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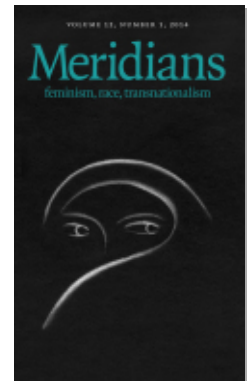
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## An Intersectional Analysis of Sex Trafficking Films

Carrie N. Baker

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# An Intersectional Analysis of Sex Trafficking Films

## Abstract

This essay analyzes the portrayal of sex trafficking in representative dramas and documentaries, both Hollywood and independent films. The majority of these films use a rescue narrative to tell the story of sex trafficking: an innocent and naïve young woman or girl is tricked or abducted by a villainous trafficker, who imprisons her and controls her with brutal violence until a heroic rescuer overcomes tremendous adversity in order to save her. Race and nationality inflect this gendered narrative: the rescuers are usually white, Western men and the traffickers are from Eastern Europe and/or are men of color. The issue of sex trafficking is portrayed simplistically, in black and white terms, with a clear bad guy, innocent victim, and savior. Often these films focus on the extreme, and least common, form of trafficking: a minor being abducted off the street and transported violently across national borders to be sold at auction. These films focus on criminal perpetrators and criminal-justice solutions, rather than on the broader systemic causes of sex trafficking, like globalization, economic inequality, poverty, and ethnic, race, and gender oppressions. This essay will discuss the 2007 Hollywood movie *Trade*, the 2010 Hollywood movie *Taken*, and the 2007 independent drama *Holly* as well as the NBC dateline special *Children for Sale*. The essay will then turn to several films that portray sex trafficking in more complex and nuanced ways: the 2003 film *Trading Women*, the 1999 film *Sacrifice*, and the 2007 film *Very Young Girls*. The essay concludes by calling for more films that portray a wider range of experiences not based on myths about trafficking that lead to simple criminal-justice-oriented solutions, but that explore the complexity of sex trafficking and show the need for localized solutions that address the systemic conditions that fuel sex trafficking.

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*“Saving little Apsu has more emotional resonance than doing something about changing the conditions of her life.”*

David Feingold, writer and producer of *Trading Women* (Silverman 2003)

Film is a powerful medium for framing social issues and raising awareness as well as funds to combat social problems. With the growth of a global movement against human trafficking over the last fifteen years, a plethora of films on sex trafficking has emerged, produced by activists, survivors, scholars, the news media, and Hollywood. These films are in multiple genres, including documentaries, dramas, educational films, cartoons (Ray 2010), and even fairy tales (McCormick 2011), and they address trafficking in countries around the globe, including Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Burma, Nepal, India), Mexico, Israel, and the US. Using an intersectional feminist perspective, this article analyzes the way some representative films frame the issue of sex trafficking. Sex trafficking films often portray women as helpless victims in need of strong men to rescue them, and they often portray non-US cultures, particularly in developing nations, as backward and in need of intervention, positioning Westerners as morally superior saviors. As Gayatri Spivak has said, white men are configured as needed to rescue brown women from brown men (Spivak 1988). This “rescue narrative” reinscribes traditional gender, racial, and national hierarchies that in fact bolster systems of inequality that are the root cause of trafficking.

The rescue narrative in the context of sex trafficking begins with an innocent and naïve young woman or girl who is tricked or abducted by a villainous trafficker, who imprisons her and controls her with brutal violence until the heroic rescuer, who often understands the female’s victimization better than she does, overcomes tremendous adversity in order to save the female. Rescue narratives have a long history, articulated in a range of contexts to justify relationships of domination. In “Two European Images of Non-European Rule,” Talal Asad argues that colonizers used discourses centered on saving colonized people from themselves to justify colonial rule in Middle Eastern and African societies (Asad 1973). More recently, Lila Abu-Lughod has noted that the rhetoric about “saving poor oppressed Afghani women” was used to justify the invasion of Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2002). Chandra Mohanty and Ann Russo have

made similar arguments (Mohanty 1988; Russo 2006). In the United States and Europe, rescue narratives pervaded turn-of-the-twentieth-century discourses on “white slavery,” generating a moral panic growing out of anxieties about female sexuality and autonomy as well as immigration, resulting in laws restricting women’s mobility (Doezema 2010).

