

## Sex trafficking, captivity, and narrative: constructing victimhood with the goal of salvation

Claudia Cojocaru

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2015

In the past 15 years, sex trafficking has gained tremendous media exposure and triggered a global abolitionist movement directed by an unlikely coalition of American Evangelical Christians and Radical Feminists (Bernstein 2007, 2010). One of the unfortunate consequences of this attention is that labor migration for sexual commerce is increasingly depicted as sex trafficking and women's unregulated movement across borders is interpreted as sexual and economic exploitation, human trafficking, and even criminal conduct by mainstream media and governmental institutions. The human trafficking definitions employed by the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children and its counterpart issued by the United States Congress, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, support a politically conservative agenda on migration and trafficking in human beings, with patriarchal emphasis placed on women and children. This has enabled the revival of anti-prostitution movements and the resurrection of the white slavery myth, as Doezema (1999) explains in her work on gender issues and human trafficking. Scholars like Weitzer (2006, 2007) have argued that the anti-sex trafficking movement is an anti-sex feminist moral crusade. Others, like Elizabeth Bernstein, have identified alliances forged by the feminist faction analyzed by Weitzer (2011) with Evangelical Christian organizations (Bernstein 2010) and argued that they seek to maintain privileges and reinforce class and social status boundaries.

---

C. Cojocaru (✉)  
New York, NY, USA  
e-mail: claudia.cojocaru@jjay.cuny.edu

These actors have organized themselves in a coalition of Non-Governmental Organizations<sup>1</sup> and fashioned a social purity movement veiled as anti-human trafficking or anti-modern day slavery activism that has received generous funding from the United States government. The attention generated by their international search for sex trafficking victims has brought these NGOs and their members to the center stage of a spectacle, in which female misery and degradation are the main voyeuristic attractions (Andrijasevic 2007). This misery and degradation has been marketed in policy circles through sensationalist images of poverty, coercion, violence and control, rape, and young third world prostitutes forced by ruthless criminals into selling themselves to terrible, immoral, and deviant men.

To efficiently deliver their message, the abolitionist movement makes use of marketing strategies that employ both legitimate news media and infotainment on television and the internet, as well as memoirs and books claiming to tell the true story of victims of brothels and pimps. They have also generated a scholarly policy literature that legitimates their circus by employing standards of evidence and analysis that are far below the, often already low, conventional scholarly standard (Weitzer 2011). Through these tactics, the abolitionists promote the image of the helpless and witless, therefore pure and deserving, victim awaiting salvation. The raw materials for this circus of salvation are the co-opted survivors of forced sex work and domestic labor, as well as converted apostate former prostitutes (sex workers) who serve their arbiters, spreading the word through just-so life stories. In doing so, they have created a new genre of “modern day slavery” that shares and recycles the narrative structure of seventeenth century Indian (Native American) and nineteenth century slave testimonials that fascinated and titillated the public with images of degradation, rape, suffering, and prurient violence and sexual misconduct.

To be one of the faces of the anti-human trafficking movement, a survivor must go through a *conversion experience* that has much in common with the Quaker or Puritan conversion rituals of the seventeenth and eighteenth century New England colonies, where “Indian captivity narratives” involved testimonials of rescue by white settler women who had been taken by indigenous men. These narratives, which were the bestsellers of their day and often had undue influence on varied policies governing the relations between settlers and natives, glossed over the dangers of the sexualized other and HIS unsuitability for patriarchal ownership in a similar fashion to the dark reality happening in our backyard that is sex trafficking. They also reaffirmed and reinstated the ownership of feminine bodies by appropriate males and the religious state.

