


The Naked Anthropologist

Dr Laura Agustin on Migration, Trafficking and Sex

The Conceit of Nicholas Kristof: Rescuing sex slaves as saintliness

22 November 2011 in [trafficking](#) by [laura agustin](#) | [32 comments](#) |  [print](#)

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(http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/ImageGen.ashx_.jpg) Some people find commercial sex or prostitution *vulgar*. I find Nicholas Kristof *vulgar*: preening, in love with himself, interfering, condescending, happy to pose grinning with brown people and claim to be saving them. A true colonial character – give me tight dresses and flashy colours any day! Since I find him nauseating, I mostly ignore him, though his Wikipedia entry makes him sound a saint (in the Rich White Man category), with prizes for ‘*powerful columns that portrayed suffering among the developing world’s often forgotten people and stirred action*’ and for ‘*giving voice to the voiceless*’. Gag. Ashton Kutcher is way preferable.

Lately Kristof *live-tweeted* a brothel raid alongside Somaly Mam, supposedly blow-by-blow. I am not going to complain about twitter, but the 140-character limit does foster reductionism and clichés. But more important is his claim later that *thanks to him and Mam*:

In Anlong Veng, Cambodia, 6 more brothels have closed since the raid I live-tweeted there that rescued a seventh-grader. (<https://twitter.com/#!/NickKristof/status/136843467757322240>)

Great balls of fire, what colossal nerve to make such a claim. I know he is trying to reach the mainstream but it is so offensive he would refer to a

young person in Cambodia with a made-in-USA label like *seventh grader*. His next claim was:

In part, that's the power of Twitter. And the fear of traffickers that they could be next to face wrath of @*SomalyMam* (https://twitter.com/#!/NickKristof/status/136843845869649920)

Wrath? A journalist who fosters the notion of a black and white world of bad people punished by good is not a journalist at all but a man selling his own virtue – which by the way is what prostitutes were said to be doing, in the olden days.

But vulgarity and childishness are not so important in the end. The real disorder in Kristof's blithe chirping about brothels closing is the **absence of responsibility towards the people working in them**: where did they go? how will they live? do they have a roof over their heads now? **How can he not understand that this is just how trafficking can happen, in his own sense of the word?**

Not only women who sell sex earn their livelihoods through brothels: barmen, waiters, guards, laundresses, food vendors and others are integrated into these businesses. Those who want to abolish them might at least suggest alternatives if this source of income dries up. As for actual brothel workers, whether they were happy or coerced, the stigma attached to their previous employment could make it difficult to fend for themselves afterwards *without* turning to unscrupulous characters unless they are very lucky. But in the fairytale land of Rescue, uncomfortable consequences don't exist and Rescuers are always Doing Good.

(http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/kristof.jpg) A critical perspective is commoner amongst those concerned about so-called Development and Aid. I used the satirical representation at the right on a post about Rescue Tourism (http://www.lauraagustin.com/have-fun-take-a-tour-to-meet-victims-of-sex-trafficking-learn-to-be-a-saviour), and Africa is a Country (http://africasacountry.com/2011/09/16/kristoff-saves-another-woman-%E2%80%A6-and-this-time-she%E2%80%99s-african/) also makes fun of him. If you want to read a recent smarmy article by Kristof, try Fighting Back, One Brothel Raid at a Time (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/opinion/sunday/kristof-fighting-back-one-brothel-raid-at-a-time.html? r=1&emc=eta1) from 12 November at *The New York Times*, where he boasts of his own heroism:



But riding beside Somaly in her car toward a brothel bristling with AK-47 assault rifles, it was scary. This town of Anlong Veng is in northern Cambodia near the Thai border, with a large military presence; it feels like something out of the Wild West.

There it is: Rescue as cowboy thrills, a way to live out conceited notions of importance by riding rough-shod through other people's lives.

–*Laura Agustín, the Naked Anthropologist*

 (http://www.addtoany.com/share_save?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.lauraagustin.com%2Fthe-conceit-of-nicholas-kristof-rescuing-sex-slaves-as-saintliness&title=The%20Conceit%20of%20Nicholas%20Kristof%3A%20Rescuing%20sex%20slaves%20as%20saintliness&description=Dr%20Laura%20Agust%C3%ADn%20on%20Migration%2C%20Trafficking%20and%20Sex)

Tags: [Asia-Pacific](#), [rescue industry](#), [trafficking](#)

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Cristina on [22 November 2011 at 20:00](#)

Nick Kristoff is really despicable. I have worked with some "former slaves" he has interviewed and featured and they shared their trafficking stories with me. Interestingly, Mr. Kristoff's own articles and stories about these girls exaggerate and sometimes alter parts of the story, as if it its some sort of oral history or myth.