In this paper I will analyze representative dramas and documentaries, both Hollywood and independent films. The first section examines dramatic films and news documentaries that use the rescue narrative, portraying sex trafficking simplistically, in black and white terms, with a clear bad guy, innocent victim, and savior. Often these films focus on the extreme, and least common, form of trafficking: a minor being abducted off the street and transported violently across national borders to be sold at auction. These films focus on criminal perpetrators and criminal-justice solutions, rather than on the broader systemic causes of sex trafficking, like globalization, political conflict, economic inequality, poverty, and ethnic, racial, and gender oppressions. I will discuss the 2007 Hollywood movie *Trade*, the 2010 Hollywood movie *Taken*, and the 2007 independent drama *Holly*, as well as the NBC dateline special *Children for Sale*. I will then turn to several news documentaries that portray sex trafficking in more complex and nuanced ways. I will discuss the 2003 film *Trading Women*, the 1999 film *Sacrifice*, and the 2007 film *Very Young Girls*. I will conclude by calling for more films that portray a wider range of experiences, not based on myths (Frederick 2005, 127–47)<sup>1</sup> about trafficking that lead to simple criminal-justice-oriented solutions, but that explore the complexity of sex trafficking and show the need for localized solutions that address the systemic conditions that fuel sex trafficking.

## Rescue-Narrative Films

Hollywood films on trafficking generally rely on very traditional ideas about gender, race, and nation. In the 2007 movie *Trade* (Kreuzpaintner 2007), after a thirteen-year-old Mexican virgin is kidnapped into sexual slavery, her seventeen-year-old brother attempts to rescue her with the help of a white, middle-aged, Texas cop and father figure, who lost his own daughter to sex trafficking years before. Across lines of age, race, and nationality, the older white American man guides the young Mexican boy on how to be a man by rescuing his innocent and helpless younger sister. *Trade* is based on journal-

ist Peter Landesman's *New York Times Magazine* investigative article "The Girls Next Door," which documents sex trafficking into the United States (Landesman 2004); Landesman served as a consultant in the making of the film. Similarly, the 2010 Hollywood movie *Taken* (Morel 2010), which grossed over \$145 million at the box office, portrays a naïve American teenager who, while traveling in Paris, is abducted by traffickers and is eventually saved by her father, a former CIA paramilitary operative (played by Liam Neeson), from Albanian traffickers and Arab procurers. The central focus of this extremely violent film is the estranged, unemployed father's restoration of his masculine authority through saving his daughter. In both of these films, trafficking is portrayed in its most extreme form and as an issue of organized crime and vigilante justice. Attention to the deeper systemic causes of trafficking is completely absent from these portrayals.

One central issue in these films is the disruption and restoration of patriarchal authority through males saving females from traffickers. At the beginning of both films, Adriana and Kim lack a competent male protector, making them vulnerable to traffickers. The disruption of patriarchal authority is portrayed by the absence or the inadequacy of male protectors. For example, in *Trade*, an absent father and the delinquent older brother, Jorge, leave Adriana protected only by her mother. Jorge in fact gives Adriana the bike that leads her to defy her mother and go out riding alone, at which point she is abducted. In *Taken*, a middle-aged white man named Bryan quits his job as a CIA investigator so he can live near his estranged daughter Kim and develop a relationship with her. His life, however, is pathetic. In the opening scene Bryan sits in a dark room watching films of Kim's fifth birthday party. He gives his daughter a karaoke machine for her seventeenth birthday that is immediately upstaged by a horse from her wealthy stepfather. Kim's mother treats Bryan with contempt and emotionally coerces him into allowing Kim to travel to Paris with a friend, despite his concern about her safety. Bryan is ignored by his daughter and her mother, leading to the daughter's capture by traffickers.

The lack of a male protector makes the girls vulnerable, but so do their innocence, naiveté, and youthful rebelliousness. Adriana and Kim both rebel against their parents' wishes by leaving the safety of their homes and venturing out into the world. Adriana rides away on her new bicycle against her mother's orders. Despite her father's warnings, Kim travels to France. This youthful rebelliousness leads to their capture by traffickers, but so

does their naiveté. When Kim and a friend agree to share a cab with a stranger they meet at the Paris airport, they inadvertently reveal to him where they live. The man turns out to be a spotter who finds girls for traffickers. The girls are also portrayed as innocent and virginal (Baker 2013). At one point when Jorge is trying to explain to Ray his urgency to rescue his sister, he says, “She’s pure. She’s never . . .” at which point Ray yells, “I get it!” (Kreuzpaintner 2007, 46.44 min.). In *Taken*, Kim’s virginity is made clear when her friend says to her right before they are abducted, “You’ve got to lose it sometime.” Despite her age, Kim is portrayed as very childlike. Several times at the beginning of the film, she jumps up and down with excitement like a little girl, for example, when she receives the horse at her birthday party and again when her father agrees that she can go to Paris. Later, she and her friend are silly and giggly in the airport both when they leave the US and when they arrive in Paris. Early in the film, the girls are violently abducted by traffickers who imprison and assault them. The girls’ vulnerability and abduction then become the occasion for the males who have failed to protect them to then rescue them.

