

WAR ON TERROR & WAR ON TRAFFICKING

A Sex Worker Activist Confronts the Anti-Trafficking Movement

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War on Terror & War on Trafficking:
A Sex Worker Activist Confronts the Anti-Trafficking Movement
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fuck survivor poems by Emi Koyama

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In honor of Asian women sex workers, my foremothers, who lived through the 19th century white slavery panic and built the foundation for the Asian American community today.



Photo: South Korean sex workers protesting police raids in the red-light district in Seoul. Taken on May 17, 2011 by Lee Jin-Man for Associated Press. Used with love, but without permission.

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Why feminists must confront the anti-trafficking movement

Human trafficking is “modern-day slavery,” and many of its victims are women and children. If so, why should a feminist have to “confront” the movement against human trafficking? Let me be clear that human trafficking is a serious problem in the United States, and we need to do something about it.

I first became aware of the issue in the early 2000s at a conference about domestic violence. What I learned at the time was that while Violence Against Women Act (1994) and Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000) had been enacted, domestically trafficked victims—many of whom are working in the sex industry—could not access services and protections under these laws. I joined the effort to raise awareness about the issue and to expand relief provided through these legislations.

“Human trafficking” was a new term then. While there have been earlier uses in some publication (the earliest mainstream use being a *Christian Science Monitor* article in 1996), it did not attain the meaning it has now until around 2000, when TVPA passed; when the term was used prior, it frequently meant the same thing as smuggling, which is often exploitative and can lead to trafficking, but is generally consensual).

A search on news article database shows that there were 3 total references to phrases “human trafficking” and “trafficking in humans” before 2000. It was mentioned 9 times in 2000, 41 times in 2001, and entered three digits for the first time in 2005. In 2010, as many as 501 articles found on the database referred to either phrases.

I mention the origin of the term “human trafficking” because, as it became obvious after many years, the creation and proliferation of the new terminology was a deliberate rhetorical shift on the part of the U.S. government and its capitalist and imperialist interest to redefine forced migration and labor (sexual or otherwise) from a social and economic issue arising from poverty, economic disparities, globalism, and unreasonable restrictions on migration to an international criminal enterprise comparable to smuggling of drugs and weapons.

And as the U.S. fell deeper into the nightmarish “War on Terror” in the aftermath of 9/11, along with its continued failure in “War on Drugs,” the new “War on Trafficking” gained intensity while copying the simplistic “just say no” attitude of the War on Drugs and “either you are with us, or with the terrorist” mentality of the War on Terror. The anti-trafficking movement today does not resemble what I had supported in the early 2000s anymore.

The battle we as sex workers, feminists and human rights activists are facing is not a simple rehash of the “feminist sex wars” of the 1980s between radical feminists and sex radicals. With its increasingly sensationalistic focus on domestic minor sex trafficking, the anti-trafficking movement we see today in the U.S. is primarily a Christian fundamentalist movement with police,

prison, immigration enforcement, counter-terrorism, and other “law and order” interests piggybacking on it. Radical feminists, with whom I have many disagreements over such issues as prostitution, transgender issues, and BDSM, are just as frustrated as we are that the current anti-trafficking movement measures the success of its own activities by the number of criminal convictions rather than the long-term health and well-being of women and children.

But many people do not realize this, either because they do not know enough about the forces behind the anti-trafficking movement or the dubious nature of many of its basic claims—which distorts our conversations about this important topic and misleads public policy. Others may not agree with everything that is happening in the name of ending human trafficking, but do not see any alternatives.

This booklet is a product of two years of research into the state of the anti-trafficking movement in the United States. I went to dozens of events, lectures, and conferences, and spoke with many wonderful but misguided people who take part in this movement. I have also had opportunities to hear many stories of surviving forced labor and prostitution, some of which were not so dissimilar to my own experiences in the sex trade in one point or another. I do not wish to negate their authority to speak about their own experiences and how they wished things were different, but I am deeply troubled by the cherry-picking of survivor stories and experiences that support the anti-trafficking trope equating all prostitution with trafficking and all trafficking with slavery, while all other voices are dismissed as “exceptions” (or “the top 2% elite,” as one anti-prostitution researcher said).

