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Moving Beyond “Slaves, Sinners, and Saviors”: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis of US Sex- Trafficking Discourses, Law and Policy¹

Carrie N. Baker, Smith College

Abstract: This article analyzes stories and images of sex trafficking in current mainstream US public discourses, including government publications, NGO materials, news media, and popular films. Noting the similarities and differences among these discourses, the first part demonstrates that they often frame sex trafficking using a rescue narrative that reiterates traditional beliefs and values regarding gender, sexuality, and nationality, relying heavily on patriarchal and orientalist tropes. Reflecting this rescue narrative, mainstream public policies focus on criminal justice solutions to trafficking. The second part suggests alternative frameworks that empower rather than rescue trafficked people. The article argues that the dominant criminal justice approach to trafficking—the state rescuing victims and prosecuting traffickers—will not alone end the problem of sex trafficking, but that public policies must address the structural conditions that create populations vulnerable to trafficking and empower those communities to dismantle inequalities that are the root causes of trafficking.

Keywords: sex trafficking, public discourses, rescue narrative, framing, public policy, feminism

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Awareness of sex trafficking has increased significantly since the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) in 2000. We now regularly hear about sex trafficking from journalists like Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times*, Hollywood movies like *Taken* with Liam Neeson, Hollywood celebrities like Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore, with their Real Men Don't Buy Girls campaign, and activists and survivors like Rachel Lloyd and Somaly Mam, who tour the country to speak out against sex trafficking. Even government-sponsored educational campaigns are attempting to raise awareness about trafficking. A plethora of activist organizations are working on this issue, including Polaris Project and International Justice Mission in Washington, DC, Shared Hope International in Washington State, and the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, Equality Now, and Girls Educational and Mentoring Services in New York City. These activists come from a range of political perspectives, making for strange bedfellows—some are feminist, some are evangelical, some are progressive, and some are politically conservative. For example, one of the key sponsors of the TVPA was conservative New Jersey Republican Chris Smith, but the bill was also supported by the National Organization for Women (Chapkis 2003, 925).

The diverse social movement against human trafficking at first framed sex trafficking as a problem that occurred in other countries, particularly countries in Southeast Asia and the post-Soviet Newly Independent States in Eastern Europe and Asia. The focus was primarily on sex trafficking; labor trafficking received much less attention. Gradually, the problem came to be recognized as existing within the United States, involving not only non-citizen victims but US citizens as well (Baker 2012). These origins have shaped how sex trafficking has been framed in mainstream public discourses over time. Government actors, anti-trafficking activists, the media, and Hollywood tell stories about trafficking that highlight particular causes of sex trafficking and particular solutions.

This article will examine anti-trafficking stories and images using a feminist intersectional perspective. Based on a review of a wide range of anti-trafficking materials produced by the US government, anti-trafficking advocates, and the media, this article analyzes selected representative images in order to discern common themes as well as distinctions among these discourses. The first part demonstrates how the US government, anti-trafficking advocacy organizations, and the media have, despite their differences, generally framed sex trafficking using a common, gendered rescue narrative: a heroic rescuer saves an innocent and helpless female victim from a cruel trafficker. This narrative of “slaves, sinners, and saviors” (Davidson 2005, 4) relies heavily on patriarchal and orientalist tropes of passive, ignorant, or backward women and girls who are trafficked and of their powerful and/or enlightened male rescuers. It taps into deeply held cultural beliefs about femininity, masculinity, and American exceptionalism, and supports criminal justice solutions to sex trafficking. The second part offers an alternative framework for understanding and addressing sex trafficking, which focuses on empowering rather than rescuing women and girls. While a criminal justice approach is an important part of an effective response to sex trafficking, it will not change the conditions that make women and girls vulnerable to trafficking. This article will argue that the dominant criminal justice approach to trafficking—the state rescuing victims and prosecuting traffickers—will not alone end the problem of sex trafficking, but that public policies must address the structural conditions that create populations vulnerable to trafficking and empower those communities to dismantle the inequalities that are the root causes of sex trafficking.

Rescue Narratives in Anti-Trafficking Discourses

Rescue narratives have a long history, articulated in a range of contexts. In “Two European Images of Non-European Rule” (1973), Talal Asad argues that colonizers used discourses centered on rescuing colonized people from themselves to justify colonial rule in Middle Eastern and African societies. Alternatively, colonizers used narratives of interracial sexual assault and protection of white women as grounds for the brutal oppression of colonized men (Woollacott 2006). This rescue narrative reflected an attitude of paternalism—the idea of “restricting the freedoms and responsibilities of subordinates or dependents in what is considered or claimed to be their best interests” (Oxford English Dictionary). More recently, Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) and Ann Russo (2006) have shown how rhetoric about saving oppressed Afghani women was used to justify the US invasion of Afghanistan. Dominant populations have long used rescue narratives to mobilize and justify interventions into the lives of oppressed peoples, thereby reinforcing hierarchies of power.

In the United States and Europe, the rescue narrative first appeared in the context of sex trafficking over one hundred years ago, in turn-of-the-century campaigns against “white slavery,” which was the term used by policy makers, advocates, and the media in stories about white women being forced into prostitution by immigrant men or men of color. This discourse generated a widespread anti-trafficking campaign fueled by anxieties about female sexuality and autonomy, as well as race and immigration, and resulting in laws restricting women’s mobility in the interest of protecting them (Doezema 2000). In the United States, Congress passed the White Slave Traffic Act of 1910, otherwise known as the Mann Act, which prohibited the interstate transportation of women for “immoral purposes” and was used to criminalize non-normative, particularly interracial, consensual sexual behavior (Langum 1994).

As in the past, rescue narratives have been powerfully articulated in contemporary discourses on the sex trafficking of women and girls. The rescue narrative that dominates trafficking discourses begins with an evil trafficker or pimp who abducts, deceives, or lures a young, innocent, helpless, and often naive girl into

a prison-like brothel and controls her with brutal violence until a heroic rescuer comes to save the day. The trafficker is often a man of color or from a foreign country, and the rescuer is often a white, Western man. In this narrative frame, the solution to sex trafficking is capturing and criminally prosecuting the trafficker. This rescue narrative appears, in different degrees, in images and texts produced by the US government, anti-trafficking organizations, and the news media, as well as in film.