The plot development in both films centers around males learning or reasserting their manhood by rescuing the females, thereby re-establishing patriarchal authority. In *Trade*, Adrianna’s seventeen-year-old brother is her rescuer, along with Ray, who the viewer eventually learns is looking for his own daughter who disappeared years before. In *Taken*, once Kim is abducted, Bryan turns instantly from a bumbling, pathetic, and regretful father and ex-husband to a powerful and ruthless avenger. In both of these films, the dramatic tension revolves around the males’ race to rescue their female relatives before they are sexually violated, especially before they lose their virginity. This race often involves extreme action and violence, providing ample opportunity for the men to display their courage, strength, and intelligence. The scenes with the trafficked females, on the other hand, portray their vulnerability—they are drugged and half-conscious, constantly under threat of violence and violation. Therefore the central messages for girls and women are that they need male protectors, that they should not defy their parents, and that they should stay close to home and hearth. For men, the message is that redemption and power come through being protectors of the women and girls in their lives.

Another central plot in many mainstream dramatic films on trafficking is the threat to and reestablishment of racial and national dominance. The

traffickers in these films are usually foreign men, often men of color. In *Trade*, they are Russian and Mexican, and in *Taken* they are Albanian and Arab. *Taken* is bookended with Arab men, initially in the store where Bryan buys the karaoke machine, and at the end when the sheik buys his daughter for half a million dollars and Bryan confronts and kills him in the bedroom where the sheik plans to have sex with her. In addition to the Arab procurers, Bryan contends with corrupt European men: the French policeman Jean Claude, who takes bribes from the traffickers, and the brutal Albanian traffickers. The rescuers, however, are all white men except for Jorge, who is under Ray's guidance. Jorge fails in the end when his desire for revenge leads him to kill the Russian trafficker who initially abducted Adriana, an act he immediately regrets when the trafficker's young son comes upon his dead father.

Ray mentors Jorge in how to be a man, but he also civilizes him. In his former life, before his sister was kidnapped, Jorge partied hard with his friends and engaged in irresponsible, sometimes criminal, behavior. At one point he lured a middle-aged American male tourist into an alley with the promise of sex with Mexican girls, and then he and his friends held him at gunpoint while they stole his belongings, although the guns end up being water pistols. Ray begins the civilizing process almost immediately. When Ray and Jorge first encounter each other, Jorge bursts out of Ray's trunk and thrashes around like a wild animal. Ray is constantly imploring Jorge to control his anger, a lesson he never learns, as demonstrated by Jorge stabbing the Russian trafficker to death at the end of the film. When they first begin traveling together, Ray's father-like advice includes asking Jorge to stop swearing, to stop putting his feet on the dashboard, and to bathe, all of which fall on the deaf ears of the rebellious teenager. Ray even forces the resistant Jorge to listen to classical music in the car as they are traveling. Jorge, on the other hand, becomes Ray's conscience, chastising him for working for the wrong side as an insurance-fraud investigator, for having few Mexican friends, and for his childless marriage and infidelity.

Whereas Ray is portrayed as rational, the Mexican characters are portrayed as religious. Religious references and imagery pervade the film, but are solely the province of the Mexican characters, even the traffickers. Jorge prays at an altar in his mother's home before going out to rob the American tourist and toward the end of the film, when Ray is bidding on Adriana, Jorge promises God that he will not lie or steal again if his prayers



are answered. The primary trafficker, Manuêlo, prays at a roadside cross on the way to New Jersey. Even the traffickers' final destination, a house in suburban New Jersey from which they plan to sell Adriana, has a statue of an angel in the front yard. The bed in which the traffickers demand that Ray have sex with Adriana to prove he's not a cop after he buys her has a cross over it, and Adriana is dressed in a Catholic-school-girl uniform. Throughout the film, Adriana repeatedly kisses a religious icon she wears on a necklace, and prays to God. At the end, she implores the trafficker, who had earlier prayed at the cross, that there is still time to repent, which causes him to have a change of heart and lie to the other trafficker to save Adriana and Ray. These portrayals reflect a dichotomy between rational/secular/first world and emotional/spiritual/third world.

