

Sex, Trafficking, and the Politics of Freedom

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Sex, Trafficking, and the Politics of Freedom¹

During a blustery New York City weekend in the final days of 2008, two very different cinematic events focused on the politics of gender, sexuality, and human rights stood out for their symmetry. The first event, a benefit screening of *Call and Response*, a just-released “rockumentary” about human trafficking made by the Christian rock-musician-cum-filmmaker Justin Dillon, showed at a hip downtown cinema to a packed and enthusiastic mixed-gender audience of young, predominantly white and Korean evangelical Christians. The second event, a public screening of the film *Very Young Girls*, a sober documentary about feminist activist Rachel Lloyd and her Harlem-based nonprofit organization for teenaged girls in street prostitution, was populated primarily by secular, middle-aged professional women with a longstanding commitment to the abolition of the sex trade. Despite the obvious demographic contrasts between the participants and the different constellations of secular and religious values that they harbored, more striking still was the common political foundation that the two groups have come to share.

Over the past decade, mounting public and political attention has been directed toward the “traffic in women” as a dangerous manifestation of global gender inequalities. Media accounts have rehearsed similar stories of the abduction, transport, and forced sexual labor of women and girls whose poverty and desperation render them amenable to easy victimization in first- and third-world cities. Meanwhile, a remarkably diverse coalition of social activists and policy makers has put forth an array of new legislation at the local, national, and transnational levels.² Despite renowned disagreements around the politics of sex and gender, these disparate groups have come together to advocate for harsher criminal and economic penalties against traffickers, prostitutes’ customers, and nations deemed to be taking insufficient steps to stem the flow of trafficked women.³

Remarkably, the anti-trafficking movement has been embraced by activists occupying a wide spectrum of political positions—one that extends from so-called “radical feminist” groups like the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women to such well-established Christian-right organizations as Focus on the Family.⁴ Yet I would like to argue that what has served to unite this coalition of so-called “strange bedfellows” is not simply an apolitical humanitarian concern with individuals trapped in “modern-day slavery,” as commentators such as the *New York Times*’ Nicholas Kristof have maintained, nor activists’ underlying commitment to “traditional” or “puritanical” ideals of gender and sexuality, as some feminist and left-leaning critics have offered.⁵ Instead, I seek to demonstrate the extent to which evangelical and feminist anti-trafficking activism has been fueled by a shared commitment to carceral paradigms of gender justice (a notion that I develop as “carceral feminism”) and to militarized humanitarianism as the preeminent mode of engagement by the state.

By focusing on feminist versions of carceral politics, I am, of course, joining a broader conversation about the social role of incarceration and its derivatives that has occupied diverse social theorists, ranging from Michel Foucault to Angela Davis to David Garland.⁶ Like other theorists who have connected contemporary trends in carcerality and neoliberalism, I am interested in situating punitive policies in terms of current trends within both culture and political economy.⁷ By focusing on “militarized humanitarianism” (a term that I shall use to refer to the application of carceral policies to the global stage) I join scholars ranging from Didier Fassin to Inderpal Grewal to Lila Abu-Lughod, who have demonstrated the coercive underpinnings of such morally prized terrain as humanitarian action, human rights, and militaristic interventions on behalf of women’s interests.⁸

Taking as a departure point my previous ethnographic research with migrant and domestic sex workers and the social actors who aim to regulate their movements,⁹ in this essay I trace the ambitions of the diverse coalition of feminist activists, evangelical Christians, and bipartisan state officials who have recently produced policy transformations on a scale unparalleled since the White Slavery scare of the last century.¹⁰ Drawing upon in-depth interviews with anti-trafficking activists, religious leaders, and state agents as well as ethnographic research at state- and activist-sponsored policy meetings, in federal courthouses, and at “rescue projects” for victims of sex trafficking, I explore how contemporary campaigns against human trafficking have mobilized constituencies with divergent backgrounds and agendas, and the overlapping moral and political visions around which the alliance between these groups has been forged. A theoretically driven *ethnography of a discourse*, my analysis is deliberately mobile and multi-sited, travelling with its empirical object across varied political and cultural domains.¹¹

