

a paper bird

Un pajarito de papel en el pecho / Dice que el tiempo de los besos no ha llegado

Sex imperialism

Posted on [24 September 2013](#)



— Let me take that off for you: Oprah's liberation strip show

In early 2001, Oprah Winfrey made a famous appearance at Madison Square Garden, for "V-Day," Eve Ensler's enormous, \$1000-a-ticket benefit for feminism. What happened is etched in many memories (there were cheaper seats, too), but I'll let *Ms. Magazine* [describe](#). Oprah performed "Under the *Burqa*," a kind of inverted "Over the Rainbow" about a foreign land:

a heart-wrenching, spine-tingling story written by Ensler to personify the daily terror and misery of women's lives in Afghanistan under the Taliban's harsh gender apartheid rule. Oprah Winfrey gave an "Oscar-winning" performance to the piece as she described women in Afghanistan crying out in pain with no one to hear or acknowledge their suffering, because in Afghanistan life for women under the brutal Taliban hardly exists. An Afghan woman wearing the all-inhibiting burqa appeared as vocal sounds of pain and agony filled Madison Square Garden.

The woman crept up behind Oprah over the stage. As the audience gasped over the misery-murmurs soundtrack, Oprah turned and lifted the *burqa* off her. Thundering cheers! The tableau of liberation was entrancing. It told us that freedom lay in the hands of Westerners to give; that we were the voices, the hands, the absent lives, of others; and that the gift would be easy, like Superwoman getting a phone-booth makeover – "the 'hey presto' transformation of suffering into strength with the flick of a hem," as Noy Thrupkaew [wrote](#). This was imperialism lite, no boots on the ground; all you needed was a celebrity and a portable article of clothing. Just over six months later we all would be at war, and while these lessons may not have been too useful for the travails ahead, they were remembered. Eleven days after the September 11 attacks, CNN aired a film on the *burqa* in Afghanistan; it became its [most-watched documentary](#) ever.

Six weeks later, Laura Bush would [assure the nation](#) that “The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.” If the fight turned out longer and harder than expected, still the image and ideal remained, an emancipation embodied in omnipresent Oprah and hence impossible to escape, through all the ravages of Fallujah and Bagram and Abu Ghraib. One of the sponsoring organizations for victorious “V-Day” was a group called Equality Now.

Equality Now, founded in 1992, is a US organization fighting to diffuse worldwide the waning impulses of absolutist Western feminism from forty years ago. It campaigns for reproductive rights but, even more militantly, against pornography and prostitution. It’s also been exceptionally good at publicity, particularly by recruiting that kind of American celebrity who believes their fame is an anointing – that they can use it to liberate the tired, the poor, the war-torn, and also the wrongly dressed and inappropriately employed. Julia Stiles! Joss Wheedon! Glenn Close and Oprah! Equality Now is at it again this week, with a campaign aimed at the drab and unexciting UN; no institution is *intrinsically* unsexy, and already the publicity machine is starting to roll. There’s [a campaign page](#) at Tina Brown’s *Daily Beast*, headlined “Call to Arms”; there are the endorsements from the famous and the only-slightly-faded. The aim is to roll back more than a decade of progress at the UN, and around the world, in safeguarding sex workers’ health and safety.

TAGS: Call to Arms



Martin Oeser/AFP/Getty

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SEX WORK

Keeping Prostitution Illegal

SEP 21, 2013 1:02 PM

— Beauty and the *Daily Beast*: Equality Now campaign page

The campaign stems from a [year-old letter](#) that Equality Now organized to Helen Clark, the head of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). As Prime Minister of New Zealand, Clark oversaw the law reform that decriminalized sex work in her country in 2003. Finding her unresponsive to their solicitations, Equality Now called for public protest. They want you to write to UNDP, UNAIDS, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), and UN Women, but the gist is simple: *Damn the evidence. Get me rewrite!*

[We] express great concern about two recent reports on efforts to prevent HIV within the commercial sex industry: the Global Commission on HIV and the Law report [HIV and the Law: Risks, Rights and Health](#) (“Global Commission Report”) released on 9 July 2012, and the UNDP, UNFPA and UNAIDS report [Sex Work and the Law in Asia and the Pacific](#) (“Asia Pacific Report”) released on 18 October 2012. ... [W]e are deeply concerned with both reports’ incomplete and misleading information regarding the effects of decriminalizing prostitution and surrounding activities.