Hollywood is not alone in focusing on a rescue narrative. The independent film *Holly* does so as well (Moche 2006). Written and produced by Guy Jacobson<sup>2</sup> and directed by Guy Moshe, *Holly* portrays a white, middle-aged, American man, Patrick, saving a twelve-year-old Vietnamese girl, Holly, who had been sold by her impoverished family and smuggled into Cambodia where she is forced to work as a prostitute. A down-and-out card shark and dealer in stolen artifacts who is "in search of a purpose" (according to the trailer<sup>3</sup>), Patrick goes to heroic lengths to try to save Holly from her traffickers. Unlike the males in *Trade* and *Taken*, who are able to save their female relatives from losing their virginity, Patrick is not able to save Holly's virginity, but after she has resigned herself to working as a prostitute, he convinces her to keep fighting and escape her traffickers. When he first reunites with her, he takes her to his hotel room (for a fee). When she suggests they have sex, he says no and takes her into the bathroom to wash off her makeup. When she says to stop and begins hitting him, he wraps his arms around her protectively and says she is beautiful, and she begins to cry. They sleep in separate beds, but he has to return her in the morning. He feeds her and buys her clothes, and is finally moved to take her away when he sees cuts on her stomach. When she says she wants to marry him, he emphatically says, "You are only twelve years old!" Finally, he takes her to a shelter, and leaves when the social worker says that it is in her best interest that he not remain in contact with her.

But he refuses to abandon her. When Patrick's boss, Freddie, gives him a free airplane ticket to return to the United States, saying that the mob had been to his office looking for him, Patrick still refuses to leave. When his

boss asks why he freed Holly, Patrick says he stopped and looked in her eyes rather than refusing to see her suffering like so many Westerners do. Freddie responds that if he is worried about little Vietnamese girls, he should go home and write his Congressman. This scene is the ultimate demonstration of Patrick's heroism—caring when so many others turn a blind eye to the brutality of trafficking. Later, when Patrick encounters the Vietnamese man who purchased Holly's virginity, he beats him up and runs, only to be caught by the police, arrested, and taken away, while Holly, who had run away from the shelter to find Patrick, watches. The film ends with him captured and her free, but with the danger looming of Holly being trafficked again. Unlike the tidy endings of *Trade* and *Taken*, this unresolved ending leaves the viewer troubled and the intractableness of the issue evident. Like Ray, Jorge, and Bryan, Patrick is flawed, but he demonstrates his masculinity through rescuing the girl. But whereas the men in the Hollywood movies ultimately succeed in rescuing the girl, Patrick's success is only partial.

In addition to using a rescue narrative, *Holly*, like *Trade* and *Taken*, also reinscribes Western racial and national dominance. In the film, the Asian characters are overwhelmingly bad, and most of the white people in the film are good, with the notable exception of a western European buyer. The madams who buy Holly are relentlessly brutal and the male traffickers are violent and willing to kill without hesitation anyone who gets in their way. The only good Asian characters, aside from Holly, are those who work in the shelter run by the western European social worker, and they appear only momentarily. The two people who are trying to help the sexually exploited girls are white: Patrick and the social worker Marie. Throughout most of the film, these two are the only people with consciences.

Although similar to *Trade* and *Taken* in its use of a rescue narrative and in orientalist depictions of Asian people, *Holly* offers a much more complex and informative portrayal of sex trafficking. The social worker Marie describes the scope of the problem and how intractable it is. For example, she tells Patrick that there are 30,000 girls in prostitution in Cambodia and dissuades Patrick from paying for Holly's freedom because it feeds the trade. She tells him that it takes five minutes to "save" a girl, but five years to reintegrate her into society. The film suggests how poverty makes girls vulnerable to trafficking, leading to their being sold into the sex trade and being kept in it for lack of alternatives. Once Holly escapes from the

traffickers, her only option is to become a trash-picker. The film shows how traffickers control the girls through starvation, violence, drugs, and threats to kidnap their siblings if the girls refuse to cooperate. Holly also addresses religion in informative ways. In contrast to the simple portrayal of religion in *Trade*, where all the Mexican characters are constantly praying for help and forgiveness (even the trafficker), Holly suggests how religion might be used as a justification for trafficking. At one point Holly speaks of how she is in her situation because of karma. Furthermore, the film portrays the justifications that Western buyers often give for their behavior: that Cambodians have a “different set of morals” and that the girls go willingly. Interestingly, the film does not show Cambodian men buying sex from girls even though they are in fact the majority of buyers in Cambodia. The film also shows how police corruption contributes to the problem. It is a police officer who lures Holly with food into his car after she escapes the first time and then sells her back to her traffickers, and it is a police officer who takes bribes from her traffickers, including first dibs on Holly, which they give to a visiting Vietnamese diplomat.