These conversion testimonials were transcribed and published as narratives (Zafar 1991–1992; Fitzpatrick 1991), which served not only as inspiration and encouragement for the less inclined to deliver a public speech about conversion, but also as entertainment or cautionary reading. However, to make the most impact and serve its salvation role, the conversation narrative had to be performed in front of church members, who were already elected for divine grace and on whose

<sup>1</sup> Non-Governmental Organizations are also referred to in this paper as NGOs and are in relation to any of the following: anti-human trafficking movement, anti-sex trafficking movement, modern day slavery abolitionist movement, or abolitionist movement.

acceptance or denial of the narrative individual election and salvation depended. This colonial process of affirming the powers of governance of male church elders over indigenous men and settler women has remarkably salient parallels with the contemporary anti-trafficking/anti-prostitution abolitionist movement, which has also selected special “ambassadors” from women who had experience within the informal industries of sex commerce or domestic work to publicly preach their stories of exploitation, survival, rescue, and salvation.

I do not doubt the veracity of many of the personal stories of suffering and survival that have been promoted by this rescue industry or that human trafficking is a genuine problem which needs to be addressed. However, my own experiences in the field, first as a teenage girl facing forced sex work in my home country, Romania, later in the context of migration to Japan in the late 1990s as a migrant, then as a participant observer in semi-voluntary sex work in Japan for 8 years, between 2000 and 2008, and finally, now as a scholarly researcher raises questions about the ways in which the descriptions advanced by this abolitionist movement misinterpret the intersection of sex work and migration and may produce policy discourses and institutions that harm, rather than benefit those who have survived the horrible ordeals that have, since the 1990s, come to be called human sex trafficking.

My own experiences, especially those in my teenage years that involved violence and forced sex work are consistent with these well-known public accounts of human trafficking for sexual exploitation. They present a commonly observed pattern associated with PTSD and predictable reactions to extended physical and psychological trauma, sexual violence and fear. These circumstances facilitated my subsequent 8 years of interactional contact with what can be defined as human trafficking and sex work industries in Japan, producing an extensive collection of real-life field work data. Inspired by the work of anthropologist Waterson (2005), I came to view my own experiences in Japan as both participant observation and “intimate ethnography” and use it in this essay and other scholarship that I am developing to make observations about the problems with the global abolitionist movement and governmental and other institutional responses to human trafficking.

The circus trope seemed appropriate in light of my own experience with the *rescue industry* (Agustín 2007). I conjured this allegory to help me understand the underlying motivations of the abolitionists’ usage of sexually explicit, violent, and traumatic imagery in their campaigns through the lens of being sexually objectified and exploited myself while giving a guest lecture at New York University Law School in February of 2014. The incident inspired this report from the field, in which I seek to evaluate the “survivor narrative” as well as the awareness raising methodology employed by these NGOs to obtain funds through reinforcing and promoting the myth of the perfect victim. This perfect victim is compelling in a policy environment that valorizes innocence and fetishizes the titillating spectacle of the sexually objectified and battered vaginas of women who cannot think, act, or make decisions for themselves. The perfect puppet-like targets of patriarchy—the exchange of freedom for protection—the rescue/salvation performance mirrors the trope of human trafficking, but involves a legitimate owner of the woman, in the form of the rescuer, rather than one who is polluted by the dark reality of sex work.

When I was asked to audition for this role in front of a class of students at the elite NYU School of Law, I had no idea what I was agreeing to. I imagined myself giving a lecture about my *experiences* living and working with sex workers in Japan, the impact that socio-political global governance institutions had on our lives, the cultural and social environment within which we labored, and the personal circumstances of engaging with clients, third parties, and the wider society... I guess I imagined that they wanted a more authentic version of Agustín (2007) or Parrenas (2011); somebody who had studied trafficking, but had the additional credentials of actually having been trafficked. Little did I know that I was going to an audition for the role of global victim/poster girl for a circus of salvation.

One of the anti-trafficking saviors, whom I met, was my first contact with the modern day slave narrative concept. I explained why I was interested in human trafficking—my own victimization—a correspondence developed and I found myself introduced to other members of the abolitionist movement. I mentioned to these activists my concerns with how the typical representations of the survivors of trafficking do not seem to relate with my own experiences, not just as a trafficked individual, but also as an advocate. Instead of answers, the focus was always redirected to my own sexual exploitation, abuse, and “enslavement” in the Japanese sex industry, but I still assumed that we all sought the same outcome—to help those in need.