One of these girls did not want to be "the face" of trafficking. However, with some pressure that she would "share" the story of trafficking and this would help prevent others from enduring what she did pushed her to agree. However, she does not get paid for her story being rewritten and re-imagined. Meanwhile Mr. Kristoff is praised for his "daring" and "heart wrenching" journalism and he is getting PAID for this work. Shame on him.

[Reply](#)

Laura Agustín on [22 November 2011 at 20:23](#)

Cristina, I have heard other such rumours about those supposedly saved by both Kristof and Mam. It's a shame we can't find a way to present this as 'evidence' of exploitative practices by Helpers and Saviours.

[Reply](#)

kato on [22 November 2011 at 21:58](#)

Unfortunately these so called rescuers are using cases of people who are held against their will, as a weapon in an attempt to remove the rights of sex workers, thus endangering them, some of those sex workers say that they do not have any real better alternative than sex work, that they would choose to be a sex worker instead of other options that they don't

want to do.

It is extremely dangerous to use a few cases of trafficked victims as justification for society to remove sex workers rights, thus making them more endangered and discriminated against and marginalised, thus affecting their mental health and mind, body and spirit.

If a female or male wants to be a sex worker then they should at least feel comfortable and protected by rights and by the police, even if sex workers are not always liked, they still are human beings who deserve rights and they should have every right to feel safe and protected in their own chosen consensual adult sexual relationships, just like wives, girlfriends, boyfriends and husbands etc have rights in their relationships and sexual relations, then sex workers must also have equal rights to equality in consensual adult sexual relationships.

The people who want to remove sex workers in society, are not listening to sex workers wants, opinions and needs, cause they just do not care, and do not respect them for their relationship choices, farley and bindel with their judgemental attitude are two such examples of people who discriminate against sex workers.

[Reply](#)

Kris on [22 November 2011 at 22:59](#)

I find his stories very interesting. He also reports about the DMSC in India. It turns out to be the largest human trafficking ring in the world! They have tens of thousands of sex slaves in their grasp!! That's more than the total number of prostitutes in the Netherlands. Saban B looks like a wimp compared to these criminals, his gang only occupied 40 women during one moment. But 40 women is a lot obviously.

[Reply](#)

Laura Agustín on [23 November 2011 at 16:41](#)

You may find his stories interesting, but that is the second time you have mentioned his slanderous comments about DMSC on this website. They are not true, he did not understand that organisation, as how would he? He finds what he has preconceived notions about. I will appreciate your not repeating this again. Thank you.

[Reply](#)

Tracey Tully on [28 November 2011 at 03:20](#)

Kristof is dangerous because he is so widely-read in the English-speaking world and because he propagates memes like the one you describe. It is an absolute lie. I know workers from DMSC and they are doing some incredible grass-roots work. I feel you have to be emotionally invested in his heroic narrative to miss the clues about the toxic ideas he is presenting. His journalismy activismy jaunt to Cambodia was a voyeuristic perversion, as are many stories about sex trafficking, not just Kristof. Though he is already a long-time offender. Would you want him near your daughter?

[Reply](#)

kato on [23 November 2011 at 00:48](#)

Unfortunately those so called rescuers are using cases of trafficked victims as an excuse and as a weapon in an attempt to remove sex workers rights to equality in society, they try to remove those rights by using stigma and spreading misinformation.

There has been a lot of sex workers who have stated that they want to remain doing sex work, as other alternatives are just not that appealing to them, so instead of trying to take away their livelihood and using stigma and discrimination against them, why not just give them rights and better protection in society?

Many sex workers have been murdered cause of bad stigma in society and lack of rights to equality and safety.

Most sex workers agree, it is not the work itself that is dangerous, but the lack of rights to safer conditions, thats the real danger, its hard to get safer conditions with so much disinformation and hatred being spread against sex workers, by people who do not like their chosen profession.

Wives, husbands, adult boyfriend and girlfriends have equal rights to adult consensual sexual relations, sex workers should also have their equal rights to their own adult consensual sexual relations and promotion of safety and better conditions.

It is unfair to hold a huge portion of sex workers as being responsible for any cases of trafficked victims, both are seperate issues that need to be addressed in a fair, cohesive and precise way, much education also needs to be done on both issues for improving the situations of the sex worker and any trafficked victim.

