

## Somaly Mam, Nicholas Kristof, and the Real Sex Trafficking Story [yasminnair.net](http://yasminnair.net)

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*Excerpt:*

*Kristof's smarmy, know-it-all, white saviour persona has gained him an audience eager to do good for nameless women and children domestically and internationally.*

*Nicholas Kristof's collected work on sex trafficking constitutes a masturbatory text, allowing do-gooders everywhere to stroke and erect their unspoken desires about rescuing sad, tormented women. There's a pornographic impulse at its heart, a sexual fantasy about dark-skinned women and children being raped by sexual predators on the dirt floors of basements, until the white saviour smashes the door down to save them.*

On May 29, the unexpected and even unthinkable happened: Nicholas Kristof, patron saint of the White Saviour Industrial Complex, was criticised for his coverage of Somaly Mam.

This is not in itself not surprising. Kristof has been the subject of justified outrage and criticism for several years, particularly from sex workers, both in the US and globally. As noted by Laura Agustin and others, he has relentlessly produced reprehensibly inaccurate and sensationalised work on, well, really, anything at all to do with women's sexuality.

What was surprising is that the criticism showed up on the pages of the *New York Times* itself. In an editorial titled, "The Price of a Sex-Slave Rescue Fantasy," Melissa Gira Grant writes about the costs of perpetuating the fictions of sex trafficking. She points out that these over-sexed stories place women not as their own agents, but as abject creatures always in need of rescue from white saviours and the broader state apparatus which, combined during raids like the one described so eagerly by Kristof here, only end up making the women more vulnerable to "police harassment" and worse. Grant names Kristof as one of the journalists who have helped to spread Mam's story.

It's a quick and short reference, but notable in that the *Times* left it in. Admittedly, given that Kristof has been the newspaper version of a blockbuster film, a kind of *Transformers* of sex trafficking, it would have been odd to not see his name there. But, still.

More recently, Margaret Sullivan, ombudsperson at the *Times*, has stated that Kristof should "give readers a full examination about Somaly Mam."

But it's not just that Kristof should explain his collusion, and that is what it is, with Somaly Mam and the entire sex trafficking hysteria industry, but that the *Times* should account for why they let him get away with it for so long. Will the *Times* now subject Kristof's reporting on sex trafficking

to the same scrutiny that has fallen upon Somaly Mam? Or will they allow him to continue to get away with what is often touted as some sort of social justice investigative reporting but which conveniently gets named “op-eds,” or which appear on his blog?

Somaly Mam’s story has been under investigation for a while now. Grant’s editorial and many other pieces on the recent news about Mam were prompted by an exposé by Simon Marks, published in *Newsweek*. But Marks, along with Phorn Bopha, has also been reporting on Mam’s story for *The Cambodia Daily*. It says a lot about the way media attention works that the Mam story, as explosive as it was, gained relatively little attention until it appeared in a Western publication.

All of which is to say: The publisher, ombudsperson, and editorial team of the *Times* would have had to live in a dark cave to not know about the years of criticism levied at Kristof, criticism that has come from the very people he has claimed to help. Why has Kristof been allowed to stay for so long, producing work that is not just wrong-headed and inaccurate but actually deeply, profoundly dangerous to women? Grant points out the real dangers faced by women “rescued” in the sort of efforts that Kristof has dramatised. Working off my own prior research and that of activists and journalists like Agustin and Debbie Nathan, I will add that Kristof’s work has served as part of the motor of a widening set of international labour and migration principles which make life impossible and deeply humiliating for men, women, and children compelled to flee home countries.

For many who find themselves in countries like the US and the UK, which overdetermine global policies towards refugees and migrants, the only way to gain recourse is to cast themselves as victims.

In Chicago, where I live, official channels regularly hype up sex trafficking stories about innocent young girls trapped into sex slavery by evil, demonic traffickers. But it’s nearly impossible for journalists to actually probe these stories, and to even want to do so is to be charged with rank insensitivity and callousness. Instead, journalists are invited to press conferences by Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez and Senator Mark Kirk, to be told of new initiatives which make bizarre and unfounded connections between sex trafficking, and the internet, using fictional links to further curtail the rights of websites to advertise sex and escort services. They slap the legislation with a name like SAVE (Stop Advertising Victims of Exploitation Act), and they insist that it would even save “our children, our women and little girls that are held in slavery..”

