

No Time to Fact Check, the NY Times Has Moral Panic to Cover

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Another day, another sex trafficking victim story falls apart.

What's sexier than a young girl forced into prostitution, after all? But perhaps the *New York Times* could take a second away from ginning up moral panic to fact check its stories on the issue.

First **Nicholas Kristof** was caught with his pants down when it came out that his human trafficking poster girl **Somaly Mam** was pretty much making it all up. Instead of being violently abducted into sex

slavery and later watching the Cambodian army kill eight girls, she was actually a happy, pig-tailed schoolgirl who's never seen anyone killed.

Two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner Kristof wrote story after story about Mam's brave fight against sex trafficking in Cambodia. In one, he asked if "This Isn't Slavery, What Is?" Well, the millions of people trafficked into this country to do domestic and agricultural work are enslaved, and they dwarf the number of people brought in to do sex work. But that just doesn't get the same number of clicks.

And now we have another deluded trafficking "victim" — this one named **Chong Kim**. She was the "true story" behind *Eden*, a tale of "underage women conscripted into sexual slavery by a criminal enterprise from which there is seemingly no escape," as described by the *New York Times* book review.

Her journey to the United States supposedly involved handcuffs, gunpoint, passport confiscation, and forced sex work. But as it turns out, the story may not be true. An organization which worked with her, called Breaking Out, has indicated that their investigation into her story has yielded some major inconsistencies, and has made a public statement to that effect.

It looks likely that Kim made up her story and used it to defraud donors out of money, and it took a non-profit aid organization, and not the national news media who covered her, to do actual reporting to find out the truth.

This is par for the course for the media, however. The white slavery moral panic has been around for at least a hundred years, starting with 1910's White-Slave Traffic Act, also known as the Mann Act. What it refers to is prostitution, under the supposition that no one enters it willingly.

The Mann Act clamped down on prostitution by making it illegal to help women cross state lines

“for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose.” Campaigners boosted support for the act by peddling lurid tales of innocent girls drugged and kidnapped right off of city streets and sold into sexual servitude. This sounds exactly like the reporting on “sex trafficking” seen today. Kristof isn’t even original.

And like today, authorities looking for sex slaves found them pretty difficult to locate. Nationwide, the Department of Justice only convicted 138 human traffickers of any kind in 2012. And I’ve never seen a US case where it was clear that the women were held against their will.

The vast majority of humans trafficked are sold into domestic and agricultural work. For those that are in the sex trade, the best way to help find and rescue them is to legalize sex work, according to both Amnesty International and the United Nations. Not only does the moral panic around sex work blind reporters to errors in women’s stories, but it is also aimed at further pushing sex work underground through law enforcement and further criminalization. Punishing sex workers, who are already far more likely to be abused by police than by clients, just alienates aid workers from the men and women on the front lines who can help identify the slaves who need help.

The white slavery moral panic has been cropping up regularly for the last hundred years. And in that time, nothing has changed. Panic is still opposed to critical thinking. Reporters need to stop buying exaggerated stories wholesale without investigating them, so we don’t end up with more pernicious legislation with no hope of solving the problem.

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