When anti-trafficking savior, number two sent me an email proposing I speak to students at NYU Law School, I saw it as an opportunity to present my own version of human trafficking narratives collected from women I worked with and speak about my *experience* with sex workers in Japan. I met with number two on the day of the lecture at a little Italian eatery about a block away from NYU Law School. I was extremely nervous, having never before presented my work in public. I told him (the friendly abolitionist) about what I wanted to talk about, but he insisted to know some of the most gruesome details of my personal experience. As I believed these questions were meant to help me process some of the most difficult aspects of my past victimization, I reluctantly volunteered extremely personal information I did not share with anyone before. After all, Dr. Judith Herman’s book “*Trauma and Recovery*” (Herman 1997) had a chapter in which the sharing of tragic incidents and traumatizing events was an essential step on the path to recovery (p. 207). The book was recommended to me by anti-trafficking savior number one who pointed out that most studies on sex trafficking trauma were derived from data on torture and imprisonment. Based on this information, I concluded that sex trafficking produced a special type of trauma, different than anything else, but my extensive personal experience and coursework in Psychology (my major) disputed such claim and supported the PTSD diagnosis criteria most trauma survivors meet.

A few hours later, the Law Professor, whose class I was going to guest lecture in, appeared and she proceeded to ask me questions related to human trafficking, selectively pressing on for details that would support the current sex trafficking victimhood discourse. She was not interested in my interpretation or my expertise, and entirely ignored my insistence that labor migration policies and cultural differences are central to understanding the contradictions between the experiences of victimized women and the anti-trafficking discourse. It seems almost painfully

naïve on my part now, but I was very idealistic and a committed advocate for the rights of the women with whom I had shared the experience of sex trafficking.

I believed that my personal experience was central to my understanding and what I might say that day, but I was completely unprepared for the relentless emphasis on the intimate and sometimes almost trivial details of the sexual violence I had experienced. Even during the conversation before the lecture, every time I tried to bring the conversation to larger theoretical and policy oriented issues that I believe are at the heart of the contradictory and often confusing reality of human trafficking or the experiences of the women whose lives I had documented for 8 years in the field in Japan, I was redirected to the sexual and violent details of my personal exploitation. I felt like I was covertly but firmly directed to retrieve my traumatic memories, which generated such graphic and suggestive imagery that even I became uncomfortable with the process, and questioned whether it was safe or the responsible thing to do.

I was assured that I was in good hands and I could stop anytime I wanted to. After the interrogation performed by the law professor, and with the approval of my new abolitionist friend, who held and stroked my hand the whole time, she concluded I was real enough for her class and we proceeded to begin the speaking session.

When we entered the classroom, students were already seated and waiting. I started talking about Japan and the people's attitudes to sex workers and migrant laborers, but I was swiftly redirected to the personal aspects of victimization they were there for. I became aware of how their expertly redacted questions were compelling me to abandon the narrative I wanted to communicate, and I began to tell them what they wanted to hear, the story of sexual exploitation, the instances of physical violence and fear. They wanted the powerlessness, the shocking details, the humiliation, the horror and the sexual domination, all common themes in the survivor narratives. They wanted a Freak Show. It was easy, because this narrative is a well-trodden path that almost anybody can walk down—regardless of whether what they are talking is the truth, the near truth, or complete fabrication. My suspicion is that all such varieties are present in the circus of salvation—where performativity, rather than experience, is what is rewarded.