But the truth is that none of these hyperbolic fears are founded upon fact, and the purported statistics and numbers are made up or pumped up unreliable data. Grant points out that, “88 percent of female sex workers in Cambodia had not experienced coercion” and that “76 percent “had a prior knowledge that they would engage in prostitution-related activities.” If we start to break down the numbers around child sex trafficking and its connection to the internet, the facts become even more fictitious.

The hysteria around sex trafficking isn’t, ultimately, restricted to a misdiagnosed epidemic of

sexual abuse. It's connected to a much larger context of migration and labour politics and policies, as well as to a whole host of deeply troubling curtailments of domestic civil rights, sexual expression, and the rights of human beings to determine what forms of work count as labour, and to engage in the same, as and when they choose, without the brutality of the state intruding upon their lives.

Are Nicholas Kristof and Somaly Mam solely responsible for all this? Of course not. But Kristof has spun his tales, literally alongside Mam, in the pages of a newspaper with the standing of the *Times*. My guess is that the *Times* has endured him for this long because he brings a substantial number of eyeballs to the paper (and as someone who is suspicious of the power of money over journalism, I suspect wealthy supporters like him a lot).

Kristof's smarmy, know-it-all, white saviour persona has gained him an audience eager to do good for nameless women and children domestically and internationally. Nicholas Kristof's collected work on sex trafficking constitutes a masturbatory text, allowing do-gooders everywhere to stroke and erect their unspoken desires about rescuing sad, tormented women. There's a pornographic impulse at its heart, a sexual fantasy about dark-skinned women and children being raped by sexual predators on the dirt floors of basements, until the white saviour smashes the door down to save them.

I don't decry fantasy, but it's about time we started to name Kristof's fables of sex and rescue for what they are: Trafficking porn. And it's about time we started to openly question whether Kristof isn't in fact actually projecting some of his own sexual fantasies onto helpless women across the world; little else helps to explain his excessive desire to probe, every pun intended, into the intimate details of his subjects' lives, turning dark masses of women into the objects of his and an avaricious audience's gaze.

More crucially, both he and Mam have directly and indirectly served to place women in far more danger than if they had been helped with economic policies that brought about real changes.

I'm generally reluctant to demand that any publication fire a writer. I find the constant calls to fire writers for op-eds, for instance, dangerous and counterproductive to the formation of a healthy public sphere, and I've frequently supported extremely unpopular work, even work I don't agree with, on the grounds that we need to collectively understand how to engage difficult and contentious work, not just wipe it away.

But Kristof is a rather different case. He has, for years, produced what certainly bears the gloss of investigative journalism, battering into brothels with Mam and policemen, and even buying up young women to make some misguided point about prostitution. The *Times* can keep calling him an "Op-Ed columnist," but we all know that for his many fans, Kristof is no mere columnist but perceived as a righteous knight in shining armour and a journalist. And he's frequently described as someone who actively does good.

That leaves us with the shattered story of Somaly Mam, for whom we can and should spare no

sympathy and who has clearly and systematically gone about shoring up personal wealth and political power on the basis of a made-up life. The investigation done by Bopha and Marks is excellent, but it's a start. Readers, activists, and commentators would do well to not end their shock and dismay where Mam's career ends, but consider the larger NGO structure which enabled her fabrications. The foundation she helped create has fired her, but its own work, which insists that the "girls" are in need of saving, continues. Pushing Mam out of the nest effectively locates her as the source of a problem and getting rid of her will count as a solution to some: But the real problems will still persist.

The sex trafficking industrial complex, built on fabrications, lies, and distortions, is unlikely to go quietly into the night: There is simply too much money and prestige at stake, and sex trafficking is, worldwide, one of the fastest and most efficient ways to make lots of money. What could be easier—and sexier—than saving lovely young brown women from sexual servitude?

But the real story about sex trafficking isn't just that it's built up on a crumbling edifice of lies and confabulations. The real story is that getting rid of the mythology and hysteria around sex trafficking would actually go a long way towards getting people to recognise where the true inequalities lie. The real story isn't hidden in unnameable dark dungeons visited by dark overlords who perform unthinkable acts of sexual violence. The real story lies in the long, relentless nightmare of neoliberalism, the spirit of which haunts and drives millions across borders, hungry and desperate enough to submit whatever fictions the state requires them to deliver, simply in order to survive.

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