In previous essays (Bernstein 2007a, Bernstein 2010a, Bernstein 2010b), I have sketched current trends in terms of feminists’ and evangelicals shared commitments to neoliberal (i.e., market-based and punitive as opposed to redistributive) solutions to contemporary social problems, with trafficking or so-called “modern-day slavery” representing the antithesis of low-wage work in the purportedly “free” market. In what follows, I draw upon my ethnographic and policy research with secular feminist and evangelical Christian anti-trafficking activists to argue that the alliance that has been so efficacious in framing contemporary anti-trafficking politics is the product of two historically unique and intersecting trends: a rightward shift on the part of many mainstream feminists and other secular liberals away from a redistributive model of justice and toward a politics of incarceration, coincident with a leftward move on the part of many younger evangelicals away from the isolationist issues of abortion and gay marriage and toward a globally-oriented social justice theology. Contemporary anti-trafficking politics have occurred squarely at this intersection, and, despite divergent political trajectories, both evangelical Christians and secular feminists have come to harbor similar understandings of freedom, justice, and foreign and domestic policy.

A Genealogy of “Sex Trafficking”

As critics such as legal scholar Jennifer Chacón (2006) have noted, “trafficking” as defined in current federal law and in international protocols could conceivably encompass sweatshop labor, agricultural work, or even corporate crime, but it has been the far less common instances of sexually trafficked women and girls that have stimulated the most concern by conservative Christians, prominent feminist activists, and the press.¹² Various commentators have also noted the similarities between the moral panic surrounding sex trafficking in the current moment and the so-called “white slavery” scare in the postbellum years of the nineteenth century (Saunders 2005; Soderlund 2005; Agustín 2007). While this earlier wave of concern engaged a similar coalition of “new abolitionist” feminists and evangelical Christians, it is interesting to note that, prior to the Progressive era, the goal of eradicating prostitution had not seemed particularly urgent to either group.¹³ By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, as tensions mounted over migration, urbanization, and the social changes being wrought by industrial capitalism, narratives of the traffic in women and girls for sexual slavery abounded. Though empirical investigations would eventually reveal the white slavery narrative to be largely without factual base (the evidence suggested that large numbers of women were not, in fact, forced into prostitution, other than by economic conditions) anti-white slave crusaders were nevertheless successful in spurring the passage of a series of red-light abatement acts, as well as the 1910 Mann-Elkins White Slavery Act, which brought the nation’s first era of widespread, commercialized prostitution to a close.¹⁴

During the past decade, the term “trafficking” has once again been made synonymous with not only forced but also voluntary prostitution, while an earlier wave of political struggles for both sex workers’ and migrants’ rights has been eclipsed.¹⁵ According to observers both laudatory and critical, this displacement has been facilitated by the embrace of a certain version of human rights discourses by abolitionist feminists, who effectively neutralized domains of political struggle around questions of labor, migration, and sexual freedom via the tropes of prostitution as gender violence and sexual slavery. The shift to the human rights field in the mid-1990s was crucial to relocating a set of internecine political debates among feminists about the meaning of prostitution and pornography—one that had divided the U.S. feminist movement throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, and in which the nonabolitionist factions were emerging triumphant—to a global humanitarian terrain in which the abolitionist constituency was more likely to prevail. As one of the founding members of the feminist NGO, Equality Now, described it to me, by resituating these issues in terms of the “traffic in women” overseas and as a violation of international commitments to women’s human rights, they were able to wage the same sexual battles unopposed.¹⁶

A simultaneous and similarly profound shift occurred during the same years within the U.S. evangelical movement. If in the early 1990s most evangelicals had little to

do with the human rights field, by 1996 a greater reliance on NGOs by the United Nations, coupled with an awareness of the increasingly global spread of evangelical Christianity, would encourage many newly formed evangelical NGOs to enter the international political fray. In their book, *Globalizing Family Values* (2003), the political scientists Doris Buss and Didi Hermann attribute these trends to the proliferation of UN-hosted conferences in the 1990s, which facilitated the expansion and further institutionalization of NGO involvement in international law and policy-making. In combination with U.S. evangelicals' growing interest in the issues of international religious freedom and the persecution of Christians, this shift served to propel new sets of religious actors into the trafficking debates, and to make religious voices more prominent in the human rights field (Hertzke 2004).