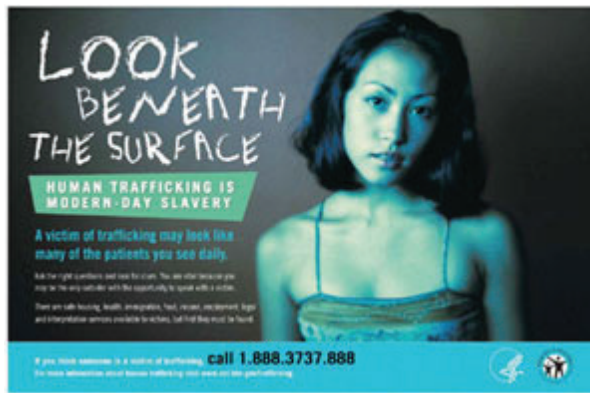
The US Government

The United States government has been explicit in framing the problem of trafficking in terms of protection and rescue. The name of the law itself—the Trafficking Victims Protection Act—reflects this framing. The US government has used the language of rescue in its anti-trafficking efforts. To implement the Act, the US Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families created the Campaign to Rescue & Restore Victims of Human Trafficking in order to identify and aid trafficking victims. This campaign asks people to become rescuers by helping to identify victims. In a public relations campaign called "Look Beneath the Surface," one poster shows a vulnerable, innocent-looking, and scantily clad woman seated in a chair, leaning away from a looming perpetrator who is standing in front of her.



Source: US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Rescue & Restore Campaign. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/endtrafficking/toolkit>.

The text on the poster reads, "Ask the right questions and look for clues. You are vital because you may be the only outsider with the opportunity to speak with the victim." The poster asks the viewer to rescue the woman, presumably by calling the 800 number provided. The image draws the viewer in and generates concern for the woman, but it does this by using traditional depictions of female sexual vulnerability, male aggression, and the need for rescue. In another Rescue & Restore Campaign poster, a woman of Asian descent is portrayed with little clothing, her lips parted and her head tilted deferentially to the side:



Source: US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Rescue & Restore Campaign. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/endtrafficking/toolkit>.

Both of these women are attractive, sexualized, and looking vulnerable. In the brochure using the second image, accompanying text encourages the viewer to rescue the woman by stating, “you can help liberate victims of human trafficking.” The brochure, directed at law enforcement officers, health care workers, and social service organizations, then states, “Many victims do not see themselves as victims and do not realize what is being done to them is wrong” (US Department of Health and Human Services 2013). The assumption is that the victim needs another person to inform her that the abuse she is experiencing is wrong. These posters and brochures construct women as helpless and ignorant, requiring rescue or saving by others who “know best” (Kempadoo 2005, xxiv). The viewer, on the other hand, is assumed to be knowledgeable, powerful, and potentially heroic.

The theme of innocence and female vulnerability appears in other government contexts as well. In 2003, the Federal Bureau of Investigation established the Innocence Lost National Initiative to address the “growing problem of domestic sex trafficking of children in the United States” (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2013). Children are certainly innocent victims of trafficking, and the work of the FBI is commendable. Still, the framing of the problem as one of the loss of innocence, rather than child abuse, is striking.



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Violent Crimes Against Children, Innocence Lost. http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc_majorthefts/cac/innocencelost.

In the above image from the FBI’s homepage for the Initiative, this loss of innocence is portrayed in the form of a girl with pigtails placed next to a sexualized adult woman. Evoking the virgin/whore dichotomy, this image taps into American cultural anxieties about female sexuality, sexual vulnerability, and the loss of virginity. This portrayal is powerfully mobilizing, but also reinforces traditional gender and sexual norms.

A final example of the government's use of female vulnerability to portray trafficking and mobilize action appears in the 2011 *Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report* (US Department of State 2011). Produced annually by the US Secretary of State as required by the TVPA, the TIP report documents the degree to which nations have passed criminal laws against trafficking and are enforcing them (22 US Code §§ 7106-7107 (2000)). Under the Bush administration, TIP reports focused almost exclusively on sex trafficking of women and girls and evaluated the anti-trafficking efforts of countries around the world, but did not evaluate the United States. This has changed under the Obama administration and the leadership of Hillary Clinton, who expanded the TIP report's focus to include labor trafficking and male victims of trafficking. In addition, as of 2010 the report evaluates US progress on fighting trafficking. Nevertheless, this report begins with a focus on female victims and sex trafficking abroad. The second page of the report displays the following images:



Source: US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2011*. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/164452.pdf>.

Invoking the trope of the oppressed and veiled Third World woman, this image portrays a silent and helpless female figure, head tilted, hands clasped around her legs, crouched in what appears to be a wooden box. On the next page is a photograph of and letter from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Side by side, these contrasting images are a good example of what Elizabeth Bernstein has described as the “backward traditionalism of third world women that [is] counterposed with the perceived freedom and autonomy of women in the contemporary West” (2007, 140). Clinton’s letter begins by describing a visit she made to a shelter for trafficking survivors—children who had been “enslaved in a brothel.” While the report does address labor trafficking as well, the initial image and text focus on vulnerable females and sex trafficking, and call on the United States to stop traffickers, “because fighting slavery and standing up for human rights is part of our national identity.” Clinton calls on the United States to “deliver on our promises to protect victims, punish abusers, and restore the lives of survivors so that someday they will have the opportunity to realize their God-given potential.” Clinton frames the United States as a rescuer of vulnerable people around the world and promotes criminal laws and prosecution as the means to eradicate human trafficking.

The above images are typical in government anti-trafficking publications. They portray vulnerable women in need of help and frame the state, as well as health-care and social-service professionals, as women’s rescuers.

