

The 'White Slavery' Panic

Anti-prostitution activists have been equating sex work with slavery for over a century.

Joanne McNeil from the April 2008 issue

Sin in the Second City: Madams, Ministers, Playboys, and the Battle for America's Soul, by Karen Abbott, New York: Random House, 356 pages, \$25.95

In 1907 a group of evangelicals visited Chicago's Everleigh Club brothel, where they handed out leaflets that said, "No 'white slave' need remain in slavery in this State of Abraham Lincoln who made the black slaves free." According to the Illinois poet Edgar Lee Masters, an Everleigh Club regular, "the girls laughed in their faces." In *Sin in the Second City*, the Atlanta-based journalist Karen Abbott recounts how Minna Everleigh, one of the club's proprietors, "explained graciously, patiently, that the Everleigh Club was free from disease, that [a doctor] examined the girls regularly, that neither she nor Ada [Everleigh, her sister and co-proprietor,] would tolerate anything approaching violence, that drugs were forbidden and drinks tossed out, that guests were never robbed nor rolled, and that there was actually a waiting list of girls, spanning the continental United States, eager to join the house. No captives here, Reverends."

The Everleigh Club was an ornate mansion. Thirty themed boudoirs ("the Japanese Parlor," "the Moorish Room," "the Egyptian Room") included absurd touches of decadence, such as hidden buttons to ring for champagne and a fountain that fired a jet of perfume. The city's finest chefs prepared the women's dinners. They read poetry by the fire with guests, who included the writers Theodore Dreiser and Ring Lardner. Sometimes Minna and Ada let swarms of butterflies fly loose throughout the house.

Some anti-prostitution activists nevertheless believed the Everleigh ladies were no different from slaves. Then as now, opponents of prostitution assumed that no woman in her right mind consensually exchanges sex for money. Abbott challenges that view in her account of Chicago's red light district at the turn of the last century. She interweaves the stories of sex workers and clientele, evangelical activists and conservative bureaucrats, explaining how the term "white slavery" was routinely applied to consenting adults. Reading her historical account, you can hear echoes of that debate in the current crusade against sex trafficking, which similarly blurs the line between coercion and consent.

The Everleigh sisters, Abbott notes, believed a sex worker was “more than an unwitting conduit for virtue. An employee in a business, she was an investment and should be treated as such, receiving nutritious meals, a thorough education, expert medical care, and generous wages. In their house, a courtesan would make a living as viable as—and more lucrative than—those earned by the thousands of young women seeking work in cities as stenographers and sweatshop seamstresses, department store clerks and domestics. The sisters wanted to uplift the profession, remove its stain and stigma, argue that a girl can’t lose her social standing if she stands level with those poised to judge her.”

The attempt to portray prostitutes as professionals never made much headway against the tendency to view them as victims. At the beginning of *Sin in the Second City*, Abbott describes an event in 1887 that forever changed the American public’s perception of sex workers. Authorities raided a Michigan lumber camp, finding nine women working as prostitutes. Eight accepted their prison sentences, but the ninth woman protested that she was tortured and forced into sex slavery. The lumberyard proprietors claimed the women were well aware of what they were hired to do; “the job description,” Abbott notes, “made no mention of cutting trees.” But the public was so moved by the woman’s story that she was pardoned and released from jail.

It was 20 years before another case of “white slavery” was reported in a Midwestern newspaper. But in the meantime, rumors of girls who were “trafficked” into sex slavery began to circulate. In 1899 the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union missionary Charlton Edholm reported, “There is a slave trade in this country, and it is not black folks at this time, but little white girls—thirteen, fourteen, sixteen, and seventeen years of age—and they are snatched out of our arms, and from our Sabbath schools and from our Communion tables.” Perhaps they found themselves in a “false employment snare,” in which a young rural girl answered a city want ad and found herself locked in a brothel, her clothes held for ransom. Or maybe a gentleman from the big city, after plying her with drinks or drugs, deflowered her and sold her to a pimp.

Around the same time, anti-prostitution evangelical groups revised their platforms. Victorian society previously had reviled prostitutes as lost women who reduced men to animals. The rhetorical shift conveniently removed the prostitute’s responsibility for her actions.

“Reformers across the country repeated and embellished Edholm’s narratives, panders used them as handy instruction manuals, and harlots memorized all the ways they might be tricked or trapped,” Abbott writes. These rumors reinforced rural Midwesterners’ fears of losing their children to the dirty, crime-ridden streets of Chicago. “Never before in civilization,” wrote Hull House founder Jane Addams in 1909, “have such numbers of girls been suddenly released from the protection of the home and permitted to walk unattended upon the city streets and to work under alien roofs.”

In 1907 a girl named Mona Marshall reportedly wrote “I am a white slave” on a scrap of paper and tossed it from her brothel room window to a passer-by. The passer-by alerted the police, who later brought her to the office of Chicago’s state attorney, Clifford Roe. Roe had been following the work of anti-white slavery activists and was eager to find a case like the

Michigan lumberyard scandal.

Marshall's story of inhumane conditions and repeated rapes attracted much press attention, but further inquiries into key details found contradictions and dates that did not match up.

Two years later, Roe met another young woman, Ella Gingles, with a story Abbott says "sounded like an osmotic recitation of every white slave case [Roe] ever tried." She proved even less trustworthy than Marshall. The reported "blood stains" on her gown were later said to be red wine. The country "ran wild with speculation that Gingles was an autohypnotist, a monomaniac...or in a state of perpetual hysteria," writes Abbott. Unfortunately, she does not try to explain what motivated Gingles to come forward with a false claim. A New York Times article from 1909 suggests Gingles used the excuse to cover up allegations that she stole lace from her employer.