Evangelical advocacy around human trafficking also received a significant burst of energy after George W. Bush's Administration expanded upon President Clinton's "charitable choice" initiative, which allowed avowedly faith-based organizations to become eligible for federal funding. Since 2001, the year that President Bush established the Office of Faith Based Initiatives, evangelical Christian groups have secured a growing proportion of federal monies for both international and domestic anti-trafficking work as well as funds for the prevention of HIV/AIDs (Mink 2001; Butler 2006). Despite the disenfranchisement of certain religious right constituencies, this is a trend that has persisted during the presidency of Barack Obama (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2009).

In a recent essay in the journal *Politics and Society*, the sociologist Ron Weitzer (2007) described feminist and conservative Christian campaigns against sex trafficking in the United States as a "moral crusade" akin to previous social mobilizations against alcohol consumption and pornography. Weitzer demonstrates that although the campaigns' empirical claims about the extent of sex trafficking into the United States are deeply flawed, they have nonetheless been successfully institutionalized in a growing number of NGOs and in official state policy. While Weitzer's argument is an important one and dovetails with various critical feminist perspectives on the issue, his account stops short of looking at other sociologically significant links between the two unlikely new-abolitionist constituencies—specifically, that which has united the two groups around a punitive and far from historically inevitable paradigm of state engagement, both domestically and internationally. In what follows, I describe how a sexual politics that is intricately intertwined with broader agendas of criminalization and incarceration has shaped the framing of trafficking for both conservative Christians and mainstream feminists, helping to align the issue with state interests and to catapult it to its recent position of political and cultural prominence. I begin by tracing the contours of what I term *carceral feminism*, providing a closer examination of those sectors of the contemporary feminist movement that have embraced the anti-trafficking cause.

The Sexual Politics of Carceral Feminism

I've spent about 17 years working on this issue—most of that time I was on the losing side, as those who supported “sex worker” rights won almost every political battle....Those were the depressing years....Now the truth about prostitution/sex trafficking is emerging and agencies are responding as never before. I think more pimps and traffickers have been arrested in the last year than in the whole previous decade.

—Donna Hughes, anti-trafficking activist and University of Rhode Island professor of women's studies, writing in the *National Review Online* (2006)

Trafficking is like domestic violence. The only thing that prevents recurrence is fear of arrest.

—Dorchen Leidholt, feminist activist from the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, speaking at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, March 2, 2007

What do we want? A strong trafficking law! When do we want it? Now!

— Call and response cry at National Organization for Women rally for New York State law, which would increase criminal penalties against prostitutes' customers, New York, February 1, 2007

For grassroots feminists of the second wave who were interested in critiquing mainstream economic and familial institutions, it would perhaps have been a strange specter to imagine that a generation hence, pioneering figures such as Laura Lederer (author of the classic feminist volume *Take Back the Night* (1980), Dorchen Leidholdt (a prominent advocate for victims of domestic violence), and Donna Hughes (Carlson Endowed Chair in Women's Studies at the University of Rhode Island) would find themselves one bright July morning as the featured speakers at a panel sponsored by the Hudson Institute, a neoconservative Washington, D.C. think tank, entitled “The Profits of Pimping: Abolishing Sex Trafficking in the United States.”¹⁷ As the all-white array of panelists spoke to the audience about the urgent need to root out inner city street pimps and “pimp culture,” to publicly stigmatize the male patrons of prostitutes, and to promote healthy families domestically and globally, the audience, comprised of representatives from assorted right-wing organizations including the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and Feminists for Life, erupted into frequent applause.

No less remarkable would be the presence of organizations such as the secular-liberal Coalition Against Trafficking in Women as witnesses for the prosecution in the recent federal sex trafficking case, *United States vs. Sabil Mujahid* (2011). In the *Mujahid* case, an African American street pimp from Anchorage, Alaska faced forty-one counts of human

trafficking and a lifetime in prison for his violence-tinged relationships with the women concerned—crimes that, prior to the advent of “sex trafficking,” would have earned him mere months, or even weeks, in prison; and which, absent the trafficking framework, might instead have been adjudicated in terms of pimping or domestic violence.¹⁸ Although carceral visions of gender justice have come to seem so right and natural as to be practically inevitable—particularly where questions of sexual violence are concerned—a revisiting of the recent history of feminist activism around such questions suggests that this has not always been the case. In fact, a number of critical genealogies of second-wave feminism have helped to shed light upon this surprising trajectory, demonstrating how contemporary feminist activism around questions of sexual violence has become a crucial enabler of the late-capitalist carceral turn.