Anti-Trafficking Advocacy Groups

Activists against trafficking also use a rescue narrative, but they focus even more on innocent, young and helpless girls, and they expand on the rescue story line by including portrayals of masculine rescuers. Organizations like Shared Hope International (SHI), an evangelical anti-sex-trafficking organization, and Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS), a service provider to sexually exploited girls in New York City, have brought attention to the issue of domestic sex trafficking, particularly of minors. The TVPA defines severe forms of trafficking in persons to include “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act,” when “force, fraud, or coercion” is present or when the victim is under the age of eighteen (22 US Code § 7102 (8) & (9) (2006)). Travel across national borders is not required for conduct to qualify as sex trafficking. Anti-trafficking advocates such as SHI and GEMS are fighting to raise awareness about underage girls who are sexually exploited in prostitution, framing this exploitation as sex trafficking because it falls within the TVPA definition. Testifying before Congress in 2010, GEMS founder and executive director Rachel Lloyd criticized US policy for ignoring domestic minor sex trafficking (Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law 2010, 14–17).

To counter society’s victim-blaming attitude toward sexually active young women, SHI, GEMS, and similar organizations focus on the theme of the threatened innocence of young girls. Rescue narratives require a worthy victim, and traditional sexual and gender ideologies heavily influence what makes a victim worthy: she is virginal and never complicit in her sexual commodification. This is achieved by portraying the victims as so young they couldn’t possibly be held responsible for their sexual victimization. At an anti-trafficking conference in Portland, Oregon in 2010, the founder and executive director of Shared Hope International, Linda Smith, and one of her staff members, continually referred to teenagers as “little girls.”² The phrase “commercial sexual exploitation of children” is commonly used in the movement to refer to the sexual exploitation of any minor, including girls as old as seventeen. SHI’s “Protected Innocence Initiative” reports on whether states have criminalized domestic minor sex trafficking (Shared Hope International 2011). Similar to the FBI’s Lost Innocence National Initiative, the Protected Innocence Initiative is striking in the emphasis it places on innocence.

Innocence is portrayed in movement advocacy materials by using images of very young girls. In 2008, GEMS produced a film titled *Very Young Girls* about adolescent girls in the commercial sex industry (Schisgall and Alvarez 2008). Most of the girls featured in the film were in their teens, but GEMS promoted the film with this poster:



Source: Girls Educational and Mentoring Services. <http://www.gems-girls.org/get-involved/very-young-girls>.

The pink Mickey Mouse socks and white sneakers powerfully represent youthful innocence. In 2011, Change.org promoted a Shared Hope International petition encouraging the North Texas Superbowl XLV Host Committee to take action to prevent child sex trafficking at the 2011 Superbowl. The petition, titled “Ask Superbowl Commission to Stand Up and Protect Children” and started by Melissa Snow of SHI, featured this image of a young girl, pouting:



Source: Patrick Schmitt (Director of Campaign Innovation, Change.org), e-mail to author dated January 17, 2011. <http://www.change.org/petitions/ask-the-super-bowl-host-committee-to-stand-up-and-protect-children>.

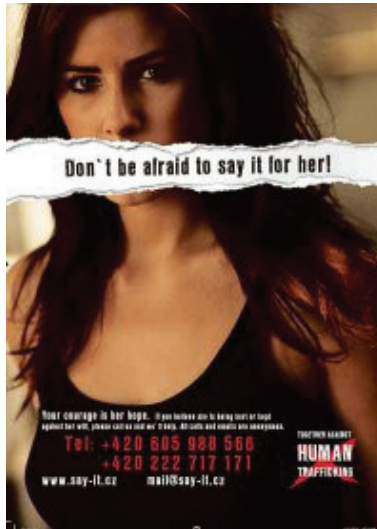
By focusing on such young girls, the producers of these images seek to shock and motivate people to take action.

Another way in which advocacy groups represent innocence is by portraying girls as silenced or blinded, and in need of someone to speak or see for them. An example of the visual silencing of victims is the following image from the website of a Texas-based anti-trafficking organization named Beauty Will Rise:



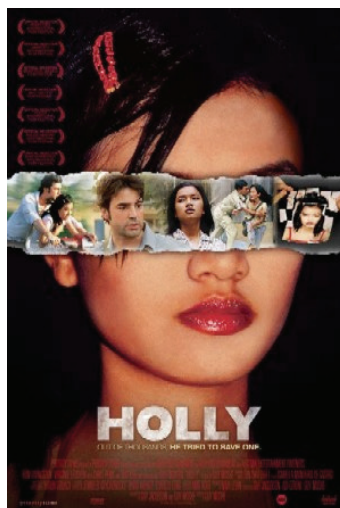
Source: Beauty Will Rise. <http://beautywillrise.org/>.

In this image, dark male hands cover the mouth and grab the shoulder of a green-eyed white girl. Adult women too are portrayed silenced in this way and in need of someone to speak for them. Facebook’s Human Trafficking newsfeed contains an image of a woman with her mouth covered by the words, “Don’t be afraid to say it for her!”



Source: Human Trafficking News Daily: Newsfeed on Global Human Trafficking. <http://www.facebook.com/pages/human-trafficking-news-daily-newsfeed-on-global-human-trafficking/173185018143>.

Alternatively, women and girls are portrayed as blinded, as in this promotional poster for the independent film *Holly* about child sex trafficking in Cambodia made by anti-trafficking activists Guy Jacobson and Guy Moshe:



Source: Priority Films. <http://priorityfilms.com/dvd.php>.

In *Holly*, a white middle-aged American man named Patrick saves 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 (Moche 2006). These images portraying women and girls as mute or blind emphasize their vulnerability and helplessness, along with their need for rescue.

The portrayal of innocence and evil is perhaps most exaggerated in the independent film *The Candy Shop*, produced by several activist organizations in Atlanta, Georgia:



Source: Whitestone Motion Pictures. <http://whitstonemp.com/film/candy-shop/>.