I recall that while I was talking to these people, they were staring at me like I was one of the women in Amsterdam's red light district windows, the Freak; they wanted to know my every sordid detail that would validate their preconceptions of the sex trafficking victim. I recounted the whole nasty story in all its gory details from how I was deceived into accepting a bar server job in a Romanian hotel as a 17 year old only to be purchased by a pimp who demanded I serve clients sexually to how I escaped this pimp by accepting a job offer in Japan where I found myself in a hostess bar in Tokyo with a mama-san who demanded that I provide sex to her clients and had her staff punish me in front of the other girls to remind them of how disobedience was dealt with.

Apart from the thematic elements that assured the audience of my survivor's validity and that I met the criteria for modern day slave narrative, these violent and degrading testimonies were what they wanted to hear and know about, entirely to the exclusion of any serious analysis or discussion of what issues actually shape and maintain such international sex work networks Why were my own individual

circumstances central to the education of lawyers? Neither the law professor, nor anti-trafficking savior number one and two could say.

It seemed that I was engaging a room filled with those who were already sure they knew what they knew and were simply reaffirming their position in the old puritan cosmology as pre-destined and saved. Their prurient fascination with my degradation and humiliation was central to this narrative of salvation and therefore too powerful to override and set them back to objectivity. I remember the silence, the students were barely breathing, and all I was thinking was that I wanted to get out of there. I had to imagine I was alone, and avoided looking anyone in the eye-dissociation tactics I recognized, as I have used them many times during high-risk and traumatic situations. I did not want to see what was reflected there, because it was not compassion or even pity. I believe it was excitement and captivation. I was the miserable wretched whore, whose success at making it out, trying to get an education and move on was an instantiation of their status as saved. In such an arena, even the most rescued victim will never be able to shed that cloak of victim completely and therefore is fit into the proper place: a victim whose value lies in how well she can serve the movement.

The only way I could maintain some sense of control over my narrative was by withholding some of the narrative. Regardless of what the spectators might have thought of my narratives, anti-trafficking savior number two and his friend the female law professor were experts in the conversion narrative and clearly could feel that I was not entirely fitting within the narrative. My narrative provided evidence of agency, and I did not once solicit salvation, nor assumed that I needed any. I made my own choices, and I voiced my concerns about the artificiality of the evidence employed in awareness raising campaigns. I was not “saved.”

History provides us with narratives about women’s captivity, slavery, resilience, and survival, relating to the agency and determination of women in hostile environments, and with instances of these narratives being appropriated and used for various political, economic, or religious agendas. From Mary Rowlandson’s (Derounian-Stodola 1998) Indian captivity narrative used by Puritan minister Increase Mathers and his son, Cotton, to remind the settlers of their Covenant with God, to antebellum slave narratives, where slave woman Jacobs (1861) makes full use of agency when she denies her master sex and decides to become pregnant by another white man, and to eventually run away to escape the sexual advances of her brutal and despotic master. In the current sex trafficking discourse, there is a tendency to associate sex trafficking and some forms of forced and bonded labor with chattel slavery, and the anti-trafficking activism with pre-civil war abolitionism, while using the methodology employed by William Stead in his “Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon” journalistic expose in 1885 London, which, incidentally, is also the first time chattel slavery is conflated with prostitution (Soderlund 2013).

My narrative did provide a group of people with enough evidence that sex trafficking exists, but does anybody doubt that at this point? Do we really need more testimonies to the fact that there is suffering in outrageous quantities and to unthinkable degrees scattered across this planet? Do such testimonies help the victims? Do they help students? They do help anti-trafficking activists and NGOs.

While all the things I testified to really happened, the narrative as a whole felt dishonest in its simplicity, prurience, and abnegation of the complexities that I, and the women I knew, faced in making decisions. This is the problem with such conversion narratives: They obscure more than they reveal, reaffirm and reproduce the structures of inequality that are at the core of the problem of migrants without control over their lives and bodies, and valorize innocence and its performance over truth, which thus hinder understanding and open up further possibilities for abuse.