The two reports linked above are ground-breaking work. The former, by 14 distinguished jurists and experts including former Presidents of Botswana and Brazil, examines the role of the law in promoting or impeding effective responses to HIV/AIDS. The latter surveys 48 countries in the Asia / Pacific region, investigating how their legal regimes around sex

work affect both health and human rights. Two aspects strike Equality Now as especially noxious.

ONE. The reports called on governments to “Decriminalise private and consensual adult sexual behaviours, including same-sex sexual acts and voluntary sex work” (Global Commission Report, p. 9). The Asia Pacific Report found that criminalization of “sex work or certain activities associated with sex work ... increases vulnerability to HIV by fuelling stigma and discrimination, limiting access to HIV and sexual health services, condoms and harm reduction services, and adversely affecting the self esteem of sex workers and their ability to make informed choices about their health” (p. 1).

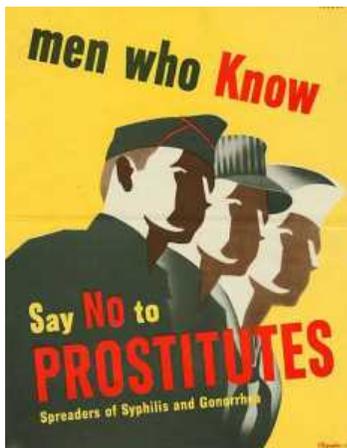
TWO. The reports called for a clear distinction, in policy, law, and public understanding, between sex work and sex trafficking, “which are not the same. The difference is that the former is consensual whereas the latter coercive.”

Criminal sanctions against human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of minors are essential—but the laws must clearly differentiate these activities from consensual adult sex work. (Global Commission Report, p. 29)

The Asia Pacific Report said laws that conflate “human trafficking and sex work and define sex work as ‘sexual exploitation’ contribute to vulnerability, generate stigma and create barriers to HIV service delivery”.

The unwillingness or inability of people to recognise that people can freely decide to engage in sex work means that sex workers are often automatically labelled as victims of trafficking when they are not. Often sex workers are portrayed as passive victims who need to be saved. Assuming that all sex workers are trafficked denies the autonomy and agency of people who sell sex. (pp. 3, 15)

“We respectfully request that you re-examine the findings and recommendations included in these two reports,” Equality Now writes in civil UN-ese, meaning: *Retract these conclusions, or else.*



— With a little help from the law: Anti-prostitution poster from World War II

Equality Now is an eradicationist organization. They believe all sex work is exploitation, and hence “trafficking.” They want prostitution eliminated. To this end they’re trying to press the so-called “Swedish model” on the UN; they [claim](#) it “addresses demand by decriminalizing the person in prostitution and criminalizing the buyers and pimps.” This sits rather strangely with the headline they chose for their campaign, above: “Keeping Prostitution Illegal.” In fact, though, that is [what the “Swedish model” is about](#). It decriminalizes the “person in prostitution” about as much as traffic laws decriminalize the person in speeding car. The brothel raids and the stings on johns trawl up sex workers, not just clients, in their nets; police pick out and pick up sex workers, photograph them, stamp stigma on their lives; and there’s always a battery of other policies and punishments — loitering and solicitation laws, [civil forfeiture](#), seizing cars and homes, even taking children — that can be used to drive women out of sex work. [Melissa Giri Grant notes](#),

A 2012 examination of prostitution-related felonies in Chicago ... revealed that of 1,266 convictions during the past four years, 97 percent of the charges were made against sex workers [as opposed to clients and others], with a 68 percent increase between 2008 and 2011. This is during the same years that [eradicationist activists] lobbied for the Illinois Safe Children Act, meant to end the arrest of who the bill describes as “prostituted persons” and to instead target “traffickers” and buyers through wiretaps and stings. Since the Act’s passage in 2010, only three buyers have been charged with a felony. These feminist-supported, headline-grabbing stunts subject young women to the humiliation of jail, legal procedures, and tracking through various law enforcement databases, sometimes for the rest of their lives.