Told as a Tim Burton-style allegory, this short film portrays a demonic man who lures innocent and angelic young girls into his candy shop, where he has a machine that magically transforms the girls into candy, which he then sells to men. The candy-shop owner, who is the trafficker, is tall, skinny and effeminate, wearing garish, tight-fitting clothes, white face makeup, and dark red lipstick, depicting non-normative gender and suggesting nonnormative sexuality. He attempts to lure a twelve-year-old boy to be his apprentice, but the boy realizes what is going on and intervenes to save the girls. In the climactic scene where the boy and the man are fighting, the man falls into his own machine and is transformed into a lollipop. The boy then uses the machine to transform the girls back into themselves, freeing them from the shop and returning them to their parents. The boy's defeat of the effeminate candy-shop owner and his rescue of the girls reestablish normative masculinity. While the film's fairy-tale portrayal of evil, innocence and rescue is an extreme case of the rescue narrative, it shares with the previous examples a portrayal of worthy victims as innocent and helpless. This representation of innocence sets a high standard that could obscure many victims of trafficking, such as underage girls who are sexually experienced or women who are coerced into commercial sex because of poverty or drug addiction, and are thus not perfect victims, locked in a room or chained up. This film also represents a common theme of advocacy organization materials, also seen in the film *Holly*: heroic white males fighting to save young girls from traffickers.

Anti-trafficking activist organizations commonly use images of strong male rescuers. Shared Hope International has a program called The Defenders USA, which seeks to get men involved in the anti-trafficking movement. The Defenders USA website invokes a chivalrous masculinity to inspire men to act as saviors and rescuers (Shared Hope International 2013). A past version of the website asked visitors to "restore a girl" by making a donation. The website had pictures of young, innocent, vulnerable-looking girls with the quotation, "He rescued me," next to pictures of middle-aged white men with the quotation, "I became a defender." Another image caption appealed, "Be the One to Save Her Future." The Defenders USA asks men to pledge not to buy sex. Past pledge cards had images of women and girls pictured in vulnerable positions:



Source: The Defenders USA, Shared Hope International. Accessed 15 June 2012.

The young women are posed looking up at the viewer, or looking away wistfully. They are sad, vulnerable, and bare-shouldered. The current pledge card and a T-shirt for sale on the website have these images:



Source: The Defenders USA, Shared Hope International. <http://sharedhope.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Take-the-Pledge-card.pdf> and <http://sharedhope.org/store/protected-innocence-t-shirt/>.

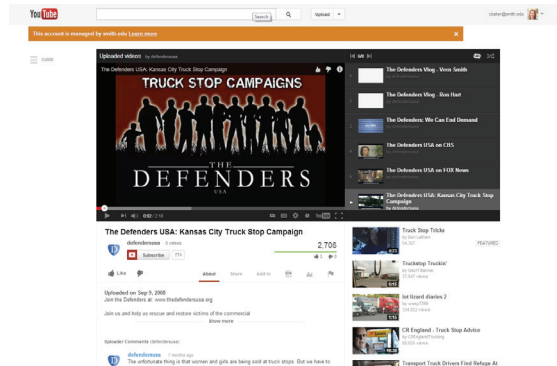
Again, the girls are vulnerable, hunched over in a bed or looking up pleadingly, waiting to be rescued.

In contrast to the images of vulnerable girls, The Defenders USA advocacy materials portray men as strong and heroic rescuers and saviors. In 2010, The Defenders USA sponsored a motorcycle ride to raise money and recruit men into the anti-trafficking movement. In the publicity for the event, the organization used highly masculinized graphics, language, and even font:



Source: The Defenders USA blog. Accessed 15 June 2012. <http://thedefenderproject.wordpress.com>. The current blog can be found at <http://sharedhope.org/category/defenders/>.

In this image, a white arm with clenched fist grabs two red figures posed in the shape of a heart. The words are in boxy, all-capital letters. Another example is an image at the beginning of a current Defenders USA video directed at truckers, which is posted on YouTube and begins with a silhouetted line of men standing aggressively, legs apart and arms linked, with “The Defenders USA” written underneath them:



Source: The Defenders USA, YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFCXCEPER2U&list=UUWWWsX94Fy7R57mrBXQ1dWQ>.

A brochure currently linked to The Defenders USA website, titled *Time to Man Up*, contains these images:



Source: The Defenders USA, *Time to Man Up*. <http://sharedhope.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/About-the-Defenders.pdf>.

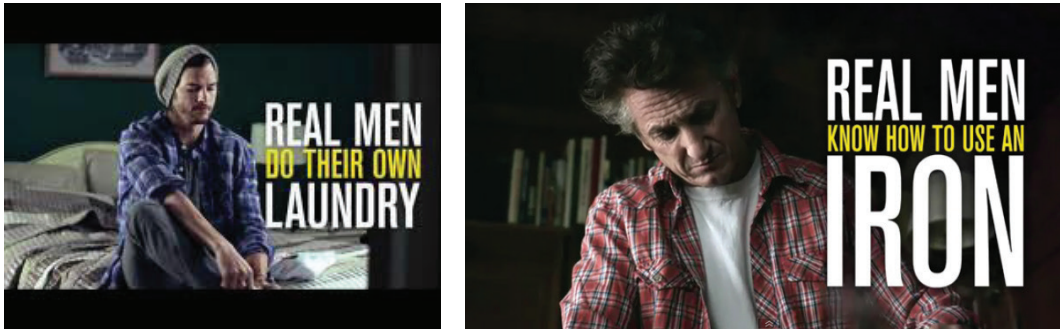
The Defenders USA blog has posts titled “A Man to Fight for You” and “Let’s Be Heroes.” All of these expressions and images portray men as strong, aggressive, and tough. Another group, Truckers Against Trafficking, calls on men to be “everyday heroes” using the following image:



Source: Truckers Against Trafficking. Accessed 28 May 2013. <http://truckersagainstrafficking.org/>.

As one commentator has said, men are coaxed into participating in women’s and other humanitarian issues by being “granted the role of heroic rescuers and saviors” and given a “moral leadership role” (Bernstein 2007, 139).

Utilization of traditional masculinity, however, is not limited to evangelical organizations, as demonstrated in Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore’s Real Men Don’t Buy Girls campaign, which has produced a number of public-service announcements featuring celebrities like Kutcher and Sean Penn.



Source: Real Men Don’t Buy Girls, Thorn’s Channel, YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL95E64A6AEEED5718>.