In addition to informing the viewer about trafficking, the film does not sensationalize the issue. Instead of an explicit rape scene as in *Trade*, Holly leaves the viewer to infer the rape from Holly’s traumatized face. Holly does not have the gratuitous violence of *Taken*. Holly is not romanticized or sexualized; she wears loose-fitting clothes through most of the film. Holly, however, is slow-paced and less cinematically sophisticated than the gripping Hollywood movies, which put you on the edge of your seat the whole time. Although the wide circulation of the Hollywood movies may inspire viewers to support anti-trafficking campaigns, Holly will teach viewers much more about the issue. But all three of these films reinforce patriarchal and orientalist worldviews.<sup>4</sup>

Orientalism is also evident in the treatment of sex trafficking in mainstream news reporting. The NBC Dateline special, *Children for Sale*, is an example (NBC Dateline 2009). NBC Dateline anchor Stone Phillips introduces the program by describing Cambodia as “an exotic vacation destination, with ancient cities, bold colors, legendary temples, remarkable beauty—and horrendous crimes that go on behind closed doors.” Behind him there are images of elephants, people in colorful clothes, historic buildings, and then a young girl with her face blurred out sitting on a bed. He continues, “Children, as young as five years old, are sold as

slaves for sex.” He then says this “dark place” and its “shameful secret” “is now capturing the attention of the world and White House, a secret that’s been exposed by Dateline’s hidden cameras” (NBC Dateline 2009, .20 min). In the program, NBC correspondent Chris Hanson speaks of the Cambodian people as animals when he says, “here the prey is plentiful and easy to stalk” (NBC Dateline 2009, 1.39 min.). Hanson describes Cambodia as a “distant and troubled land” (NBC Dateline 2009, 2.23 min.). Noting that Cambodia is a “small Buddhist country” and showing an undercover white man being led into a building by several Cambodian people, Hanson says, “to follow their trail we’ll have to infiltrate their perverted world, pretend we’re predators ourselves” (NBC Dateline 2009, 2.40 min.). The film then jumps to President George Bush addressing the United Nations, saying “it’s a special evil . . . the abuse and exploitation of the most innocent and vulnerable.” Following this, Hanson is shown asking Colin Powell why human trafficking is a priority issue for the Bush administration, to which Powell responds, “it’s the worst kind of human exploitation imaginable.”

The film centers on Gary Haughen, founder of the religious antitrafficking organization International Justice Mission, leading a dramatic “rescue of women and girls” and then confronting an American tourist who admitted on hidden camera that he bought sex from adolescent Cambodian girls. Whereas Hanson describes Cambodia as “chaotic,” he describes Haughen as “daring.” Although Hanson mentions war and poverty as contributing factors to girls’ vulnerability, he primarily blames abusive adults, parents who sell their children into slavery, and a government that fails to arrest and prosecute traffickers. Under the direction of Haughen, the police assist with a raid and arrest pimps and madams, although the raid is compromised by a corrupt police officer who tipped off the brothel owners. Hanson interviews Cambodia’s Minister for Women’s Affairs, who said she was aware of extensive trafficking of girls, but she seems unable to do anything about it.

The United States government, on the other hand, is applauded for proactively passing laws, shown by Bush signing legislation making it easier to prosecute men who travel abroad to have sex with minors. Bush, Powell, and the United States government are portrayed as moral authorities that will teach Cambodian leaders that sexual exploitation of children is wrong and push them, under threat of losing US aid, to do something about it. The problem is framed entirely in criminal-justice terms with very little attention to the underlying conditions that make people vulnerable to

sex trafficking. In this framing, individual criminals are the cause of sex trafficking, and stricter laws and law enforcement is the solution. In addition, this film portrays Cambodia as exotic, barbaric, violent, immoral, and in need of civilizing Western intervention. Trafficking is framed as a problem “over there,” and privileged Western white men are the powerful moral figures who must right this wrong.<sup>5</sup>

Popular media, from Hollywood to mainstream news reporting, frame the causes and solutions to sex trafficking in individualistic, criminal-justice terms. The problem is caused by criminals and the solution is law enforcement, or individual heroic men who rescue women and girls when law enforcement fails to act. In *Trade*, *Taken*, *Holly*, and *Children for Sale*, law enforcement is portrayed as negligent or corrupt, so individual men have to step in and save the day. Ray and Jorge, Bryan, Patrick, and Gary Haughen all try to get law enforcement to help or have to fight not only the traffickers but also corrupt law enforcement. All of these white men successfully rescue the young girls of color from the adults, most of whom are people of color, who seek to harm them. When trafficking involves girls in southeast Asia, the girls are often portrayed as victims of their backward cultures. These films also often sensationalize violence against women and portray women and girls in very traditional ways. The girls worth saving are innocent virgins who are helpless. The films also ignore the systemic factors that have fueled the growth of sex trafficking, factors like globalization, economic inequality, disenfranchisement of the poor, restrictions on mobility, war and displacement, exploitation of traditional gender ideologies, and oppression of ethnic minorities.