The Global Commission report charges the Swedish model with “Victimising the ‘victim.’”

The Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) has [answered](#) the claims Equality Now made in its letter; I won’t recap its arguments here, save to note that Equality Now repeatedly misrepresents and distorts the results of studies.

(For example: Equality Now asserts a government report in New Zealand found “no great change” in sex workers’ access to health services, and use of safer sex, in the wake of law reform. But the [government report](#) actually says something quite different — that effective, and sex-worker friendly, “HIV/AIDS prevention campaign that ran in the late 1980s” had *already* generated across-the-board improvements, hence the room for positive change was small. Meanwhile, a [2007 study by researchers](#) at the University of Otago in Christchurch found that decriminalization had made sex workers more willing to choose and refuse clients, a right the reform law specifically guaranteed them — the numbers who felt they couldn’t do so fell from 63% in 1999 to only 38% in 2006. They were also readier to report abuses to police, and in general more empowered about the conditions of their work.)



— Gathering at the Wellington office of the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective, for the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, 2011

I will make two points, though. One is that Equality Now cultivates a rhetoric of care built round the idea of “Listening to Survivors.” Listening is admirable; but in this case, it becomes an accusation against any and all opponents: *those other people, the ones you’re listening to, aren’t real*. Thus, one eradicationist [cites](#) a “survivor” approvingly:

To support decriminalising the sale of sex would be to support prostitution itself. ... I believe if a prostitute or former prostitute wants to see prostitution legalised, it is because she is inured both to the wrong of it and to her own personal injury from it.

This is a moral rephrasing of the old Marxist claim of false consciousness: your class position, or in this case your sin, invalidates your voice and deafens my ears to your inauthentic pleas. Moreover, the audible “survivors” aren’t so audible in the end. They fade into placeholders for institutions that can, and will, speak on their behalf. The letter to Helen Clark bemoans that “If the drafters of the reports – in particular the Asia Pacific Report – had consulted with a broader range of stakeholders, *including anti-trafficking and women’s rights organizations* as well as trafficking survivors” — well, everything would have been different. In essence this means: *Do nothing till you hear from me*. In fact, the Global Commission on HIV and the Law held seven regional dialogues and reviewed 680 written submissions in its work. The Asia Pacific report draws on extensive consultations with advocacy groups, including sex worker groups, in the countries it analyzed. Integrating usually-unheard voices into the conversation is likely to rouse acute institutional anxieties; but you really can’t just claim those voices were never there.

Listen to Carmen, fools. And now can we just pretend these "reports" you published never happened?

The second point is that, while Equality Now talks the talk of protecting the helpless against exploitation, its concerns flow from a different point where morality and politics, respectability and power, meet. Ninety-seven organizations signed the letter to Helen Clark; but while most of them seem dressed in the appealing-looking garments of sober feminism, quite a few are wearing a *burqa* underneath. For instance, [Ruhama](#), a powerful Irish "anti-trafficking" group, *sounds* awfully progressive, opposing prostitution because it's so "deeply rooted in gender inequality and social marginalisation." Ruhama, though, is a front. Behind it lurk several Catholic religious orders which, for decades, imposed forced labor and virtual slavery on "fallen women" in the notorious [Magdalene Laundries](#). Moral rigor and a quest to recover political authority drive its campaigning, not indignation at the gendered injustice its parent groups enforced for years.

There's a history behind this power quest. Anthropologist Laura Agustín [argues](#) that the earnest focus on "prostitution" as a social problem in Britain's 19th century came with the emergence of middle-class women as a group who needed occupations, purpose, and identities. "Social critics and philanthropists constructed an identity for 'the poor' in general, and 'prostitutes' in particular, which necessitated intervention, at the same period when the same critics, in need of and desiring employment, designated themselves as peculiarly suited to intervene."