What I aim for in this booklet is to examine various questionable “facts” presented by the anti-trafficking movement, and address ways in which they distort our perceptions of sex trafficking and prostitution and mislead the public to support policies that are ineffectual or counter-productive. I will also show links between the War on Trafficking and the War on Terror, and how problematic aspects of the War on Terror permeates the War on Trafficking as well.

Chapter 1 of this booklet exposes the big three “factoids” that anti-prostitution groups use in order to influence people emotionally and to get their way with media, corporations, and the government, but are false. Chapter 2 continues on this direction, but focusing on other misinformation that influence public opinions. Chapter 3 scrutinizes “economic” arguments, including the “end demand” approach to end sex trafficking and the theory of “economic coercion.” In Chapter 4, I will use the movie *Taken* as a starting point to talk about the links between the War on Terror and the War on Trafficking. And finally in the conclusions, I will contrast anti-trafficking versus social and economic justice approaches, demonstrating how anti-trafficking movement is harming women and other vulnerable people.

I hope that this booklet contributes to building a more comprehensive and reality-based movement that challenges many facets of social and economic injustices. I hope that readers find the booklet informative, challenging, or affirming of their deep suspicion they have about the anti-trafficking movement. Thanks for reading, and I welcome reader feedbacks at emi@eminism.org.

Why “facts” presented by the anti-trafficking movement are wrong

In the first two chapters, I will examine many of the shocking but false or unfounded “statistics” and “studies” about prostitution and sex trafficking promoted by anti-trafficking groups. These are not some occasional errors or small, innocent exaggerations: these are the common “data” found on almost all anti-trafficking websites and “fact sheets,” and are far removed from reality. They distort our conversations about prostitution and sex trafficking and mislead public policy.

Before going into details, I would like to present some of the common themes and foci found in the U.S. anti-trafficking discourse as a key to understanding the inner logic of the highly illogical movement, which I believe helps us understand why anti-trafficking groups cling on to these factitious “statistics.”

1. Focus on domestic minor sex trafficking. Focus on domestic trafficking helps the domestic audience to identify with the victims or to imagine their daughter, sister, and other women and children in their own lives as potential victims, which raises their fear and interest on the topic. Focus on minors helps them avoid difficult questions about individual choice or agency and since all minors engaging in the sex trade can be victims of sex trafficking. No complexities or nuances there.

2. Adult prostitution as the extension of minor sex trafficking. Anti-trafficking movement first establishes that all minors in the sex trade are victims, then proceeds to reason that almost all adults who engage in prostitution were once minors—that is, victims. If you accept this to be true, though it isn't, then it should be obvious that she does not suddenly turn from a victim into a criminal when she has her eighteenth birthday. Anti-prostitution movement thus defines adults who engage in the sex trade as unacknowledged victims of child abuse who were not fortunate enough to be rescued or escape.

3. All prostitution is trafficking, and thus slavery. By combining 1 and 2, the anti-trafficking movement readily equates prostitution in general with trafficking, rather than problematizing how some people who work in the sex trade are trafficked, as are some of the people who work in agriculture or manufacturing or cleaning or restaurants. They also reduce complexity of how “trafficking” occurs, equating all trafficking with “slavery,” which invokes the horrific historical memory of human beings being bought and sold.

4. End demand approach. Since points 1-3 establish those engaging in the sex trade are “victims,” even “sex slaves,” many anti-trafficking activists do not advocate punishing them (although many also view the threat of punishment as a useful tool to coerce the “victims” to cooperate with the law enforcement). The answer is the Swedish model, which views prostitution as a form of violence against women and children and punishes pimps, traffickers and johns (clients), but not those who are “prostituted.”

Myth #1: Average age of entry into prostitution is thirteen

One of the most commonly cited “statistics” about prostitution in the United States is that the average age at which someone enters into prostitution (“forced into prostitution,” “sexually trafficked,” etc.) is around 13. In fact, the Department of Justice publicizes this figure, attributed to a study by Richard J. Estes and Neil Alan Weiner of University of Pennsylvania. In *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada and Mexico*, Estes and Weiner report:

The age range of entry into prostitution for the boys, including gay and transgender boys, was somewhat younger than that of the girls, i.e., 11-13 years vs. 12-14 years, respectively.