In these videos, the men appear to be doing traditionally female tasks like laundry and ironing, but as the video progresses the viewer realizes that doing laundry for Kutcher amounts to throwing his dirty socks in the trash can and opening a new package of socks, and ironing for Penn is using the iron to make a grilled-cheese sandwich. After showing their incompetence at traditionally female tasks, both videos end with the words, “Real men don’t buy girls.” The intent is humorous, but the message is very traditional: men can refuse to engage in a traditionally male behavior—predatory sexual behavior—while still remaining real men who prove their masculinity by not knowing how to perform traditionally female tasks. While these videos challenge demand for commercialized sex from girls, they do so in a way that reinforces traditional gender roles.

The gendered nature of sex-trafficking discourses is apparent from the fact that males are rarely mentioned or portrayed as victims in anti-sex-trafficking campaigns, despite the fact that male victims certainly exist (Curtis et al. 2008; Saewyc et al. 2008). The following image appears on the website of a Texas-based anti-trafficking organization, Beauty Will Rise:



Source: Beauty Will Rise. <http://beautywillrise.org/>.

The assumption in the text is that only women and children are targets of sex trafficking. One scholar attributes the invisibility of men in trafficking discourses to the gendered assumption that, with regards to prostitution, “women are victims and men make choices” (Dennis 2008).

Similar to the US government's anti-trafficking position, non-governmental anti-trafficking organizations utilize a rescue narrative that focuses on female innocence, helplessness, and sexual vulnerability. But whereas government materials tend to focus on the state or professionals as rescuers, anti-trafficking activists focus on individual men playing the rescuer role. This gendered contrast is amplified in popular media—both in journalistic accounts of trafficking and, even more so, in Hollywood movies.

The Rescue Narrative in Mass Media: Journalism and Hollywood Movies

Both journalists and, especially, Hollywood movies use the most extreme form of the rescue narrative when addressing the issue of sex trafficking. US media often represent women and girls as helpless victims in need of strong men to rescue them, to which is added a portrayal of other cultures, particularly in developing nations, as primitive and/or barbaric, thereby positioning Americans as saviors. The media regularly portrays the cultures from which trafficked women and girls come as backward and unrelentingly oppressive. For example, on the NBC Dateline special *Children for Sale*, the founder and CEO of evangelical anti-trafficking organization International Justice Mission, Gary Haughen, is seen in Cambodia raiding brothels and rescuing girls. In the opening scene of this film, NBC correspondent Chris Hansen describes Cambodia as “an exotic vacation destination, with ancient cities, bold colors, legendary temples, remarkable beauty—and horrendous crimes that go on behind closed doors” (NBC Dateline 2005). He goes on to describe this “dark place” and its “shameful secret.” Trafficking is framed as a problem “over there,” and privileged Western white men are the powerful moral figures who rescue Cambodian children from exploitative adults. This image from the film is of an American rescuer fleeing from a brothel with a terrified Cambodian child:



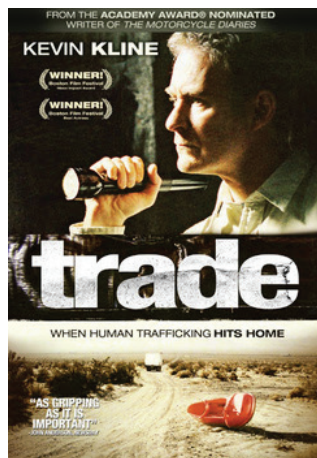
Source: NBC Dateline, *Children for Sale* (2005). <http://www.nbcnews.com/video/dateline/4039095#4039095>.

This recurring rescue narrative configures white men as needed to “rescue brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1988, 296), often downplaying poverty and focusing on a deficient culture as the cause of trafficking. In doing this, “cultural communities are cast as ‘not yet’—not yet realizing feminist potential, not yet enacting human rights values, not yet as modern or progressive as their Euro-American counterparts (who are placed in the role of rescuer)” (Hua 2011, 65). The initial and still predominant framing of sex trafficking as a problem originating outside of the United States likely contributes to this cultural explanation of trafficking.

Sometimes journalists themselves are the rescuers (Hua 2011, 57). Examples include Canadian journalist Victor Malarek, author of the book *The Natashas* (2003) about women trafficked from Eastern Europe, and Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times*, who has written many columns on sex trafficking, particularly

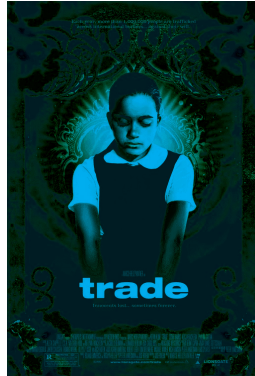
about girls in Cambodia, as well as a book, *Half the Sky* (2009), with his wife Sheryl WuDunn. In many of his *New York Times* columns, Kristof himself is a character within the story, sometimes posing as a john to gain access to brothels in order to save a girl, a technique used by other journalists as well. In one case, Kristof actually bought two girls out of prostitution in Cambodia, which he described in a 2005 story. Perplexed when one of the girls returns to her brothel, he muses, “It would be a tidier world if slaves always sought freedom” (Kristof 2005). Attributing her return to “low self-esteem” and drug addiction, he reports a conversation where he warns her that she will die of AIDS if she stays in the brothel, telling her of “some young women I had just seen, gaunt and groaning, dying of AIDS in Poipet.” Nevertheless, she stays, which Kristof attributes to her being “broken” in a world that “poisons its victims.” Despite his heroic efforts, Kristof is unable to save the girl. In another story, a video “The Face of Slavery” (2009), Kristof, guided by a trafficking survivor, leads the viewer into the dungeons of Cambodian brothels, describing “unspeakable” torture and showing several close-ups of a girl whose eye had been gouged out by her pimp. While the work of Kristof in raising attention to the abuse and exploitation of women and girls around the world is certainly commendable, he follows a common journalistic pattern of portraying himself as a heroic rescuer of helpless women and girls of color in developing nations.

The rescue narrative is particularly strong in Hollywood movies about trafficking, like the 2007 German-US coproduction *Trade*, in which a thirteen-year-old Mexican virgin is kidnapped by Russian sex traffickers and her seventeen-year-old brother attempts to rescue her with the help of a middle-aged Texas policeman and father figure (played by Kevin Kline), who lost his daughter to sex trafficking years before (Kreuzpaintner 2007).