Philanthropy came to be seen as an appropriate sphere of paid employment for middle-class women, who designated themselves as those authorised to care for a group of working-class women they designated prostitutes. Both groups were engaged in the search for livelihoods and a degree of independence during the development of industrial capitalism. In the new 'prostitution' discourse, both figures, the victim and the rescuer, belonged to a new vision of society in which good conduct was linked to bourgeois, domestic marriage and family.



— Slumming with a purpose: Victorian philanthropists go in search of the deserving and undeserving poor

What Agustin doesn't say [in this article, I mean; see in the comments, below, for references to places where she's drawn out the implications!] is that this vision of "intervention" paralleled other interventions in the larger, political sphere: imperialism, militarism, the projection of British might, the growth of a governing class of males whose identities were built on intruding in other countries and morally recuperating other peoples. Deviant within and barbarian abroad were matching objects of colonial improvement.



— Behind every successful empire is a good woman: France distributes the benefits of civilization to suitably impressed people in funny hats

Elizabeth Bernstein has [pursued these ideas](#) in a contemporary frame. She argues that "antitrafficking activism," as practiced by both feminists and their faith-based allies, "has been fueled by a shared commitment to carceral paradigms of social, and in particular gender, justice ... and to militarized humanitarianism as the preeminent mode of engagement by the state." You *fight* the enemies of your version of liberation, at home and abroad. You need the big guns on your side; feminism turns to the State. The battle requires the government to flex its muscles, through its police under the streetlights of Chicago as much as through the soldier boys in the alleys of Kabul. It's no coincidence that Equality Now defines its demand for protests to the UN as a "call to arms." It's no coincidence that eradicationist Gloria Steinem, touring India and pressed to explain why she refused to dialogue with sex worker activists, [fell back on](#) a strange anti-Blitzkrieg rhetoric: "The truth seems to be that the invasion of the human body by another person – whether empowered by money or violence or authority – is de-humanising in itself. ... [P]rostitution is the only [job] that by definition crosses boundary of our skin and invades our most central sense of self." Does she mean all prostitution is rape, or all penetrative sex is? Shouldn't we defend against

an invasion by any means necessary — police, armies, the full panoply of power? Indeed, isn't the best defense maybe just invading something ourselves?

It's no coincidence, either, that both the war-cry against uncivilized and misogynistic Muslim peoples and the clamor to crack down on sex trafficking met in the receptive embrace of the Bush administration. Bush is gone, of course. But the powerful impulses are both still there. And their common feature, the guilty secret of their involuntary incursions, is still there too. The objects of rescue, the victims of intervention, don't get to lift the veil of their own volition, or speak for themselves.

The *niqab* is back in the news these days. Banned in France and Belgium, it now faces [prohibition](#) in part of Switzerland. It's a hot topic in Britain, where a Liberal Democrat minister [called for](#) a "national debate" on whether the State needed to "protect" women from veilish wiles. One right-wing British [blogger drew](#) an analogy I found illuminating, like a white phosphorus flare. It's all, in the end, about State power, whether embodied in laws or bombs:

While the two situations are not directly analogous, there are, nonetheless, noteworthy similarities between the objections made to humanitarian military intervention in foreign countries and the objections made to state intervention in the matter of the niqab. Concomitant similarities can be observed in the arguments in favour, which speak to a common impulse.

Opposition to a niqab ban is frequently undergirded by a suspicion of State power as irrational and indiscriminate as anti-War hostility to American power — in neither case is it conceded that power can be harnessed for benign, progressive or utilitarian ends. ... The wisdom of intervention in either case may be disputed, but the motivating humanitarian impulse in both cases is the responsibility to protect and should be debated as such.