For example, in a recent book tracing the coemergence of second-wave feminist attention to sexual violence and neoliberal agendas of incarceration, the political theorist Kristin Bumiller (2008) has demonstrated the ways in which a myopic feminist focus on the criminalization of rape and domestic violence during the 1990s contrasted with grassroots and early second-wave feminist concerns about women’s social and economic empowerment. Arguing that the neoliberal carceral imperative has had a devastating impact on the ways that feminist engagement with sexual violence has been framed, Bumiller shows how the reciprocal is also true: once feminism became fatally inflected by strategies of social control, it could serve as an effective inspiration for broader campaigns for criminalization. She observes that by the early 2000s, the sexual violence agenda of feminism was increasingly being exported as part of U.S. human rights policy, solidifying the carceral imperative within feminism domestically and spreading the paradigm of feminism-as-crime-control across the globe.

The evidence indeed suggests that contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns have been far more successful at criminalizing economically and racially marginalized populations, enforcing border control, and measuring other countries’ compliance with human rights standards based on the curtailment of prostitution than they have been at issuing any concrete benefits to victims. This is true within the United States, where pimps such as Mujahid can now be given three consecutive life sentences for “sex trafficking,” and where migrant sex workers are increasingly arrested and deported for the sake of their “protection” (Bernstein 2007b). It is also true elsewhere around the globe, where the U.S. tier-ranking of other countries has led to the tightening of borders internationally and to the passage of punitive anti-prostitution policies in numerous countries.¹⁹

Most recently, with gathering feminist attention to so-called “domestic” forms of trafficking, it has become clear that the shift from local forms of sexual violence to the international field back to a concern with policing U.S. inner cities—this time, under the guise of protecting women’s human rights—has provided critical circuitry for the carceral feminist agenda.²⁰ In fact, the overwhelming majority of federal trafficking cases currently concern underage women in inner city street prostitution, which police and prosecutors



FIGURE 1. “Rescued” sex workers in lockdown in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Photograph from the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Work Projects. The photo captures the extent to which freedom and incarceration become literally equated in carceral feminist rescue projects, where women’s “freedom” is obtained not just via the punishment of so-called traffickers, but also through the incarceration of sex-workers themselves.

describe as the easiest way to generate case numbers.²¹ At the state and municipal levels, the numbers are even more skewed. For example, during the 2008 calendar year in New York City, which is purportedly one of the biggest hubs of international sex trafficking, *all* of the documented cases—and there were eight in total—took place on the streets of the Bronx.²² Enforcement-wise, this has resulted in a highly racialized police crackdown on Black and Latino men and women who are involved in the street-based sexual economy—including pimps, clients, and sex workers alike.²³

The carceral feminist intermingling of crime control and the putative rescue and restoration of victims is also powerfully illustrated by the recent film *Very Young Girls*. The film has been shown not only in diverse feminist venues and on HBO, but also at the U.S. State Department, at various evangelical megachurches, at Princeton University in 2011, and at the conservative Christian King’s College.²⁴ Under the rubric of portraying domestic trafficking, the film seeks to garner sympathy for young African American women who find themselves trapped in the street-level sexual economy. By framing the women as “very young girls” (as can be seen in the promotional poster for

the film, the seated protagonist depicted is so small that her feet dangle from the chair) and as the innocent victims of sexual abuse (a category that has historically been reserved for white and non-sex-working victims), the film can convincingly present its perspective as antiracist and progressive. Yet the young women's innocence in the film is achieved at the cost of completely demonizing the young men who profit from their earnings, and who are presented as irredeemably criminal and subhuman. The film relentlessly strips away the humanity of young African American men in the street economy, along with the complex tangle of factors beyond prostitution (including racism and poverty) that shape the girls' lives. At one screening of the film that I attended, the audience members called for the pimps not only to be locked away indefinitely but to be physically assaulted. In *Very Young Girls*, as in carceral feminism more generally, a vision of social justice as criminal justice, and of punitive systems of control as the best motivational deterrents for men's bad behavior, serves as a crucial point of connection with state actors, evangelicals, and others who have embraced the anti-trafficking cause.



FIGURE 2. Promotional poster for the film, *Very Young Girls*.