Source: Amazon.com.

In this promotional poster, Klein’s character is featured gripping a flashlight and looking intensely beyond the frame. Across lines of age, race and nationality, the older white American male guides the Mexican boy on how to become a man by rescuing his young sister. The theme of threatened innocence is central to the movie. The plot is driven by the race to rescue the girl before her virginity is sold to the highest bidder. In another promotional poster for the film, the girl is dressed in a school uniform, looking down demurely, surrounded by hearts and flowers:



Source: Lionsgate. <http://www.tradethemovie.com/>.

The girl's innocence is represented not only in her dress and demeanor: there is even a white halo around her face and shoulders. Her virginity begs to be saved from the rapacious red lust advancing toward her from all directions.

The themes of female sexual vulnerability, the heroic fight to protect a girl's virginity, and heroic masculine rescue are also central to the film *Taken* (Morel 2010), which grossed over \$145 million at the box office. This film portrays a naive 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. Similar to *Trade*, the plot is driven by Neeson's race to rescue his daughter before her virginity is auctioned to a wealthy Arab man. In the film, Neeson is portrayed as hypermasculine—willing and able to kill anyone who gets in the way of rescuing his daughter:



Sources: The Movie Blog and IMDb.

In the promotional poster to the left, Neeson's character is posed in an aggressive stance, legs apart, pulling a gun out of his long leather jacket and looking as if he is about to whip around. In the poster on the right, he is dark and menacing, photographed from below, again with a gun, and with a superimposed quotation from the film where he threatens to kill his daughter's kidnapper. The central focus of this extremely violent film is the estranged, unemployed father's restoration of his masculine authority through the act of rescuing his daughter. The extreme vulnerability of the daughter, the brutality of the traffickers, and the heroic Neeson character all convey a very traditional story of gender and rescue. Rescue as an exchange of women between men—the trafficker and the rescuer—constructs a form of heroic masculinity.

In both of these films, sex trafficking is portrayed in simplistic, individualistic, good-and-evil terms, where there are only “slaves, sinners and saviors” (Davidson 2005, 4). The focus is on individual victims and perpetrators. Victims are almost always female (although sometimes they are boys); they are innocent, helpless, naive, totally victimized, and needing to be rescued. Rescuers are white Western men. At the start of both films, the disruption of patriarchal authority is portrayed by the absence or the inadequacy of male protectors. The need for male intervention is occasioned by the vulnerability and naïveté of the females who end up trafficked. The plot development in both films centers around males learning or reasserting their manhood by rescuing females, thereby reestablishing patriarchal authority. The male rescuers in both films are former members of law enforcement, but rather than rely on the criminal justice system, they seek vigilante justice. The message to girls is also very traditional. *Trade* and *Taken* begin with girls defying their parents; they are abducted as a result of their defiance. The implicit message in both films is that girls should listen to and obey their parents, and stay close to home because the world is a dangerous place for them.

Men are usually the rescuers, but sometimes women are, although women usually fail in saving the central victim, as in the 2005 Lifetime miniseries *Human Trafficking* or the 2010 film *Whistleblower*. In *Human Trafficking*, a female US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent, played by Mira Sorvino, attempts to save an undocumented woman trafficked into the United States. *Whistleblower* portrays a Nebraska cop (played by Rachel Weisz) who becomes a peacekeeper in post-war Bosnia and exposes the United Nations for covering up a sex-trafficking ring. Both characters’ failure to rescue the primary victims in these films stands in stark contrast to the success of male rescuers in *Trade* and *Taken*.



Source: IMDb

The portrayals of the female would-be rescuers on the posters for these movies are quite different than the portrayals of the men on the posters for *Trade* and *Taken*. Rachel Weisz’s character holds her arms close to her body and looks off to the side, warily. Mira Sorvino’s character strikes an aggressive stance, holding a gun with outstretched arms, but she has a distressed and unsure expression on her face. These poses make the women look weaker than the aggressive and determined poses of the men in the promotional materials for *Trade* and *Taken*.

When placed side by side, the portrayals of sex trafficking by the US government, anti-trafficking organizations, and the media exhibit some common patterns, but also distinctions. All three tend to focus on sexually vulnerable and helpless women and girls in need of protection and rescue. Whereas the government

discourses frame the state or professionals as rescuers, anti-trafficking organizations and the media focus on individual male rescuers. Hollywood distinguishes itself with an extreme and hypermasculinized version of the trafficking rescue narrative, where the rescuer is a former law enforcement officer turned vigilante and playing outside the rules. In all three mediums, race and nationality play out in predictable ways, with white Western men rescuing women and girls, often in developing countries, from traffickers who are men of color or Eastern Europeans. These stories reiterate conservative beliefs and values around gender, sexuality, and nationality. In this way, ironically and despite the good intentions that surely motivate many of the activists on this issue, rescue narratives reinforce some of the social and cultural conditions that make women and girls vulnerable to sex trafficking in the first place—sexism, racism, and xenophobia.

Reframing the Discourses

The film *Trade* was based on a 2004 *New York Times Magazine* article on sex trafficking by journalist Peter Landesman, titled “The Girls Next Door.” This article played a significant role in raising awareness about sex trafficking into the United States. In the article, Landesman quotes International Justice Mission’s CEO Gary Haughen saying, “Sex trafficking isn’t a poverty issue but a law-enforcement issue” (Landesman 2004). This perspective reflects the predominant view that sex trafficking is a criminal justice problem (Gulati 2011), a view that grows naturally out of the stories that are routinely told about sex trafficking. Rescue narratives portray the cause of trafficking to be individual deviant men or networks of criminals and the rescuers to be the state, health-care or social-service professionals, heroic male defenders, or hypermasculine vigilantes. This framing, however, obscures structural factors and the social, economic, and political conditions that create vulnerability to trafficking, such as wealth inequality and poverty, gendered cultural beliefs that devalue women and girls and commodify sex, and the denial of human rights based on race and/or nationality. These are the conditions that the state often creates, perpetuates, or fails to ameliorate through laws and public policies. The responsibility for trafficking is “shifted from structural factors and dominant institutions onto individual, deviant men: foreign brown men (as in the White Slave trade of centuries past) or, even more remarkably, African American men living in the inner city” (Bernstein 2007, 144), in the case of domestic minor sex trafficking.