In other words, you must concede the *principle* that the State has an absolute right to intervene ("protect") in either case; the only permitted argument is about the pros and cons of particular interventions. The females who choose to cover their faces, and the peoples who slave away in oppression while unable or unwilling to resist, are equally incapacitated children, whose very muteness demands a decision-making power located somewhere else. Confronted with a woman, "a proud Welsh and British citizen, a molecular geneticist by profession and an activist in my spare time," who says, "I find the *niqab* liberating and dignifying; it gives me a sense of strength," the man sees nothing but mind-forged manacles:

Coercion does not necessitate physical imprisonment, and religious authority exerts a particularly pernicious hold over those taught from birth to accept it without question.

The blogger elects to remain veiled in anonymity, so all I know is he's one of the pro-war, Islam-fearing fans of the neocon website *Harry's Place*, a type that's done so much to damage British public life. In an [interview](#) with Norm Geras — co-author of the invading-things-is-fun [Euston Manifesto](#) — he declares that "I dislike any ostentatious displays of religious or political affiliation. Slogan-bearing badges and t-shirts, religiously observant haircuts, dress codes and iconography of any kind." One senses further prohibitions down the pike. The sinister beauty of power is that it corrupts even *before* you have it; just the scent, the fantasy of it, intoxicates. And the same spirit that drives you to enthuse over stripping women of their veils, or herding them into Black Marias on a moonless evening, is the spirit that informs imperial dreams of imposing one-size Mao jackets on the unisex masses, toppling statues and towers, Rumsfelding it over subject peoples like a Roman titan. Your idealism? No vaccine against megalomanhood. Human rights activists are hardly immune to State-worship. The whiff of power deranges their brain cells no less than anybody's.



— Police arresting a niqabi woman in Paris, April 12, 2011, © EPA

And, as long as we're talking about power: a colleague noticed something interesting over at the New School for Social Research. The Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy is [offering a practicum](#) for students to do research, in a project for Equality Now. "This project would analyze the legalization of prostitution and formation of sex workers' rights groups. ... Equality Now seeks to better understand the movement to legalize prostitution and form sex workers' rights groups in order to refute arguments for legalization and lobby for adoption of the Nordic Model instead." The students will:

Examine the history of sex workers' rights groups in the following countries and answer the questions below: Netherlands, Germany, Australia, Venezuela, Brazil, Senegal, Ivory Coast, South Africa, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Nepal, India, Philippines and the United States (particularly in Nevada)

- *What is the history of the formation of sex workers' rights groups in these countries?*
- *Who are the groups, what are their funding sources, and where is the influence on their policies coming from (for example is a larger international NGO working with them)?*
- *Are the sex worker's groups pushing for legalization in those countries where it is not already legalized? (Look only at India, Nepal, Philippines, US, South Africa)*
- *In those countries where it is not legalized, what are the local women's rights groups in these countries saying about legalization? (Look only at India, Nepal, Philippines, US, South Africa)*

"Please keep in mind that this is a confidential work product developed for Equality Now and not intended for distribution or publication." OK, *don't put it on the website* where a Google search can turn it up, then. Now, it's obvious what this is: it's what we call *oppo research*, trying to figure out what your foes (bad people "inured to the wrong" of prostitution) are doing. Many organizations dabble in this at one point or another, though they don't usually call on students at a distinguished university to help. But this is where the power question comes in. I don't like the tone of the questions — the funding sources, the suggestion of foreign influence. Most sex worker groups are poor and marginal. In countries where sex work "is not legalized," the organizations' very existence is often endangered. Even where sex work is at least partly legal, they're still stigmatized as advocating immorality, and any number of contrived crimes from promoting public indecency to spreading pornography to running a brothel can provide excuses to shut them down, and even jail their members.

So what exactly is this information going to be used for? Has [the professor](#) (a good guy, I think, with a history of work on migration issues) who's overseeing the practicum asked Equality Now? *Has the New School put safeguards in place to make sure its students' research will only be used for ethical purposes, and will not endanger the safety, human rights, or freedom of sex worker advocates and activists?* The school is asking its students to monitor sex workers' groups for an NGO that *really* doesn't like them. And the school needs to be answerable for any consequences. The history of power politics around sex workers' rights and freedoms is too acute and recent — and the possibility of even inadvertently endangering people is too strong — for an academic institution to pretend this is purely an academic question for very long.