In the myriad of survivor narratives published by this movement, a few stand out as particularly misguided, questionable, and, in some instances, plain fraudulent. For instance, Minh Dang's story of exploitation, featured in a MSNBC documentary from 2010, *Sex Slaves in America*<sup>2</sup> (which, surprisingly, proves difficult to find even on the network's website), is promoted tirelessly by the abolitionist movement as one of the most disturbing examples of commercial sexual exploitation of children, despite its wild inconsistencies. Reminiscent of the story of how young Eliza Armstrong, who was purchased by William Stead for five pounds, was sold by her parents and ended up as the "face" of the "Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon"; Minh Dang was not purchased by an unscrupulous journalist, but instead claims that she was sexually exploited by her own parents, who allegedly sold her to numerous patrons interested in sex with a very young girl.

The claims are unverifiable, and the story is, at best, questionable—a student with a straight A average and a valued place on a varsity soccer team earned over two million dollars between the age of 10 and 18 when she matriculated at the University of California at Berkeley.<sup>3</sup> Her parents have not been formally charged by law enforcement, nor has she pressed charges against them<sup>4</sup> or the numerous patrons who have allegedly bought her for sex; nor have other witnesses, anonymous or not, voiced support for the narrative. As a former forced sex worker myself, I understand the complexities in the process of recovery and I can relate to other stories of survival, but Dang's version is closer to Stead's type of sensationalist expose than to a sex-trafficked individual's account. These narratives have more impact if associated with the endorsement of a celebrity, as it has become common in human rights movements to employ musicians and actors to gain visibility for a certain cause. Not surprisingly, until recently, Minh Dang was working with a celebrity endorser of anti-human trafficking abolitionist movement, Jada Pinkett Smith (Haynes 2014) whose expertise on sex trafficking is nonexistent and whose involvement with this moral crusade seems to be more of a PR stunt than genuine concern.

I am inclined to believe that there is a core of parental abuse somewhere in Minh Dang's narrative. However, what is theoretically and ethically important in this case is not the particular truth or falsity of the particulars, but rather that her experiences of abuse have been shaped to fit the sensationalistic mold of anti-sex trafficking

<sup>2</sup> "Sex Slaves in America! MSNBC." Minh's Story" (2010) <http://www.msnbc.com/documentaries/watch/sex-slaves-in-america->.

<sup>3</sup> Idem 2.

<sup>4</sup> Idem 2.

rhetoric. All the narratives flatten into the same story, the same woman, the same miserable whore in need of upraising, rescue, and salvation.

For some like Dang, the sex trafficking narrative is an extended lecture circuit of activism and paid speaking events. However, for others, like Somaly Mam and Rachel Lloyd, who are a bit older and have hustled in public for longer, the process of testimony has brought them their own congregations.

In *Girls Like Us* (Lloyd 2011), Rachel Lloyd narrates her own experience as an underage sex worker and survivor of sexual exploitation by pimps. Lloyd has become her own ringmaster, as the founder of GEMS, a New York-based abolitionist NGO working with adolescents who experienced sexual exploitation. Her devotion to her girls at GEMS is exemplary, but her commitment to flattening out the narratives of real life into a denied agency, her sex work abolitionist discourse, and quest for continued funding for her organization suggests some of the same problems with putting performance ahead of truth and obscuring the deep problems with gender inequalities, migration and labor law, and other structural forces that are hidden behind the pimp boogeyman trope.

A final example is the notable fraud of Somaly Mam, whose memoir *The Road of Lost Innocence* (Mam 2009), was, until her international disgrace, an exemplary modern sex slave narrative. Her fabrications of a life as sex slave and claims made at the United Nations that eight of the Cambodian sex slaves she rescued were shot dead by the Cambodian army have been thoroughly discredited. Apart from these statements, Mam's narrative tells about her life as a 10 years old in the captivity of a man she called "grandfather" whose abuses she had to endure as a child in slavery. Later on, when she becomes older, Mam works as a prostitute in Phnom Penh and meets her husband, a French national working for Medicines Sans Frontieres. For anyone who is familiar with the life and strategies of sex workers, Somaly's story is nothing but a version of the many dramatic tales sex workers have ready for gullible clients. For an example of this see Hoang (2014).