Militarizing Humanitarianism in New Evangelical Anti-Trafficking Campaigns

Among many left-leaning secular critics of contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns, old stereotypes persist about the underlying cultural politics and broader social interests that have resonated with contemporary evangelical Christians, a group that is frequently assumed to be one and the same with the anti-pornography, anti-abortion, and anti-gay rights activists of generations past. Although avowedly Christian right groups such as Focus on the Family and Concerned Women for America have also participated in the contemporary anti-trafficking crusade, my research in the “justice-oriented” churches that have taken on the issue, at prayer gatherings for trafficking victims, and at evangelical anti-trafficking conferences and film screenings suggests that such groups do not

represent the preponderance of evangelical Christian grassroots activity.

Instead, a new group of young, highly educated, and relatively affluent evangelicals who often describe themselves as members of the “justice generation” have pursued some of the most active and passionate campaigning around sexual slavery and human trafficking. In contrast to their Christian right predecessors, the young evangelicals who have pioneered Christian engagement in the contemporary anti-trafficking movement not only embrace the languages of women’s rights and social justice but have also taken deliberate steps to distinguish their work from the sexual politics of other conservative Christians. Though many of these evangelicals remain opposed to both gay marriage and abortion, they do not grant these issues the same political priority as their more conservative peers. Instead, young evangelicals have argued that the best way to forge an effective politics is to move away from hot-button controversies around gender and sexuality and to focus their attention on what they understand to be uncontroversial and consensus-building issues such as global warming, human trafficking, and HIV/AIDs.²⁵

Yet the new-evangelical pursuit of social justice that has spawned the anti-trafficking movement remains wedded to a particular constellation of sexual and gender politics, one that, while sharing key points of continuity with their Christian Right brethren, is in equally important ways quite distinct. At a basic level, new evangelicals’ embrace of human trafficking as a focus of concern must be situated as a culturally modernizing project rather than a traditionalizing one. Under the guise of moral condemnation and prostitutes’ rescue, evangelical women in particular are granted new opportunities to participate in sexually explicit culture, international travel, and the previously forbidden corners of urban space. Moreover, contemporary evangelical anti-trafficking activists hew closely to a liberal-feminist vision of egalitarian heterosexual marriage and professional-sphere equality, one in which heterosexual prostitution, as for many middle-class secular liberals, represents the antithesis of both these political aims.

Despite the genuinely modernizing aspects of new-evangelical sexual politics, a recent spate of celebratory declarations in the secular press about the “fatal fracture” of the U.S. evangelical movement may also be overstated, as there remain several elements that continue to connect the various developing factions.²⁶ Although new evangelicals do care less about culture-war battles than they do about humanitarian issues and global social justice, their vision of social justice remains one that equates directly with criminal justice, and to the extent that economic issues are considered as causal factors in human suffering, the solutions that new evangelicals forge are imagined in corporate and consumer-friendly terms. In this way, new evangelicals remain beholden to an underlying carceral politics that serves to link them not just to those sectors of the contemporary feminist movement that have themselves veered rightward in recent decades but also to the entire rightwing spectrum of criminal justice-oriented social and economic conservatives.

A stark example of the criminal justice agenda that undergirds new-evangelical

humanitarian interventions is represented by the International Justice Mission (IJM)—the largest evangelical anti-trafficking organization in the U.S., with more than eighty full-time, paid staff members and operations in fourteen countries. The organization has been at the forefront of the militarized humanitarianism that has characterized the faith-based response to human trafficking since the late 1990s. In the rescue-and-restore model of activism that IJM has patented, male employees of the organization go undercover as potential clients to investigate brothels around the globe, partnering with local law enforcement (as well as mainstream press outlets) in order to rescue underage and allegedly coerced brothel occupants and to deliver them to rehabilitation facilities.²⁷

Although IJM's operations have attracted some controversy, the undercover and mass media oriented model of activism that IJM propounds has become the emulated standard for evangelical Christian and secular feminist organizations alike.²⁸ Through IJM's rescue missions, men are coaxed into participating in women's and other humanitarian issues by being granted the role of heroic crime fighters and saviors. Unlike in other Christian men's groups, however, here it is not headship in the domestic enclave of the nuclear family that draws men in but rather the assumption of a leadership role in and against a problem that is global in scope and that requires transnational actors to combat.