### More Complex Portrayals

But there are some good films that avoid sensationalizing, simplifying, or exoticizing the issue, such as *Trading Women*, about girls trafficked in Thailand, made by anthropologist David Feingold who has extensive knowledge of the region, Ellen Bruno’s film *Sacrifice* about trafficked girls in Burma, or Rachel Lloyd’s *Very Young Girls* about the commercial sexual exploitation of underage girls in New York City. Rather than offering simplistic, criminal-justice-oriented solutions to trafficking, these films delve into the complexities of the problem of human trafficking, looking at the deeper, systemic causes.

The documentary *Trading Women* places the issue of sex trafficking in the broader context of the sex trade and addresses several contributing factors, like political conflict, the repression of ethnic minorities, and poverty (Feingold 2003). The film begins with orientalist depictions of Asia in films from the 1930s and 1940s like *The Shanghai Gesture* and *The Mask of Fu Manchu*. The film notes that Southeast Asia is a land that the “West has clouded in myths and mysteries.” The film shows clips of provocatively presented Asian women in a US Air Force V.D. prevention film and a clip from the 1974 antiwar documentary by Peter Davis, *Hearts and Minds*, where General William Westmoreland says, “the Oriental does not put the same high price on life as the Westerner. Life is plentiful and life is cheap in the Orient” (Feingold 2003, 1.38 min.). By drawing attention to the historical roots of stereotypes about Southeast Asia, the filmmaker encourages Western viewers to reflect upon the ways these stereotypes continue to shape discourses around sex and sex trafficking in Southeast Asia today.

Against this background, the film then delves into the complexity of the sex industry, interviewing a range of people, including an anti-trafficking activist from an NGO, owners of massage parlors, women working in the sex trade, the parents of trafficked girls, government officials from Thailand, the US, and Burma, an opposition leader in Burma, and UN officials (from UNIFEM and UNICEF). The range of perspectives reveals the complexity of the sex trade, which is missing from the black-and-white rescue narrative central to most films that address sex trafficking. The film distinguishes between direct and indirect prostitution, brothels versus bars, and the visible side of the sex trade—strip bars and massage parlors—and the hidden side, where victims of trafficking are found. The women working in the sex trade explain why they are in the trade, often describing economics as the key reason. A widowed single mother describes how she needed money to send her sons to school, and a young woman explained how she sends money home to her impoverished parents. The film portrays how many women and girls are indirectly pushed into selling sex by economic circumstances, not just directly by force, fraud, or coercion, which is the focus of most films on sex trafficking. Several women describe how circumstances led to their exploitation: one girl’s mother died, another trusted friends who ended up selling her. The women are portrayed as having complex agency: they are not only victims, but they often make the best choices they can in a highly

constrained personal and systemic context. They are not autonomous individuals: they are influenced by individual and societal circumstances. But they are not passive victims either. The film portrays women and girls respectfully, as survivors, not in pitying and voyeuristic ways. The film also exposes as false the racist myth that parents do not care about their daughters and sell them for material gain.

While exploding myths that women freely choose prostitution or are sold by cruel parents, the film shows how economic and political structural conditions in China, Thailand, Burma, and Laos have led to the vulnerability of women and girls to trafficking. In Thailand, the Hill tribe peoples were displaced because of development programs and antidrug and forestry policies, which devastated their economy, and population pressures from people fleeing fighting and forced labor in Burma. The Hill tribe people are not recognized as citizens and cannot own land, so they are easily exploited. In Burma, warfare and governmental mismanagement led to inflation and currency devaluation so that rural people could not make a living from traditional village industries. In addition, the international war on drugs destroyed the opium market so women who had traditionally worked in opium production had few opportunities to support their families. Finally, wartime rape by the Burmese military drove ethnic minority women into Thailand, where they were vulnerable to exploitation. Although the filmmaker could have done more to address how globalization and its effect on local economies contribute to trafficking, the film effectively demonstrates how local conditions contribute to the incidence of trafficking.

Whereas mainstream depictions of trafficking in films like *Trade, Taken, Holly*, and *Children for Sale* address only the most extreme cases of trafficking and frame the issue simply as the result of organized crime, *Trading Women* describes the complexity of the problem, including the multiple causes and the difficulty in finding solutions. This more complex depiction leads to a much more sophisticated understanding of the systemic causes of sex trafficking, like poverty, war, disenfranchisement of ethnic minorities, and restrictions on migration, as well as antidrug and environmental policies, to name a few. Whereas most films on sex trafficking, like those described in the first section of this paper, focus only on the clearest cases—a minor abducted off the street and violently moved across national borders and auctioned on the internet—*Trading Women* portrays the much more likely circumstance of the women and girls who are “trafficked by

circumstance,” who are vulnerable to deception, coercion, or abuse because of economics or migratory conditions (Feingold 2003, 11.35 min.). If framed in this broader context, solutions to the problem of sex trafficking require attention to these broader systemic factors that make women and girls vulnerable to trafficking—economic conditions created by globalization and trade policy as well as migration policies. At the end of *Trading Women*, the narrator says, “Solutions based on Western myths cannot confront Asian realities. Conferences, conventions, and laws may make us feel good, but they have done little to better the lot of minority women and girls” (Feingold 2003, 1.13.30 min.). Films that retell myths about sex trafficking obscure a deeper understanding of the problem and may lead people to support public policies that fail to solve the problem, or policies that may even exacerbate trafficking.<sup>6</sup>