In my own life as a sex worker, I remember telling clients in broken Japanese that I had just been diagnosed with a deadly form of cancer to avoid sex. Such fabrications were often rewarded with money and no expectation of providing sexual services. As instructed by older co-workers and friends, from whose rich and profitable repertoire of excuses and tales of dramatic life changes I borrowed, I was telling various lies to every client to avoid sexual activity of any kind. This is the nature of many businesses: Telling such fabrications is not exclusive to sex work, and Mam's narrative suggests she was well versed in these techniques, at least as well as her fellow sex workers in the brothel, and made use of it as much as she could. She was eventually exposed as a fraud after years of peddling the story, and subsequently resigned from her position at the Somaly Mam Foundation (*The Holy Saint (and Sinner) of Sex Trafficking* 2014). The foundation closed their operations in 2014 as a result of the scandal Somaly Mam's lies ignited.

When all of this occurred, I was just beginning to engage the rescue industry and remember asking one of the anti-trafficking saviors about Somaly Mam's deceitful practices, which included fabricated survivor narratives of sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation filmed and presented as true stories. His response was that perhaps it was necessary for her to do what she did to be able to help those

who needed her. As stunningly outrageous as it is, the comment seems to be representative of how the rescue industry justifies its methods to gain attention to their mission and fund their crusade. Fraud, lies and contorted facts appear to be the norm in this modern day slavery abolitionist movement circus (Agustín 2007; Weitzer 2011). Far from being the noble initiative this Circus of Salvation presents itself to be, the reality points to a broken trail of misguided attempts to pass as a legitimate and indispensable social movement.

The locus of attention is a fabricated character, the ultimate victim archetype, contorted out of numerous racial, moral and classist fears and repressed sexual fantasies. Roger Lancaster, in *Sex Panic and the Punitive State* defines the creation process of such victim typology as “condensation” and is “the production of amalgamated, blurred or composite figure in dreamwork, or symptom of a disturbance”, “a complex entity, part real, part imagined”(p. 25). This misguided “condensation” may have induced victim testimony to lose its purpose of eliciting attention to bring about true social change from caring for others. It has instead become a grotesque spectacle where the members of the public can feel they do their part by expressing their indignation after secretly enjoying the sexual rush the imagery of naked and bruised sex slave bodies incite in their minds. This mass dissociation from reality and unconditional acceptance of these overly sexualized and moralizing stories has allowed actors in this anti-sex trafficking moral crusade to appropriate and misrepresent these narratives for purposes that grossly overlook and neglect the very populations they are meant to serve. This is the type of deceit that we expect from traffickers not rights advocates.

Extrapolating on the examples I provided above, the major figures running the modern day abolitionist movement have grown accustomed to the victim industry (Best 1997) rewards, such as lucrative book contracts, leadership positions in prestigious humanitarian and political organizations, recognition and respect from peers in academia, and have great incentive to maintain the symbiotic relationship between the abolitionist movement and the victim whose story and imagery is exploited during the great spectacle in the Circus of Salvation. Just like a trained animal in the circus, and the Puritan women, heroines of the Indian captivity narratives in seventeenth century New England, the “survivor of modern day slavery”, whose purpose is to bestow a human face to the movement, returns to her cage quietly after the show and does not present with any other humanizing conditions that would disrupt the simulation (Baudrillard 1994) of reality this movement validates.

Apart from the above mentioned financial rewards bestowed generously on these abolitionist organizations by the United States Federal Government, the religious based organizations and their radical feminist allies organized in a quasi-religious movement, such strategies have increased the political influence of these conservative forces at the local level-globally. It is post-cold war governance, providing leverage to bully and coerce governments they deem non-compliant with their plans of policing and controlling sexual behavior, non-procreative sex and migration for labor.