With the support of many anti-trafficking organizations, the United States has concentrated on criminal justice solutions to sex trafficking. The TVPA focuses on “the three Ps”—prosecution, protection, and prevention—around which the annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) reports are organized (US Department of State 2011, 16). The order of the three Ps reflects the priorities of the Act. The focus and the vast majority of the Act’s funding is directed toward criminalization, prosecution, and punishment. The Act created new federal crimes related to trafficking and provided abundant resources to prosecute traffickers. Relatively few resources are dedicated to helping victims directly. Aid for foreign victims of trafficking, including visas to stay in the United States, is very limited, and is contingent on the willingness of the victims to testify against their traffickers, an offer few have agreed to for fear of harm to themselves or their families by traffickers (US Immigration 2013). Even less has been allocated to victims of domestic minor sex trafficking (Baker 2012, 1004). The TVPA made only a modest attempt to address the economic conditions that lead to trafficking by providing limited funds to create economic alternatives to those vulnerable to trafficking, including microcredit lending programs, job training, and programs to keep girls in school (22 US Code § 7104(a) (2000)). The Act prioritizes criminal prosecution and protection of victims over prevention and empowerment of people vulnerable to trafficking.

The TVPA pressures countries around the world to adopt these priorities. Since 2001, the United States has issued an annual Trafficking in Persons report, in which it evaluates every country estimated to have more than one victims on whether it is taking appropriate action to combat trafficking. The United States has determined the criteria for evaluation, which include passing criminal prohibitions, prosecuting traffickers, and assisting trafficking victims. The Department of State ranks nations according to their compliance with these standards. The Act authorizes the President to withdraw non-humanitarian, non-trade-related aid to countries that are not in compliance (22 US Code §§ 7106–7107 (2000)). As a result, many nations around the world have adopted the priorities set by the United States government. The most dramatic example of the criminal justice approach to trafficking is the “raid-and-rehabilitate” method of dealing with sex trafficking, which the United States has supported by funding groups that forcibly remove people from brothels and send them to government-sponsored “rehabilitation” facilities, as was portrayed in the NBC Dateline special *Children for Sale*, discussed above. The federally funded International Justice Mission has sent its personnel to countries like Cambodia and India to conduct raids and sting operations in order to rescue women and girls from brothels and turn pimps and madams over to local law enforcement for prosecution (NBC Dateline 2005).

In response to US pressure and informed by the rescue narrative framing of trafficking, many nations have strengthened border controls and tightened immigration laws in the name of protecting women and girls from trafficking. For example, scholar Mary Crawford has argued that sex-trafficking discourses in Nepal, which, similarly to US discourses, portray perfect victims who are innocent, naive and backward, have resulted in policies that restrict the human rights of women and girls, including their ability to migrate, and do little to address root causes of trafficking like gender and caste (Crawford 2010; see also Parreñas 2008). These restrictions on women’s rights and mobility may actually have the opposite effect than what was intended—they may push women further into situations of violence and abuse. In her article on Chinese migrants to Canada, Nadita Sharma argues that concerns about sex trafficking have legitimated increasingly repressive state practices of immigration control in Canada while obscuring that migrants have been “displaced by practices that have resulted in the loss of their land and/or livelihoods through international trade liberalization policies, mega-development projects, the loss of employment in capitalist labor markets, or war” (Sharma 2005, 89). The anti-trafficking rhetoric, she argues, justifies restrictive national and international security agendas and more stringent limits on migration. The underlying assumption about migrants, particularly females, is that they are weak, submissive, and incapable of looking after themselves. The result is to dissuade women and girls from migrating in order to protect them from harm, thereby reinforcing the gender-biased notion that women and girls need constant male (or state) protection.

Rather than framing sex trafficking as a criminal justice problem, an alternative approach would be to view the root causes of trafficking as the economic, political, and social conditions that make people vulnerable to trafficking in the first place. Many argue that neoliberal economic policies have created extreme income inequality and poverty through laws that allow for the free flow of capital while restricting the flow of labor. These policies work to the benefit of corporations, but impoverish people (Barker and Feiner 2006, 95–117). Neoliberal policies forced on poor countries by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have required privatization of state industries and services and a shift from subsistence to export production, which makes populations vulnerable to economic forces outside of their control. These policies have also pushed the development of tourism (and the related demand for sex) and austerity programs that eliminate social services that help women and girls stay out of poverty (Davidson 2005, 45–46). As

Cynthia Enloe has argued, US corporations collude with militarized governments abroad to make women's labor cheap, to erode labor rights, and to cast aside safety and environmental standards (Enloe 2007, 19–38). These neoliberal policies create economies that serve profit rather than people, thereby generating populations vulnerable to trafficking. In addition to economic conditions, political conditions like war or states' depriving ethnic minorities of citizenship rights (Feingold 2003) are factors that might increase people's vulnerability to sex trafficking. Finally, social conditions contribute to making people vulnerable to sex trafficking. Cultural belief systems that devalue women and girls, commodify sex, and legitimate male demand for commodified sex are among the root causes of sex trafficking. Effective solutions to sex trafficking must address these structural factors.

Within the United States, advocates against domestic sex trafficking have also focused on criminal justice solutions to the problem. For example, as discussed above, Shared Hope International presses state legislatures to pass and strengthen criminal laws against commercial sexual exploitation of girls (Shared Hope International 2011), as does the Polaris Project (2012) based in Washington, DC. This criminal justice framing, however, does not address the underlying factors that make women and girls vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation. As in the international context, evidence suggests that social and economic factors play a role in creating populations vulnerable to trafficking in the United States. For example, in the late 1990s, shortly after the substantial weakening of the social safety net in the United States with the passage of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, Atlanta juvenile court judges Nina Hickson and Glenda Hatchett noticed increasing numbers of young girls coming through their courtrooms on prostitution charges (Richardson and Boxill 2007, 143). After this law went into effect, the number of children receiving government support went down significantly, but not the number of children in poverty (Child Trends 2013). In 2010, 20% of children in the United States lived in poverty and 42% lived in families below 200% of the poverty level (Child Trends 2012). The high rates of child poverty in the United States and diminishing social support services for children in poverty and homeless youth, along with high rates of child sexual abuse, all contribute to commercial sexual exploitation of minors and their vulnerability to sex trafficking (Estes and Weiner 2001, 3; Anderson 2009).