But more than a newly transnationalized middle-class masculinity is at stake here, particularly since the majority of the organization's grassroots activists—as in anti-trafficking campaigns in general—are middle-class young women. In contrast to a previous generation of evangelical Christian activist groups that avowedly embraced sexual and gender traditionalism for Western women, IJM's members make frequent reference to the backward traditionalism of third-world cultures as one of the primary causes of sex trafficking, a framework that helps them to define and reinforce their own perceived freedom and autonomy as Western women. In this regard, they follow what the feminist critic Inderpal Grewal (2005, 142) has identified as the contemporary feminist model of human rights activism, produced by subjects who imagine themselves as more ethical and freer than their "sisters" in the developing world.

The embrace of the third-world trafficking victim as a modern cause thus offers these young evangelical women a means to engage directly in a sex-saturated culture without becoming "contaminated" by it; it provides an opportunity to commune with third-world "bad girls" while remaining first world "good girls." Whether by directly entering the third-world brothel or by viewing highly sexualized media portrayals, the issue of trafficking permits a sexualized frame to exist without threatening these women's own moral status or social position. One twenty-three-year-old evangelical anti-trafficking activist whom I encountered at a film screening bluntly reflected upon the Christian concern with trafficking in terms of the issue's "sexiness," noting that "*Nightline* does specials on it...it would be hard to do a *Nightline* special on abortion."

Contemporary evangelical anti-trafficking efforts thus extend activist trends that have also become increasingly prevalent elsewhere, embodying a form of political engagement that is consumer- and media-friendly and saturated in the tropes and imagery of the culture it overtly opposes—a feminine, consumer counterpart to the masculine politics of militaristic rescue.²⁹ A recent photograph, from a special issue of the evangelical Christian magazine *Christianity Today* focused on “the business of rescuing” sex trafficking victims, makes this dynamic quite clear (2007).³⁰ The image depicts a smiling young activist from a Christian human rights group who is ministering to a sex worker in a Thai brothel. Although the magazine’s evangelical readership would be likely to interpret the women’s happy affect as evidence of Christ’s love, young missionaries’ brothel visits are also situated within the contemporary practices of consumer-humanitarianism, in which touristic adventures in exotic settings serve to create Westerners’ sense of freedom and good time



FIGURE 3. Photograph of an evangelical “red light rescue” that originally appeared in *Christianity Today* (2007).

Conclusion: Rethinking Feminism and Freedom

The human rights model in its global manifestation is a pseudo-criminalized system of surveillance and sanctions. At its most extreme...human rights policy can be used to justify military intervention....Thus, it becomes imperative to ask in both a local and global context—how do policies designed to “protect” women serve to reproduce violence?

—Kristin Bumiller (2006, 136)

Save us from our saviors. We're tired of being saved.

—Slogan of VAMP (sex workers' collective in India) ³¹

Sexual politics have been crucial to cementing the coalition between feminists and Christians that has given rise to the anti-trafficking movement, but as I have sought to show in this discussion, these politics must be understood broadly and historically, in terms of a period in which the consumer and the carceral are increasingly seen as the preeminent vehicles for the attainment of sexual freedom and gender justice. Evangelical Christian engagement with anti-trafficking politics has not diverged from the reluctance displayed by *all* significant political constituencies to look beyond the imperatives of neoliberal globalization in forging effective policy remedies. Rather, there has been broad agreement among all major parties—both secular and religious—that the best means to address trafficking is through the criminal justice system and the expansion of the carceral state apparatus.

An alternative feminist approach to human trafficking that is thus far distinct from what either the major secular or religious actors have proposed would shift the focus from the criminal justice system to the structural conditions that propel people of all genders to engage in risky patterns of migration and diverse forms of exploitative employment. Of necessity, it would also entail a critical interrogation of the trademark policies of neoliberal globalization—such as linkages between international debt and lending guidelines, price fluctuations in global commodity markets, and economic development policies—which encourage indebted nations to respond to economic crises and to enhance local cash flow through migrant workers' remittances.