Its surely not impossible to create safer environments for both issues.

But first people should realise that yes they are women and even men in society who want to be sex workers and have a livelihood out of it, and during their time as sex workers they need fair treatment.

[Reply](#)

Laura Agustín on [23 November 2011 at 16:44](#)

Well-put summary of the sex worker rights position. I don't promote the idea that there are two clearly separable groups, though, myself - it's far more complicated than that!

[Reply](#)

kato on [23 November 2011 at 18:36](#)

Laura the USA recently recognised that sex workers have different rights and needs to trafficked victims.

Do you have an opinion on this, curious to know?

It is true though that both issues are a bit complex

[Reply](#)

Adeyemi on [23 November 2011 at 21:20](#)

At this time I have no critique of the work of Nicholas Kristoff as I believe the truth will emerge if actually he is exploiting the victims. However, while I agree the society must find alternative source of livelihood for the sex worker, I completely object to the notion of giving rights to commercial sex workers to continue what they do for a living. The question is how do we protect children used for sex by adults who visit brothels to solicit sex? By giving them such rights, the society would be legalizing commercial sex; it is time to abolish prostitution in its entirety I do not favor the mistreatment of a woman's body in any form therefore, while the society must find an alternative form of survival for people involved, the abolitionists are right we must end prostitution and sex trafficking.

[Reply](#)

kato on [24 November 2011 at 02:43](#)

Some sex workers have said they do not want some other alternative source of livelihood cause the alternatives do not pay as much as sex work.

If sex workers want rights, they are entitled to rights.

You are most naive if you ever think that you can abolish human exchanges where sexual services are offered in exchange for material wealth, such activity has been there for hundreds and hundreds of years stretching back to some of the earliest known civilisations, get real.

Trafficking with held victims most definitely should be fought, but not to the level where it creates trouble and danger for sex workers like in Sweden where they are forced cause of restrictions into dangerous situations.

[Reply](#)

Johnpaul on [28 November 2011 at 19:32](#)

"Some sex workers have said..."

Really, Kato? Than that ends that debate. If "some have said" than clearly we should let them go on undisturbed.

Oh, by the way, "some" of these sex workers are little children...I wonder what they have to say.

[Reply](#)

McDuff on [30 November 2011 at 07:15](#)

We wouldn't find out by asking Nick Kristoff. He's never very interested in what prostitutes have to say, regardless of their age. Well, apart from prostitutes called Nick Kristoff.

[Reply](#)

marc on [28 November 2011 at 20:48](#)

laura

i don't want to get into the sex worker issue...but the issue of trafficking pre-adolescent girls simply has no defense.

you may be right that Nick Kristof is using an 'Geraldo' approach but at least he is getting the message out to millions of people...

your problem is that right or wrong, and not withstanding a short guest appearance on BBC and hanging out with Julian Assange's legal team, no one knows who you are..

As far as Nick Kristof the Rich, White, Straight, male...I would give that issue a rest...Since, to judge from your photos you are a Rich-World, White, Woman ...you fit the neo-colonialist profile too.

[Reply](#)

Laura Agustín on [29 November 2011 at 01:57](#)

What problem are you talking about, marc? It doesn't matter if I am important, it's a blog, these are my opinions as a researcher in the field for many years. Freedom of speech, remember? And whiteness is not about skin colour, I guess I will have to write about that soon.

Also I never mentioned Geraldo, that was someone else.

[Reply](#)

Bittermuch on [6 December 2011 at 21:39](#)

You take criticism well, Laura.

Maybe what Marc was simply stating is that he disagrees with your bashing because, unlike you, Nick is well known and is doing a really good job with the awareness factor. Freedom of speech....remember?

[Reply](#)

Gregory A. Butler on [29 November 2011 at 01:51](#)

Marc –

It's easy to make cheap shots at Dr Agustin.

How about we keep this story focused on the main theme.

That is, a glory-seeking affluent White man from America comes to Cambodia to impose his morality on adult Cambodian sex workers. Many of these sex workers have ended up in Cambodia's hellish prison system thanks to Kristof's "rescue efforts".

That's the bottom line, no matter what you think of Dr Agustin.

[Reply](#)

Pingback from [Reality Tour of Human Trafficking in Cambodia: Yes, This Actually Exists | Faine Opines](#) on [29 November 2011 at 18:01](#)

Johnpaul on [29 November 2011 at 23:09](#)

Mr. Butler,

How about we keep this story focused on the important theme.

