, London: Routledge.

Guy, D.J., 1991. *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family and Nation in Argentina*, Lincoln, Nebraska and London: University of Nebraska Press.

Haveman, R., 1998. *Voorwaarden voor Strafbarestelling van Vrouwenhandel*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Utrecht, Utrecht: Gouda Quint.

Human Rights Watch, 1995. Human Rights Watch Global Report on Women's Human Rights, New York: Human Rights Watch.

International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), 1998.

Strengthening the International Regime to Eliminate the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, Tokyo: IMADR.

Kempadoo, K., 1998. "Introduction: Globalising Sex Workers' Rights," in K. Kempadoo and J. Doezema (eds.), *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, New York and London: Routledge.

Kempadoo, K., 1998. "The Migrant Tightrope: Experiences from the Caribbean," in K. Kempadoo and J. Doezema (eds.), *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, New York and London: Routledge.

Matheson, A., 1994. "Trafficking in Asian Sex Workers," *Green Left Weekly*, no. 26 pp. 1 - 6.

Mirkenson, J., 1994. "Red Light, Green Light: The Global Trafficking of Women," *Breakthrough*, Spring 1994 at [www.captive.org](http://www.captive.org).

Mohanty, C., 1988. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review*, 30: 3 - 8.

Murray, A., 1998. "Debt Bondage and Trafficking: Don't Believe the Hype," in K. Kempadoo and J. Doezema (eds.), *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, New York and London: Routledge.

Rosen, R., 1982. *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900 - 1918*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.

Skrobanek, S. et al, 1997. *The Traffic in Women: Human Realities of the International Sex Trade*, London: Zed

Stoler, A. L., 1989. "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures," *American Ethnologist*, 16:4 pp. 634 - 660.

UNICEF, 1995. *Trafficking of Women and Children in Myanmar: A Situation Analysis*, New York: UNICEF

Walkowitz, J., 1980. *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Watenabe, S., 1998. "From Thailand to Japan: Migrant Sex Workers As Autonomous Subjects," in K. Kempadoo

and J. Doezema (eds.), *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, New York and London: Routledge.

Weijers, M., 1998. "Keep Your Women Home: European Policies on Trafficking in Women," unpublished manuscript

Weijers, M. and Lap-Chew L., 1997. "Trafficking in Women, Forced Labour and Slavery-Like Practices" in *Marriage, Domestic Labour and Prostitution*, Utrecht and Bangkok: The Foundation Against Trafficking in Women (STV)/The Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW)

Yuval-Davis, N., 1997. *Gender and Nation*, London: Sage Publications.

Yuval - Davis, N., and Anthias, F., 1989. *Woman-Nation-State*, London: Macmillan