Although the cultural and political dynamics that I have described here first gained prominence during the administration of George W. Bush and during a period of religious right ascendance, it is important to keep in mind that the Obama era has not ushered in a dramatic change of course. While some secular liberals have celebrated the fact that U.S. anti-trafficking policy is no longer being used as a proxy for the sexual obsessions of the religious right (see, e.g., Skinner 2009), as I have sought to demonstrate, both “liberals” and “conservatives” have tended to agree on the underlying carceral politics that have defined the issue of trafficking from the outset—with debates usually revolving around the narrow question of whether severe criminal penalties should extend

beyond sex trafficking to other forms of trafficking as well. The hesitancy that a number of sex workers' rights advocates initially voiced when the UN Protocol against Trafficking in Persons was first negotiated as a crime control protocol (see, e.g., Jordan 2002) has all but vanished from the realm of acceptable political discourse.

This is not to say that there is no cause for hope for alternative political remedies. While the carceral feminist voices are still the loudest and best funded, other groups continue to speak out. For example, right after President Obama was elected, I attended a fascinating meeting in Washington, D.C. with congressional representatives, heads of mainstream women's groups, and sex worker rights activists from Cambodia, Brazil, India, and Mali—the first meeting of its kind ever held.³² It was quite striking to have political officials listening to sex workers discuss their concerns in terms of an economic, rather than a criminal justice agenda, even if their perspectives were unlikely to be encapsulated into law and policy, or to achieve sponsorship from the likes of the Body Shop or Exxon Mobil, who have recently become corporate champions of this issue.³³ What may, however, be even more significant for the contemporary political landscape around the issue of human trafficking are the possible transformations to neoliberalism itself during an era of economic crisis. It is interesting to consider whether feminist carceral politics can persist amid rising calls, including from elements of the right, for cutbacks to the carceral state and for the downsizing of prisons.³⁴

The historical record suggests that brokered alliances often come undone during moments of social rupture, and existing political coalitions can reconfigure. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, for example, it seems possible to imagine that a different vision of sexual freedom and justice could eventually reemerge via some version of the global Occupy and precariat movements.³⁵ While questions of sexual politics are often subsumable within broader geopolitical interests, they cannot be entirely contained. As in the previous century's white slave panic, in which a decades-long feminist campaign relying upon gendered helping discourses was eventually supplanted by medical discourses focused on venereal disease (Brandt 1985, Luker 1998), it is clear that new constellations of power can emerge to eclipse the urgency of sex trafficking, freeing secular feminists, evangelical Christians and others who advocate on behalf of a more just world to forge new political visions.

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ENDNOTES

1. This paper condenses and updates some arguments that have also appeared in Bernstein (2012), Bernstein (2010a, b), and Bernstein (2007a).
2. This coalition is comprised of not only abolitionist feminists, evangelical Christians, and bipartisan state officials, but increasingly, multinational corporations such as Lexis-Nexis, the Body Shop, and Manpower Incorporated (“Top Corporations” 2012).
3. See, most recently, *The William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act*, signed into law on December 10, 2008; see also the *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* (2000) and the *United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime* (2000).
4. The term “radical feminist” may be largely a misnomer given a political trajectory that has carried many of the original activists associated with this point of view to prominent positions in national and international governance, including within the Bush White House (see Bernstein 2010).
5. See, e.g., Kristof and Wu Dunn (2009), Saunders (2005), Soderlund (2005), and Weitzer (2008).
6. See, e.g., Foucault (1979), Davis (2003), and Garland (2001).
7. See especially Sudbury (2005), Bumiller (2008), Haney (2004), and Wacquant (2009).
8. See, e.g., Fassin (2011), Grewal (2005), and Abu-Lughod (2005).
9. See Bernstein (2007a), Bernstein (2007b), Bernstein (2010a), Bernstein (2010b), and Bernstein (2012).
10. For critical treatments of White Slavery, see Doezema (2010), Langum (1994), and Bernstein (2007a).
11. My methodological ambition to provide an ethnography of a discourse takes its inspiration from David Valentine’s innovative “ethnography of a category.” Valentine describes this as the “critical ethnographic exploration of the origins, meanings, and consequences of the emergence and institutionalization” of distinct types of social categorization (Valentine 2007:6).