Race and sexuality exacerbate poverty and increase vulnerability to sex trafficking. Black and Hispanic youth experience much higher rates of poverty—over 40% live below the poverty level and 60% are below 200% of the poverty level (Child Trends 2012). Native Americans on reservations have double the national rate of poverty, and many reservations have six times the national rate of extreme poverty (National Center for Education Statistics 2008, iii). Predictably, Native Americans also experience high rates of sex trafficking (Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center 2009). Poverty and homelessness are particularly acute among GLBT youth, making them especially vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation (Ray 2006, 1), so challenging heterosexist ideologies and institutions is also part of the solution to trafficking. High levels of poverty, in combination with extreme materialism in United States society and popular culture's sexual objectification of young girls (American Psychological Association 2010), along with glorification of pimp culture (Lloyd 2010), make young people particularly vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation. The commodification of sex intersects with stereotypical gender roles to normalize male demand, which feeds off girls made vulnerable by poverty and a culture that sexualizes them.

A comprehensive solution to sex trafficking must include support for laws and social programs to ameliorate the poverty that makes many people vulnerable to trafficking—laws requiring a living wage, adequate healthcare, affordable housing, quality schools, especially for the poor, and strengthening rather than rolling back labor rights. Particular attention should be paid to policies that would reduce the

continuing segregation of women into low-paying jobs, wage disparities based on gender and race, lack of quality child care, lack of paid parental leave, the inadequate and punitive welfare system, and inadequate child-support enforcement. All of these factors contribute to the ongoing economic marginalization of women and children, making them vulnerable to sex trafficking. While criminal law has an important part to play in combatting trafficking, the criminal justice focus of the mainstream anti-trafficking movement obscures the deeper structural causes of trafficking and thus fails to prevent sex trafficking in the first place.

Conclusion

The mainstream discourses around trafficking in the United States reinscribe very traditional notions of gender and sexuality, where female sexual purity is in danger, girls and women need to be protected and rescued, and men are heroic rescuers. These paternalistic discourses also reinscribe relations of power based on race and nationality, and can be used to justify relationships of domination. In her book, *Dangerous Brown Men: Exploiting Sex, Violence and Feminism in the War on Terror*, Gargi Bhattacharyya (2008) argues that sexualized racism is at the center of the war on terror and is used to justify the retreat from previously accepted standards of international conduct in conflict. Sexualized racism similarly pervades the discourses around sex trafficking. Discourses on sex trafficking both abroad and in the United States regularly portray “dangerous brown men” (Bhattacharyya 2008) as evil and barbaric others who threaten innocent femininity, setting up whites and/or the West to be the heroic rescuer. Perhaps the disproportionate focus on sex trafficking over other types of trafficking is connected to the political and cultural work that the issue is performing. The political work is the bolstering of the United States’ role as a leader in human rights at a time when this status is being called into question because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the war on terror. The cultural work is assuaging anxieties around gender, sexuality, and race in a globalizing world with increasing female migration and decreasing US economic dominance.

To effectively combat sex trafficking, the anti-trafficking movement must move beyond the simplistic framing of the issue as a matter of “slaves, sinners and saviors” (Davidson 2005, 4) best addressed by a stronger state and aggressive law enforcement, to a more complex and nuanced analysis that attends to the root causes of trafficking—unjust economic systems and conservative ideologies of gender, race and nation. A feminist approach to trafficking must be one that focuses on empowering people, not just protecting or rescuing them. Sexually exploited people are often in the situations they are in because they lack power and control over their lives, so activists must be very conscious about articulating their activism in ways that do not reinforce that disempowerment. The rescue discourse “casts women as victims in need of protection from harm rather than as subjects deserving of positive rights” (Soderlund 2005, 82). But protection is offered selectively and at a cost; it only “stretches to those deemed innocent, while it persecutes, criminalizes, or ignores those who are seen as complicit in their victimization” (Soderlund 2005, 82–83). In the context of the West’s portrayal of Muslim women, Lila Abu-Lughod contends, “rather than seeking to ‘save’ others (with the superiority it implies and the violences it would entail), we might better think in terms of ... considering our own larger responsibilities to address the forms of global injustice that are powerful shapers of the world in which they find themselves” (Abu-Lughod 2002, 783). Similarly, in the context of trafficking, rather than using a rescue narrative to frame the problem, which focuses almost exclusively on criminal justice solutions to sex trafficking, activists must focus on the root structural causes of trafficking and work to enhance democracy to empower vulnerable populations most likely to experience trafficking.

Public policy needs to address how trafficking is rooted in political, economic, and social conditions. With this framing of the issue, solutions to trafficking become focused on systemic and preventative solutions

rather than individual, after-the-fact, criminal justice solutions. The experience of trafficking varies widely in different contexts, so local, grassroots solutions are key to addressing the situations of women and girls (Parreñas 2008, 158–66). Policy needs to reflect the issue’s complexity rather than relying on simplistic solutions. Particular solutions that address root causes of trafficking ask much more of people than rescue. In his excellent film on sex trafficking in Burma, David Feingold (2003) says, “Saving little Aspu has more emotional resonance than doing something about changing the conditions of her life.” Saving her is easier and asks less of society than changing those conditions. Changing the conditions of her life, on the other hand, requires people to face how they contribute to those conditions via economic policies that benefit the privileged, as well as deeply engrained cultural and social biases. Systemic changes are harder to achieve than criminal justice solutions, but they are necessary to eradicate sex trafficking.

Notes

1. The expression “slaves, sinners, and saviors” is drawn from Julia O’Connell Davidson’s *Children in the Global Sex Trade* (2005, 4).
 2. Intervene Training, Third Annual Northwest Conference Against Trafficking, Portland, Oregon, January 14, 2010 (attended by author).
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