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It's a classic heroic tale: bad guys abduct an innocent little girl, hero barges into their lair and saves the damsel in distress. It's the exact story that we get told about human trafficking in the sex industry. Human traffickers steal a woman away and force her to work until the heroes storm the brothel and save her. But what if the 'damsel' wasn't actually in distress? What if there are no bad guys to be found? What if the heroes turn out to be the bad guys?

The rescue industry is big business. The USAID Counter Trafficking in Persons project pulled in a good 7.3 million US dollars. The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, one of the largest international organisations against prostitution, offers financing and jobs to countless projects and persons. The Dutch organisation Free a Girl raised more than a hundred thousand euro through their Lock me Up campaign, for example for the Alliance Anti Traffic, which orchestrates rescue missions in which prostitutes are taken from their workplaces and kept locked in government buildings. In itself a worthy goal, of course, trying to rescue women from sexual exploitation. But there are problems.

*"It's as if prostitutes don't want to be saved,"* said a surprised manager of a Rescue Foundation shelter in India. The rescuers had once again made a raid on a brothel, after which the women had been forced into a shelter they weren't allowed to leave. Again and again women escaped, continually protested their imprisonment in the shelters, and returned to their old workplaces as soon as they were able to make a run for it. It was as if the women were working as prostitutes of their own accord, didn't view themselves as victims, thought of the rescue missions as threats to their human rights and livelihoods and for the most part felt victimized by the rescue industry.

*We have now reached a point in history where there are more women in the Thai sex industry who are being abused by anti-trafficking practices than there are women being exploited by traffickers.*

- Thailand, Empower Report

In Thailand sex workers refusing to admit after capture that they were human trafficking victims can be detained for months so they can be used as witnesses in other human trafficking cases. They don't have a right to legal counsel, aren't allowed to contact their families or other organisations and aren't allowed to leave. The medical care in such 'shelters' (prostitute prisons) is inadequate. There's no independent institution where the prostitutes can complain, there's no trial, the rescue industry gets a free pass.



In India, too, women try desperately to stay out of the rescue industry's clutches. After women had fled the 'shelters' (prisons) in Mumbai once again, the High Council ordered an investigation. "The shelters are a living hell" was the conclusion. Women suspected of prostitution, regardless of whether they are guilty (or well, victimized) can be kept prisoner for years, even if they want to leave. They have no right to legal counsel because they are 'victims' and there's no trial. They aren't allowed to communicate with the world outside the

shelter, although often their families are often informed they are sex workers, so that women don't dare to go home and face this disgrace. They are fed concoctions with insects, worms and gravel in them. Sexual assault by staff members is an everyday occurrence, just like forced vaginal exams and abuse. Sanitary amenities are inadequate, women urinate and defecate on the floors, there is almost no medical care. They want out. Women are depressed, fearful and even suicidal. More and more money is spent on guarding these shelters: not for the safety of the women, but to make sure they stay inside and contain the umpteenth try to break out.

Because what you need to understand is, organisations that are part of the rescue industry earn good money for rescuing and rehabilitating enough women in their shelters. The more court cases (if there are any perpetrators they are rarely convicted), the more 'witnesses' they 'protect' and the more sex workers they 'offer a chance at a better future' by having them make products that are sold in the Western world for big bucks ("made by disadvantaged women who were saved from the sex industry!") the more money the projects rake in. More women means more cash.

In South Korea the bullying by the police has gotten so severe that prostitutes rather killed themselves than be 'saved'. The United States pressured the government into making a stand against prostitution ('human trafficking'). Despite protests from the sex workers themselves the police kept arresting johns and pestering the prostitutes. Women used to earn about nine thousand dollar each month, but this shrunk to a good three thousand ever since the police kept invading the brothels. The US and the South Korean government have reached their goal: women are being forced out of prostitution against their will. For 920 USD per month they are allowed to live in a shelter and work for the government, but as usual few prostitutes are happy to perform forced labor while impris... I mean, to be rescued.

RATSW: If a woman agrees to go to work in a brothel but ends up sent to a factory and forced to sew, is that trafficking? Would you rescue her?

Police: No that is not trafficking. We wouldn't rescue her. That is called an opportunity.