Finally, there is the old question of imperialism. The Global Slavery Index (Walk Free Foundation 2013) provides a case in point. It uses the same old and tired

statistics (McGaha and Evans 2009) in its wild claims, as the carceral feminists (Bernstein 2007, 2010) and their Evangelical Christian allies NGOs, and decorates it cleverly with pseudo-scholarly rhetoric, or, as Loic Wacquant illustrates it—the “academicization” of neoliberal creed: “It is through the agency of exchanges, interventions and publications of an academic character, real or simulated, that intellectual “smugglers” (*passseurs*) reformulate these categories in a sort of *political pidgin*, sufficiently concrete to “hook” “state decision makers”, and journalists anxious to “stick close to reality” (as projected by the authorized vision of the social world), but sufficiently abstract to strip them of any overly flagrant idiosyncrasy that would tie them back to their originating national context” (Wacquant 2009, p. 47).

Although Wacquant’s focus is on criminalization and racialization of poverty, and on carceral politics, I find his arguments apply to the abolitionist movement agenda and describe a genderization of poverty and carceral politics. This is done through the same network of neoliberal schemers and their shaming of non-western, non-Christian cultural heritage and differences. In my efforts to comprehend the reasoning behind the *abolitionist movement’s* efforts in passing their exploitation of the trafficked humans’ bodies, imagery and narratives as liberating and redemptory charitable missions, I reached the conclusion that there is absolutely no interest in the salvation and rehabilitation of *undeserving victims*, the ones whose self-description does not include the perfect victim features—the one worthy of saving, but rather a campaign to reinforce colonial and ethnocentric values around class, race and access to resources, and to increase influence of the privileged. There is a dysfunctional and codependent dynamic concerning race, class and victimhood in the modern day slavery abolitionist movement, as it follows the prescriptions of the victims’ rights movement, which states that claims of victimhood must be respected and unquestioned. In the victim industry (see J. Best) the expression of white resentment against racial minorities, the poor, the migrants and sex workers results in a scenario commonly encountered in the rescue industry as well, most victims’ rights advocates and anti-human trafficking activists are middle class, educated, or religious individuals. As other critics observed, this field is profitable especially for privileged, white upper middle class women, who have created a comfortable professional niche for themselves (Agustín 2007; Best 1997; Lancaster 2011) and are most likely to benefit from carceral politics designed to protect their marriage advantages through “end demand policies”, anti-prostitution campaigns, utterly confusing gender equality and victim defining rhetoric, and stubborn efforts to police non-procreative sex on a global level; all these are meant to relieve their status anxiety and reinforce their grasp on diminishing resources, without much consideration on the consequences of these particular set of actions on other members of society.

Women’s narratives of degradation and survival have been appropriated and misused by social and religious movements to shape and control the political landscape, and warp public opinion since the seventeenth century. With every campaign attempting social reconstruction and moral re-shaping women are losing more of their agency, their power and their decision making capacity, as is the case with the modern day slavery abolitionist movement; women are increasingly reduced to sexualized, vacant puppets, to perform the ideal, innocent victim part in

the Circus of Salvation. Their stories of suffering and exploitation are trimmed and distorted to fit a narrow pattern of victimhood, which ignores the complexities of the human being behind the mask of sex trafficking victim and allows for broad and unnerving changes in social, legal and political discourse, and has devastating consequences on the lives and families of sex workers, labor migrants, accused sex traffickers and sex consumers, and on the people who have indeed experienced sex trafficking and forced labor.

Instead, I would argue that these moralist social change agents must adjust their agendas to include the interests of the people whose rights they advocate for, and this should be done through a lens that focuses on their worldview and their specific needs; through policies that address social exclusion, stigma, and structural violence to which these individuals are vulnerable. Salvation is central to the modern day slavery abolitionist movement, as it was for Quakers and Puritans; Indian captivity narratives, slave narratives, and sex trafficking survivor accounts are presented with carefully directed and inflated emphasis on the women's lack of agency and gendered helplessness, which justifies the mission of salvation conducted with vociferous and ostentatious vulgarity across the globe. In the Circus of Salvation, however, god's grace has been replaced with the Imperialists' Wrath, as the candidate to redemption is condemned to a purgatory of reliving her own trauma by perpetually narrating her victimization to raise awareness instead of healing from trauma and moving on. This is unacceptable and built on false premises that need serious and further research.