Children are being forcibly raped.

Somebody needs to do something and Kristof is doing more to raise awareness than anyone else (yes, including you Ashton).

That's the bottom line, no matter what you think of Mr. Kristof.

[Reply](#)

Gregory A. Butler on [30 November 2011 at 05:56](#)

John Paul,

The issue is, Kristof's raids are leading to adult sex workers, voluntarily employed in the trade, being arrested, beaten, robbed and raped by the Cambodian Police.

That's the real issue here, as the vast majority of sex workers rounded up in Kristof's raids (about a 200 to 1) ratio, are adult sex workers.

As for Nick Kristof, he's a rich White man from the west with a messiah complex, an unhealthy obsession with young women having sex and more money than brains.

[Reply](#)

Tracey Tully on [30 November 2011 at 05:52](#)

John Paul, we do not know if or when and where children are being forcibly raped. In case you haven't noticed, Kristof is a liar. It's all part of the neocolonialist mindset. If sex work was vested with labour rights, it would prevent trafficking. It is the best safeguard against it, as well as against HIV, STIs and violence. Especially state violence.

[Reply](#)

Johnpaul on [30 November 2011 at 22:27](#)

Thanks Greg and Tracey, where do you get your statistics from and Tracey why do you say Kristof is a liar?

I heard from a lot of people that don't like Nick Kristof but I don't really understand where the anger comes from. Surely it can't be for referring to one of the Cambodian children as a "Seventh grader" (which, in my opinion, is the pettiest criticism I've ever heard).

[Reply](#)

Gregory A. Butler on [1 December 2011 at 22:23](#)

Kristof sets himself up as this "great White father" out to "save" the dirty fallen girls of Cambodia.

His raids lead to Cambodian women being herded into prison camps, where, according to Human Rights Watch, they are subject to beatings, rape and robbery by Cambodian police officers.

Incidentally, most of these women are ADULTS who are VOLUNTARILY

working as sex workers.

That's my beef with Kristof.

[Reply](#)

Tracey Tully on [2 December 2011 at 05:24](#)

I am opposed to western neocolonialism in the developing world.

[Reply](#)

Casey Nelson on [30 November 2011 at 22:30](#)

"Great balls of fire, what colossal nerve to make such a claim. I know he is trying to reach the mainstream but it is so offensive he would refer to a young person in Cambodia with a made-in-USA label like seventh grader."

This does seem something of a pedantic point, but taking it a bit further, one of the things I find odd about this characterization of the girl as a "seventh-grader" is that if she is imprisoned in a brothel, she's not going to school, regardless of the grade. And if she is a 14-year-old that's been trafficked from Vietnam and debt-bonded into a brothel in Cambodia, most likely by her parents, it is highly unlikely that she is from a background in which she has received any significant schooling, let alone 7 years of it. While being, as I said, a rather pedantic point, it hints, in part, that Kristof is not acting as a journalist reporting on a brothel raid and the people involved, but as a dramatist of sorts, spinning a narrative in which the details of the real-world individuals are not as important as painting a particular picture. The messy particulars of actual individuals are smoothed into characters in a narrative (which do in fact fit neatly into Twitter-size blurbs.) We are not supposed to think about the complex and difficult real world circumstances leading to girls (and women) like this ending up in brothels or as some other sort of CSW, but merely have a visceral reaction that demands simple, immediate, uncomplicated solutions.

[Reply](#)

Frank on [7 December 2011 at 16:52](#)

I guess I came to the party a little late, but since Kristof has a movie coming out soon, this issue isn't going away anytime soon.

marc – When you say, "I don't want to get into the sex worker issue here...", either you are uninformed or you are following the tack of Kristof and his cohorts who, because they cannot debate the issue of sex work straight up, have to hide behind the relatively rare 10 year old forced into prostitution to promulgate a global ban on sex work. This issue is about sex work (and imperialism) and little else.

Furthermore, taking cheap shots at Laura proves that:

- 1) You are losing the argument.
- 2) You have nothing else to add.

If you can't handle the truth, go back to reading and listening to people like Sorvino, Hunt, and Kutcher; they have a far bigger presence on the

web than people like Laura.

Lastly, regarding your "give it a rest" remark, it is pretty difficult to "give it a rest" when you have all this White ***** (in the thousands, with millions of dollars of taxpayer subsidies behind them) floating around Asia trying to impose those good 'ole superior "Western Values" on people who never asked for or want it. Saying that Laura is some sort of neo-colonialist is ridiculous.

Frank

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