- Empower Report

## Size of the human trafficking industry

The rescue industry claims there are millions of people all over the world, particularly women and children, who are being traded like chattel across borders to work as slaves in the sex industry. However, real proof for large-scale human trafficking operations is never found. The rescue industry claims this is because it's a hidden and shadowy world which makes it hard to find hard data, but even big 'rescue operations' don't succeed in proving the existence of trafficking. Take for instance the British project 'Pantameter 2', involving the police forces of the entire United Kingdom (as well as that of the Republic of Ireland and the UK Human Trafficking Centre), in which raids were performed in hundreds (hundreds!) of brothels and massage parlors. Results? No arrests. Not a single arrest was made for trafficking or forced prostitution. Zero. Nada. Dissatisfaction with this result led to the foundation of the Acumen project, explicitly designed to provide proof of human trafficking. The results were disappointing: none of the women had been kidnapped, held against her will or sold. To be considered 'vulnerable' in this investigation they had to fulfill one of the criteria, of which working in a brothel was one, which labeled the whole group as 'vulnerable'. Other criteria were having an economically disadvantaged position (not speaking English, not having had an education), having a disadvantaged social position (being an illegal immigrant for example), being wrongly informed (it was sufficient if you were working in a different city than had been agreed on) or having been abused/having been forced (was found only rarely). Four of these criteria were enough to be considered a 'victim of human trafficking' in this report, regardless of whether you actually *were* a victim of human trafficking. 11% of the women included in the investigation complied to these criteria. Next, this percentage was raised considerably based on preconceptions ("this has to be too low, in reality there must be more women from vulnerable countries") and the results were presented to the world: thousands of victims of human trafficking in the UK! They hadn't found even one...

CoMensha is a Dutch foundation that fights human trafficking and puts out reports about the scale of human trafficking in the Netherlands. Their numbers are used by the Justice Ministry's WODC and by the police. In their annual reports, CoMensha mentions the amount of reports they have received of possible victims of human trafficking, but for convenience's sake, they abbreviate this structurally to *victims* of human trafficking. And to be clear: CoMensha does *not* check or investigate these reports, they are reports of suspicions.

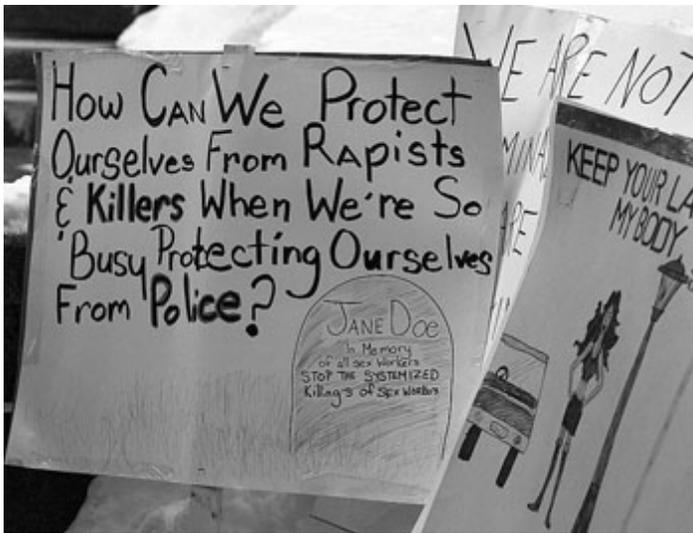
The imprecise (and misleading) language use of CoMensha is copied without scruples by all sorts of official institutes, and this turns the reports of possible victims into actual victims. When the government ordered the Intraval agency to investigate prostitution, their report mentioned "400 victims of human trafficking" instead of the actual 400 reports of possible victims. The real problems in the sex industry are not talked about. Prostitutes in Utrecht are hindered in their work and are denied a place of business 'for their own good' and 'because of suspicions of human trafficking'. Again, the myth of human trafficking is used to put prostitutes in a more dangerous spot, to force the sex industry underground and to take away the rights of sex workers.

In the year 2000, The National Human Trafficking Reporter asked 155 help and special interest organisations how many reports they had had of possible victims of human trafficking, and simply

added the numbers these organisations gave them (!) with no correction to account for doubles, then systematically talked about 'victims' in the report instead of 'possible victims', causing news papers and other media to wrongly state that in the year 2000, there had been 608 victims of human trafficking.

In Cambodia alone there are hundreds of organisations 'rescuing and rehabilitating' sex workers' and it's suspected there are more activists than victims of trafficking. An audit by the USAID Counter Trafficking in Persons project reported that in 2009, only 12 people had been charged for human trafficking.

The Asia-Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW) reports how the rescue industry is almost pornographic in their way of using lurid stories about sexual humiliation in order to rake in more funds, even while they have trouble finding any actual victims. This is how the organisations explain this failure.



The police is often the perpetrator of violence against sex workers. In countries where prostitution is prohibited, it turns out the police is the number 1 aggressor when it comes to violence against sex workers. They have the power to arrest and publicly humiliate these women and this power is abused at a large scale. In Cambodia, 70% of the prostitutes who work in a brothel reports having been abused by the police and almost 60% has been raped by the police. The awful thing is, they are hardly able to report this sort of crime for fear they themselves will be arrested or abused further.

Anti-trafficking organisations have put themselves in the idiotic position where they have to use violence and human rights violations against the women and girls they say they are rescuing, so they can prove there has been a crime, in spite of the denial and the uncooperative attitudes of the alleged victims.