Another film that deals with trafficking in more complex ways is *Sacrifice: The Story of Child Prostitutes from Burma*, made by Ellen Bruno. Bruno begins with a description of the political and economic conditions that make Burmese girls vulnerable to sexual exploitation: the military dictatorship in Burma that has oppressed ethnic minorities by confiscating traditional lands and leaving people with no means of livelihood (Bruno 1999). Other structural conditions, like poverty and lack of access to education, push girls to migrate to the cities, where they are vulnerable to exploitation. However, the film also portrays how girls’ dreams of a better life pull them to the cities. The film also focuses on the cultural and social factors that lead to sex trafficking. The film explains how religious beliefs about gendered obligations, where girls have a duty to support their parents, as well as the cultural devaluation of girls contribute to the sexual exploitation of girls. In this aesthetically beautiful film, several girls are extensively interviewed, and they are presented in respectful ways, without the sensationalization or simplification common to antitrafficking films.

*Very Young Girls* is another excellent film about trafficking that focuses on the United States (Schisgall 2007). The film was produced by Rachel Lloyd of Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS), a shelter that serves girls coming out of commercial sexual exploitation in New York City. A survivor herself, Lloyd’s film delves into the complex web of problems that lead to the commercial exploitation of girls. Narrated not only by Lloyd, but by survivors who live or work at GEMS, the film describes the circumstances that lead girls into sexual exploitation—poverty, childhood sexual abuse, violence,



and the failure of those in the criminal-justice system to understand and intervene in the commercial sexual exploitation of girls. The girls featured in the film come from communities that lack the resources to support them and keep them safe. Some are in foster care, others live in violent homes, many are living in poverty. At young ages, they are targeted by much older men who take advantage of these vulnerabilities, promising them love and support, offering to be father figures to them and pretending to be the loving family they never had. But once the girls are hooked, these men push them into prostitution and use violence, threats, and emotional coercion to keep them there. The film also shows the nitty-gritty of how hard it is to get girls out of bad situations and the difficulties of re-establishing their lives. In one particularly compelling scene, a fifteen-year-old girl is shown severely injured in a hospital bed, after her pimp beat her up and left her unconscious on the side of a road. The film draws the viewer into the complex web of barriers that keeps girls trapped in dangerous situations as well as the difficulty girls have recovering from commercial sexual exploitation when the conditions of their lives remain largely unchanged. Like *Trading Women*, the film describes the circumstances that constrain girls' choices: their youth, deprivation of emotional and material support, and a dangerous environment where so many men seek sex from young girls and pimps function with few restraints because of police indifference.

The film critiques how the criminal-justice system contributes to the sexual exploitation of girls by failing to respond to reports of abuse, by failing to investigate and arrest men who exploit girls, and by treating victims as perpetrators. In one scene, an African American woman goes to a police station to report the kidnapping of her young daughter by several much older men who were abusing her and selling her for sex. The white police officer responded, "What do you want me to do?" and insisted that the mother obtain a court order before the police could take a report or respond in any other way (Schisgall 2007, 21.20 min.). By revealing the unwillingness of law enforcement to assist a distraught mother reporting crimes against her daughter, the film exposes the institutional barriers faced by women of color seeking to protect their daughters from sexual exploitation. In a later segment, the film shows a fifteen-year-old girl who was kidnapped and forced to have sex with multiple men being prosecuted for prostitution. The girl's mother says, "instead of taking her to the hospital, they took her to the jailhouse" (Schisgall 2007, 25.40 min.). Meanwhile, the film shows how

adult men charged with purchasing sex are offered a diversion program where they can have their records cleared if they attend an educational program. These scenes depict the criminal-justice system in New York as contributing to the sexual exploitation of girls and turning a blind eye to their abusers. The film's portrayal of this system, and its suggestion of how racism and sexism influence police responses to exploited girls and their perpetrators, amount to a plea for structural change to address the problem of the sexual exploitation of girls.