NB. A comment (below) states that the Milano School is not part of the New School for Social Research but a parallel institution to it within the overall New School structure. Sorry for the confusion.



— Alleged sex workers arrested in a “rescue” raid on a lodging in Kathmandu, Nepal, September 15, 2013

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11 THOUGHTS ON “SEX IMPERIALISM”

 [Laura Agustin](#) on [25 September 2013 at 07:17](#) said:

I don't understand – have Equality Now paid this school to be able to run such research

there? And if the teacher is asking such a question does that mean he was assigned the class rather than thought of it himself?



Wendy Lyon

on **25 September 2013 at 08:54** said:

It's always worth recalling [this article](#) co-written by Donna Hughes, leading member of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women and leader of the campaign to reverse the decriminalisation of sex work in Rhode Island, written in 2004 to defend Bush's crusade against Islam. *"Many feminists are out of touch with the realities of the war that has been declared against the secular, Judeo-Christian, modern West. They are still romanticizing and cheering for Third World anti-colonialist movements..."*



iamcuriousblue

on **25 September 2013 at 14:22** said:

I think there's a lot of valid criticism of the tendency of the political left to romanticize Third World anti-colonialist movements, but in the case of Donna Hughes, it was a call to embrace and cheer on an even more reactionary agenda, all in the name of feminism. And let's not forget Hughes record of openly shilling for People's Mujahedin of Iran, a classic case of romanticizing a violent terrorist group (a group far outside of and not embraced by the democratic Iranian opposition, I might add) in a far corner of the world if ever there was one.



scottlong1980

on **25 September 2013 at 14:47** said:

Is there a bit of dirty business anywhere, or an effort to divide and impede the left, that the MEK hasn't been part of? They bought off Peter Tatchell and, I tend to believe, a lot of the pro-war British "muscular liberals" in the UK a long time ago. They seem to have a direct line to both the Democratic and Republican parties in the US. Like the Unification Church, a fine example of a successful cult going mainstream. Brrr.



iamcuriousblue

on **25 September 2013 at 18:06** said:

Well, full disclosure – I'm quite sympathetic with many of Tatchell's positions, and am not at all sympathetic with those parts of the Left that lean toward sympathy with Islamism, the Iranian regime, or other authoritarian governments and movements in the developing world just because they happen to oppose US imperial power. That said, my sympathies are with the those like the Iranian Green Movement that seek genuine change from the bottom up, not neo-con proxies like MEK or vanguardist terrorists of any political stripe. I didn't know Tatchell was a supporter of MEK and it doesn't speak well for his political judgement in that case, though I'm not sure if he's a current supporter.

Pingback: [New School Students Drafted for Opposition Research Against Sex Workers | postwhoreamerica](#)



Katherine T.

on **25 September 2013 at 14:07** said:

This an excellent article, and there can't be enough well-written pieces like this out there. Thank you.

I just want to point out, though, that the Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy and the New School for Social Research, are two entirely separate entities under "The New School" institution umbrella. As a former NSSR student, I cannot think of one faculty member whom I worked with that would support such questionable research practices. I just don't want to see them become associated with this mess.



scottlong1980

on **25 September 2013 at 14:08** said:

Thanks for the correction. I will add a note in the text.



Imagustin

on **26 September 2013 at 12:52** said:

Regarding your 'what Agustín doesn't say', which makes me sound very blindered, I wonder if you would like to refer to my book, Sex at the Margins, and/or my web writings rather than a constrictive academic piece from many years ago? The remit of the special edition that piece was written for was studies of governmentality – not all the wider issues. Thanks for a reply.



scottlong1980

on **26 September 2013 at 13:04** said:

hi Laura, I'm happy to. I will even add a note in the text.

Pingback: [That Was the Week That Was \(#339\) | The Honest Courtesan](#)

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