### **Sex work as a profession.**

Of course, sex work isn't always a completely free choice, often women find themselves needing to work in the sex industry because they lack other options. Research by Mai (2009) for example showed that a lot of immigrants in the UK work in the sex industry because that way they can eke out a respectable living for themselves and their families. A lot of immigrants choose sex work to avoid the abuse in other sectors, where long hours and little pay are not uncommon. Many of the sex workers in Cambodia are former seamstresses and clothing factory workers, who prefer the circumstances in the sex industry above those in other sectors.

Almost 95% of women in CSOM research reported the money they earned as the primary

motivation to work as a sex worker. About 3.9% of women reported having ever been forced to work. This percentage, in this research and comparable ones, is similar to the percentage of women not in the sex industry who feel forced or abused. Furthermore, 97% (!) of women working as escorts report an increase in self confidence since they started working as a prostitute whereas only 8% of streetwalkers reports this. Another research (Decker, 1979: 166, 174) showed that 75% of escorts feel their lives improved since they started working as a sex worker, 25% says it didn't change anything, and 0% felt that their lives had gotten worse. Australian research showed that half the prostitutes considered their work as one of the major positive aspects to their lives, and 70% said they would choose prostitution again if they had to do their lives over (Woodward et al., 2004: 39).

The human trafficking myth allows governments to enforce restrictive migration laws, claiming it is to stop human trafficking but in reality mainly to stop immigration. In 2008, Cambodia passed the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation Law, a law financed and supported by UNICEF. This law makes it impossible for sex workers to work safely, makes almost any social or financial transaction surrounding sex work a criminal act, and has forced sex workers out on the streets. The consequences are horrendous: sex workers are being raped, abused and arrested by the police, the rescue industry keeps women locked up against their will and women have been known to die in custody.



When sex workers are considered either criminals who need to be punished, OR victims in need of rescue, the rescue industry takes away any humane option from sex workers. Take for example Project ROSE in the US, in which prostitutes have to admit that they are victims, are lectured on the evils of 'selling one's body' and have to promise to give up on sex work forever or they will be thrown in prison. You're either a filthy whore or a powerless victim, nothing else.

'Rescue missions' in the sex industry and laws against 'human trafficking' in practice make sex workers' positions more vulnerable and dangerous. Restrictive migration laws to fight human trafficking and laws aimed against the clients of sex workers make a prostitute's job more complicated or even impossible, forcing sex workers to take more risks to fly under the radar. For many migrant sex workers the rescue industry and their 'rescue missions' are a greater threat to their safety and livelihood than john or 'pimps'.

Large organisations for the rights of sex workers, like Empower in Thailand (50 thousand sex workers) are calling out for help against anti-trafficking organisations who are slandering them, insulting them, setting the police on them, keep them imprisoned for years, forcing medical exams on them, having them follow mandatory programs and forbidding them from crossing the border.

## Stop human trafficking

To stop human trafficking, first the rescue industry has to be stopped. Reducing prostitutes to powerless victims and then raiding their homes or workplaces, keeping them in shelters they cannot leave and where they are forced to work for minimal pay because otherwise they are faced with arrest or worse is HUMAN TRAFFICKING.

Sex work needs to be acknowledged as a legitimate profession, so that sex workers can be protected against abuse and violence from police and institutions. In New Zealand the laws were changed in 2003, making sex work legal. Sex workers reported feeling no apprehension about going to the police or to court to make complaints about bad circumstances. A good 60% of sex workers indicated that under the new laws, they were better able to refuse work. The research committee's conclusion was clear: legalizing sex work improves the rights and safety of sex workers.

Only when sex workers have equal rights as people in other professions we can begin to truly combat human trafficking. When sex workers can rent a space, have an accountant, can cooperate and have rights, then we can fight injustice. Right now, prostitutes in England sharing an apartment for work can both be arrested and convicted for 'being a pimp' and 'keeping a brothel', allegedly making the other their victim! In India, adult live-in children of sex workers are arrested for human trafficking (because they benefit financially from their parent's income). In the US, prostitutes travelling or visiting a client together are arrested, again because they 'victimize' each other. If, as a sex worker, you can file a report on a bad situation without fear of being kidnapped and held by the rescue industry or arrested by the police, you can arrange so much help from within the sex industry itself. The world is in no way improved when we punish sex workers.



The real causes of human trafficking need to be addressed. Problems surrounding poverty, gender inequality, migration problems, discrimination, cultural problems and sex negativism. Human rights. But that's not as exciting a story as 13-year old girls in a six foot square closet, so human trafficking is still being financed by us. The saviors. The good guys. It's enough to 😞 make you cry.

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In New Zealand, by the way, there hasn't been an incident involving human

trafficking since 2003.

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Marijke Vonk is a Dutch sex-positive psychologist specialised in working with sexual minorities. Besides working as a therapist, she is a writer and lecturer on various topics concerning sexuality. Main topics on this blog include kink, feminism, sex workers' rights, non-monogamy and psychology.