12. In the TVPA of 2000, “trafficking” is defined as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.” In the 2000 UN Protocol against Trafficking in Persons, “trafficking” is understood to include “the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.”
13. Notably, then as now, the language of abolitionism was embraced by activists to cast an explicit parallel between prostitution and chattel slavery.
14. The 1910 Mann Act prohibited the interstate traffic in women for “immoral purposes.” It later became notorious for its use in prosecuting instances of interracial sex (Langum 1994).
15. See, e.g., Kempadoo and Doezema (1998), Agustín (2007), and Chapkis (2005).
16. Interview with Jessica Neuwirth, December 3, 2008. Transcript on file with the author.
17. The event took place on July 10th of 2008.
18. Telephone interview with Kevin Curtner, Federal Public Defender, Anchorage, Alaska, October 2011. Transcript on file with the author.
19. See, for example, Svati Shah’s work on the impact of the U.S.’s annual *Trafficking in Persons* report tier rankings in India, as well as Sealing Cheng’s ethnographic treatment of the South Korean context, where sex workers embarked upon a hunger strike to protest punitive anti-trafficking policies (Shah 2008, Cheng 2010).
20. “Domestic trafficking” is a new political language that is increasingly being applied to what was once simply known as “prostitution”; since the passage of the 2005 Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, crossing borders has no longer been a prerequisite for the imposition of the trafficking frame.
21. Because sex workers who are under eighteen are not legally capable of consent, they can legally be considered to have been “trafficked,” whatever their circumstances (Chen 2007).
22. New York City Police Department, Vice Crimes Division, memorandum on file with the author.
23. According to a U.S. Department of Justice summation of 2,515 human trafficking

investigations conducted between 2008 and 2010, of 389 confirmed incidents of trafficking, 85% were sex trafficking cases, 83% of victims were U.S. citizens, and 62% of confirmed sex trafficking suspects were African American (while 25% of all suspects were Hispanic/Latino) (U.S. Department of Justice 2011).

24. King's College, a subsidiary of Campus Crusade for Christ, sits in the basement of the Empire State Building in New York City.
25. While pro-life politics remain an indisputably potent force in U.S. evangelical politics, as emblemized, most recently, by assaults on the Obama Administration's healthcare and contraceptive policies and on funding for Planned Parenthood (see, e.g., Eckholm 2012), it must be recognized that not all pro-life activists are evangelicals, nor do all evangelicals grant political priority to pro-life issues. On the social formation and political allegiances of the new professional class evangelical coalition that I am describing here, see also McAlister (2008), Balmer and Winner (2002), and Lindsay (2007).
26. On the "fatal fracture" of the U.S. evangelical movement, see, e.g., Kirkpatrick (2007), Pally (2011), and Wicker (2008).
27. There have been multiple reported instances of supposed sex-trafficking victims being literally imprisoned in rehabilitation facilities in Thailand and Cambodia, including some women's successful attempts to escape the facilities and to return to the brothels from which they had been "liberated" (see, e.g., Soderlund 2005).
28. The secular liberal organizations Equality Now and Polaris Project, for example, have also enlisted male volunteers to go undercover to find traffickers and to work with local law enforcement to bring them to trial (Aita 2007).
29. In March of 2012, attention quickly galvanized around the remarkable "KONY 2012" social media campaign, which featured a \$30 "action kit" and bracelet available for purchase as well as the most downloaded video in the history of the internet. The video was made by the evangelical Christian group Invisible Children, and urged a broad secular and Christian constituency to support the arrest of the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army and the elimination of child soldiers through militarized humanitarian intervention (see, e.g., Flock 2012).
30. The purpose of the issue was to profile Christian humanitarian organizations that orient former prostitutes toward entry-level jobs in the service economy, teaching women to bake muffins for Starbucks and to prepare Western-style drinks and food.
31. Seshu and Bandhopadhyay (2009:14).

32. The meeting took place on March 19, 2009.
33. Multinational corporations have come to play an increasingly prominent role as advocates within—rather than the targets of—anti-trafficking campaigns by providing funding, framing, and “market based solutions” to the perceived problems of sex trafficking. As these economic actors have assumed a more prominent role in reshaping the political field, feminist articulations of sexual freedom and gender justice have been similarly transformed. The rise of “global corporate citizenship” (see, e.g., Schwab 2008) emblemizes a new paradigm of social justice advocacy in which corporations not only invest in philanthropic projects or in “socially responsible” branding, but themselves become active stakeholders in advocacy campaigns, working to assure that social responsibility and economic profitability coincide.
34. See, e.g., Steinhauer (2009), and Liptak (2009).
35. See, e.g., Sontag Broudo and Saunders (2011).