After several attempts, Roe finally found a case that jibed with the public's dark perception of organized sex work.

Seventeen-year-old Sarah Joseph reported that she had moved to Chicago to join her old friend Mollie Hart, who said she had work lined up for her. The job was in a brothel, which became clear to Joseph only after she entered its doors. Abbott does not offer many details about Joseph's experience, with only a 1909 *Chicago Tribune* article as a reference. It is unclear how Joseph's case came to Roe's notice or why her friend deceived her. In light of the previous chapters describing Roe's dubious "white slave" cases, the reader might be inclined to doubt Joseph as well. But many historians, including Humbert Nelli, John Koble, and Thomas Reppetto, have suggested that Joseph was indeed held captive. When the *Chicago Sun-Times* revisited the controversy in 1999, it reported that Joseph's brothel keeper had indeed acquired some employees "by force."

The case received national publicity. Inspired by Roe's efforts, Rep. James R. Mann (R-Ill.) rushed the United States White-Slave Traffic Act (now known as the Mann Act) through Congress. President Taft signed it into law in 1910. The Mann Act forbade the transportation of individuals from one state to another for the purpose of prostitution. It also authorized \$50,000 to create the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It appears the FBI never quite reprioritized: In 2001 the bureau was strongly criticized for allocating excessive man-hours to wiretapping the New Orleans brothel madam Jeanette Maier, both before and after the 9/11 attacks.

A century after the Mann Act passed, women are no longer limited to the roles of wife, whore, or some combination of both, but the debate over prostitution is framed using roughly the same language. Today's "sex trafficking" narratives often sound like embellishments of the rumored "white slaves."

According to the website of the National Organization for Women, foreigners expecting high-paying work as au pairs or waitresses "often find themselves in a city where they don't speak the language, where there isn't a job waiting, and where they are in debt to threatening thugs. Often their passports have been confiscated, limiting their ability to escape. Many of these women and girls are hidden residents of our own communities." According to numerous reports in major news outlets, other sex trafficking victims are kidnapped and smuggled across borders. "The sheer volume of stories bolstered the notion of a 'traffic in

girls,' ” Abbott writes about the Midwest in the early 1900s, but she could be talking about Washington today.

This narrative of deceived and kidnapped sex slaves might make for an exciting episode of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, but the truth is more complex. In 1999 the CIA estimated that 50,000 women in the U.S. are trafficked for sex each year, but that number seems to be wildly inflated. In September *The Washington Post* reported that, after spending \$150 million on task forces and grants since 2000, the federal government had identified only 1,362 victims of sex trafficking in the U.S. The Post also reported that the original CIA estimate was the work of one analyst, who relied mainly on news clippings about overseas trafficking cases, from which she attempted to estimate U.S. victims.

Estimating the actual number of trafficked sex workers is nearly impossible. Many studies do not distinguish between illegal migration and the smuggling of a person against her will. Others fail to acknowledge that some trafficked workers might not have a problem with the prostitution itself but object to human rights violations and other poor conditions in their new homes.

New legislation threatens to further conflate coercive and consensual sex work. The William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2007 would appropriate \$872 million over four years for protecting and assisting the victims of trafficking. The bill would revise the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, and would establish a minimum sentence of 20 years for sex traffickers, by removing language requiring proof of fraud, force, or coercion. Currently, when there is no proof of coercion, pimps are prosecuted under the Mann Act, typically receiving a three-to-five-year sentence. Under the new bill, which overwhelmingly passed the House in December but at press time had not been introduced in the Senate, prosecutors could seek the 20-year penalty without presenting victim testimony.

A narrow focus on sex trafficking cases undermines the fight against another appalling (and possibly more frequent) practice: forced manual labor. Domestic and international funds that might be allocated to the protection of forced laborers are instead used to crack down on consensual massage parlors and brothels.

Steven Wagner, former head of the anti-trafficking program within the Department of Health and Human Services, has commented on the millions of dollars “wasted” in grants aimed at combating sex slavery. “Many of the organizations that received grants didn’t really have to do anything,” he told *The Washington Post* last fall. “They were available to help victims. There weren’t any victims.” Tony Fratto, then deputy White House press secretary, said the issue is “not about the numbers. It’s really about the crime and how horrific it is.” There’s no question the crime is horrific, but the numbers appear to be modest, unless you equate all prostitution with slavery.

Karen Abbott’s book suggests that prostitution was better respected a century ago. While today’s high-profile johns hold press conferences at which they ask the public for forgiveness, Everleigh Club clients boasted of their membership. Perhaps prostitution was considered a necessary evil, keeping husbands from defiling their wives with their prurient

fantasies. Or perhaps, as the *Chicago Tribune* suggested in a 1936 article about the Everleighs, people believed respectable women “were safer from rapes and other crimes if open prostitution was maintained and ordered as an outlet for the lusts of men.” Patronizing as that viewpoint might be, it is no more insulting than the implication that women never consent to sex work.

Just as feminists today rally around anti–sex trafficking measures, many anti–white slavery activists at the turn of the 20th century were politically progressive and believed in women’s suffrage. “White slavery gave women a chance to insert themselves in political discourse,” Abbott notes. “America’s women would best know how to protect America’s girls.” But such activism infantilizes women instead of promoting gender equality. Women don’t need protection from their own choices.

Joanne McNeil is a writer in Massachusetts. Her articles have appeared in *The Washington Times* and her photography has appeared in *\$pread*, a sex industry magazine.