While offering a strong critique of the criminal-justice system, the film does less to critique other structural factors that contribute to sexual exploitation, like lack of economic opportunities for both men and women, the diminishing social safety net after welfare reform in the 1990s, and the prison-industrial complex that criminalizes young men, preventing them from finding employment and supporting their families. Nevertheless, like *Trading Women* and *Sacrifice*, *Very Young Girls* is a thoughtful and thought-provoking film that demonstrates that the commercial sexual exploitation of girls doesn't just happen "over there" but that it happens right here in the United States. Unlike the mainstream films about sex trafficking, all three of these films delve into the deeper causes of sex trafficking without invoking traditional gendered or colonialist discourses.

## Conclusion

*"A myth is simplistic: it cannot express the complexities of an issue, entertain controversy, or encompass 'gray areas'. . . . [I]t presents morals, heroism, and emotionality as readily as facts . . . [and it is] easily influenced by cultural prejudices and political agendas." (Frederick 2005, 128)*

The rescue narrative is the dominant myth about sex trafficking circulating in American society. The story of helpless victims, evil traffickers, and heroic rescuers that commonly appears in Hollywood movies, investigative news reports, and documentary films allows no complexity or "gray areas" and is shaped by "cultural prejudices and political agendas." It mobilizes moral outrage and activates people to care about the issue of sex trafficking, but this story can also obscure the realities of sex trafficking, especially the deeper structural factors that create vulnerable populations and

an abundance of perpetrators. Many films on sex trafficking, like much media coverage of the issue, frame trafficking solely in terms of criminalization and victimization (Pajnik 2010).

The films discussed in the first part of this paper deploy a criminalization frame, whereby sex trafficking is portrayed as the result of organized crime, so the solutions are always criminal-justice solutions: passing laws against trafficking, prosecuting criminals, and tightening up borders to protect women. However, the criminal-justice system might actually be part of the problem, as *Very Young Girls* suggests, rather than the solution. Within this criminalization frame, social and economic factors that contribute to trafficking are ignored. In fact, multiple factors contribute to trafficking and multiple solutions are necessary.<sup>7</sup> The films also employ a victimization frame that sees women as passive and in need of protection, with little agency or subjectivity. Men, on the other hand, are active and effective agents, either rescuers or perpetrators. The main action is the fight between the rescuers and the perpetrators; the victimized women are the prize. Finally, the films employ an imperialist frame that presents American citizens and/or the United States as civilizing agents for the rest of the world.

Films have the potential to educate viewers about important social issues. But films can mislead as well as educate. Films that sensationalize and simplify sex trafficking may draw people in and motivate them to become more involved with the issue or to donate money to antitrafficking organizations, but they also reinscribe many of the ideologies that lead to trafficking in the first place: ethnic, racial, or gender oppression, as well as ideas of Western superiority that fuel the global inequalities at the root of trafficking. Real solutions require deep, systemic analysis and change. We need more films that focus on this complex reality. As David Feingold said in the opening quotation, saving an innocent and pitiable girl is more appealing than changing the conditions of her life that created her situation, but if we want to understand trafficking and stop it, we have to examine those conditions and change them.

#### NOTES

1. Frederick gives an insightful critique of myths surrounding trafficking.
2. Jacobson, a lawyer and former investment banker who discovered the issue of trafficking while vacationing in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, has also made two documentaries, *The Virgin Forest* and *Redlight*, and in 2004 founded the nonprofit

- RedLight Children (<http://redlightchildren.org/> [accessed October 31, 2013]) to raise awareness about sex trafficking.
3. Trailer for *Holly* at <http://www.traffickingproject.org/2007/12/human-trafficking-film-holly.html> (accessed October 31, 2013).
  4. The male rescue narrative also appeared very powerfully in the PBS Frontline special, *Sex Slaves*, which aired in 2006, where the filmmaker follows the harrowing efforts of a heartbroken husband trying to rescue his wife out of sexual slavery, which he accomplishes by the end (Bienstock 2006). Another example is *The Candy Shop: A Fairytale about Sexual Exploitation of Children*, made by independent filmmaker Brandon McCormick (2011) and promoted by Atlanta's public broadcasting stations, WABE and PBA 30 and by two religious organizations that work against sex trafficking in Atlanta, 12Stone Church and Street GRACE. *The Candy Shop* is a bizarre, fairy-tale-like story, where a young boy rescues a younger girl from an evil older man, who mysteriously turns the girls into candy and sells them.
  5. Another example of the rescue narrative in news documentaries is *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof's video *The Face of Slavery* (Kristof 2009).
  6. Rhacel Salazar Parrenas argues that US trafficking policy has resulted in restrictions on Filipina women migrating to Japan, thereby putting migrant women more at risk of trafficking (Parrenas 2008).
  7. For a discussion of how local conditions shape Filipina women's experiences of trafficking, see Parrenas 2006.

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