## References

- Agustín, L.M. 2007. *Sex at the margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*. London: Zed Books.
- Andrijasevic, R. 2007. Beautiful dead bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns. *Feminist Review* 86(1): 24–44.
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation*, vol. 1, 3–23. (trans: Sheila, Faria Glaser). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Bernstein, E. 2007. The sexual politics of the “new abolitionism”. *Differences* 18(3): 128–151.
- Bernstein, E. 2010. Militarized humanitarianism meets carceral feminism: The politics of sex, rights, and freedom in contemporary antitrafficking campaigns. *Signs* 36(1): 45–71.
- Best, J. 1997. Victimization and the victim industry. *Society* 34(4): 9–17.
- Derounian-Stodola, K.Z. (ed.). 1998. *Women's Indian captivity narratives*. London: Penguin.
- Doezema, J. 1999. Loose women or lost women? The re-emergence of the myth of white slavery in contemporary discourses of trafficking in women. *Gender Issues* 18(1): 23–50.
- Fitzpatrick, T. 1991. The figure of captivity: The cultural work of the puritan captivity narrative. *American Literary History* 3(1): 1–26.
- Haynes, D.F. 2014. The celebritization of human trafficking. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 653(1): 25–45.
- Herman, J.L. 1997. *Trauma and recovery*. New York: Basic books.
- Hoang, K.K. 2014. vietnam rising dragon: Contesting dominant western masculinities in Ho Chi Minh City's global sex industry. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 27(2): 259–271.
- Jacobs, Harriet Ann. 1861. *Incidents in the life of a slave girl: Jacobs, Mrs. Harriet (Brent)*. Published for the author.
- Lancaster, R.N. 2011. *Sex panic and the punitive state*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Lloyd, R. 2011. *Girls like us*. New York City: Harper Perennial.

- Mam, Somaly. 2009. *The road of lost innocence*. New York: Random House LLC.
- McGaha, J.E., and A. Evans. 2009. Where are the victims—The credibility gap in human trafficking research. *Intercultural Human Rights Law Review* 4: 239.
- Parreñas, R. 2011. *Illicit flirtations: Labor, migration, and sex trafficking in Tokyo*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Sex Slaves in America | MSNBC. Minh's Story. 2010. <http://www.msnbc.com/documentaries/watch/sex-slaves-in-america->
- Soderlund, G. 2013. *Sex trafficking, scandal, and the transformation of journalism, 1885–1917*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Somaly Mam: The Holy Saint (and Sinner) of Sex Trafficking. 2014. 22 Nov 2014. <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/05/30/somaly-mam-holy-saint-and-sinner-sex-trafficking-251642.html>
- Wacquant, L.J. 2009. *Prisons of poverty*, vol. 23. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press.
- Walk Free Foundation—Global Slavery Index. 2013. | Home... 2013. 18 Oct 2014. <http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/>
- Waterston, A. 2005. The story of my story: An anthropology of violence, dispossession, and diaspora. *Anthropological Quarterly* 78(1): 43–61.
- Weitzer, R. 2006. Moral crusade against prostitution. *Society* 43(3): 33–38.
- Weitzer, R. 2007. The social construction of sex trafficking: Ideology and institutionalization of a moral crusade. *Politics and Society* 35(3): 447–475.
- Weitzer, R. 2011. Sex trafficking and the sex industry: The need for evidence-based theory and legislation. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 101: 1337.
- Zafar, R. Summer 1991–1992. Capturing the captivity: African Americans among the Puritans. *MELUS* 17(2): 19–35.