I’m not sure if Estes and Weiner are actually talking about female-to-male trans youth, which is what “transgender boys” mean to me, or they are making a common mistake and calling male-to-female trans youth “transgender boys,” but most people only cite the figure for girls, who make up majority of “sexually exploited youth,” so I will focus on the figure 13 (or between 12 and 14).

As I stated at the beginning, this “statistics” is ubiquitous in the anti-trafficking literature.

According to the Department of Justice (DOJ) the “average age at which girls first become victims of prostitution is 12-14.” (Not For Sale)

The Department of Justice estimates the most frequent age of entry into the commercial sex industry in the United States is 12-14 years old. (GEMS)

The average age of entry into the commercial sex industry in the U.S. is between 12 to 14 years old. (Polaris Project)

The average age of first initiation for most youth occurs between the ages of 12-14. (Rebecca Project for Human Rights)

The average age of entry for children victimized by the sex trade industry is 12 years. (Stop Child Trafficking Now)

As you can see, some groups cannot even cite this simple “fact” (though it isn’t) correctly, despite that the fact they all attribute it to the Department of Justice: GEMS suggests that the figure 13 is the mode instead of mean (average), while Rebecca Project on the other hand present it as the median. Stop Child Trafficking Now on the other hand dropped the upper end of the estimated range to claim an even lower figure. With such careless and irresponsible handling of data, it may not be surprising that they do not question how Estes

and Weiner arrived at the figure to begin with.

The major problem with Estes and Weiner's data is that it is based on survey of minors who engage in prostitution. Since the study does not include anyone who is over the age of 18, it is natural that the average of the reported age at which respondents entered prostitution is below 18: after all, anyone who enters into prostitution at 18 or above, who could push the average upwards, are not even interviewed.

But that is not the only consequence of not including adults in the study. There is also a cumulative effect in play, because someone who enters at a younger age have many more years during which they might be interviewed by researchers, compared to someone who enters at 17. For example, someone who entered at age 12 has six years in which she might be "counted," while another person who entered at age 17 only has one year. In other words, someone who entered at age 12 are six times more likely to be "counted" than someone at 17.

Imagine a town in which one 11 year old and one 17 year old enter into prostitution each year. The "average age" for this town, which we know, is $(11+17)/2 = 14$. But in any given year the researchers show up, they do not meet these two girls only: there is also a 12 year old who entered last year, a 13 year old who entered two years ago, and so on. There are also a 18 year old and a 19 year old who entered in the last two years, but they are not surveyed because they are overage.

When you interview these girls, all but one answer that they have entered "the life" as an 11 year old; only one, the 17 year old who entered this year, report that she entered at age 17. When you average all the responses, it is $(11+11+11+11+11+11+17)/8 = 11.75$, which is more than two years younger than the actual average of 14. This is the cumulative effect, and it artificially lowers the "average" age if you simply average out participants' responses.

On the next page, you will find a partial page from *National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking*, published by Vancouver, Washington based national anti-trafficking organization, Shared Hope International. On the top of the page, Shared Hope founder and president Linda Smith propagates (as an objective fact) the common myth that "the average age that a pimp recruits a girl into prostitution is 12 to 14 years old." The information is repeated in the second paragraph of the body, which states: "Research has shown that the average age of entry into prostitution and pornography is 12 to 14 years old in the United States."

But to the left of that claim is a chart titled "Average Age of Entry into Prostitution," which apparently shows the breakdown of responses (age of entry 11 thru 17 or "unknown") from Shared Hope's own survey of sexually exploited youth. Interestingly, the "average age of entry" among this group of research participants turn out to be 14.96, almost a full year older than the upper end of the "statistics" that is printed twice on the very same page.

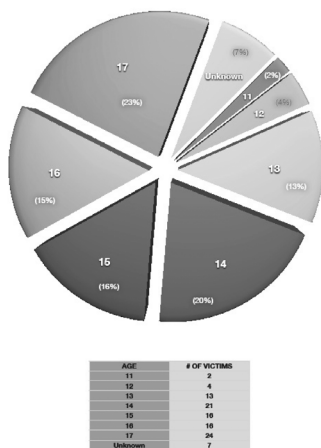
Of course, simply averaging the participants' responses does not produce the actual "average age" due to cumulative bias, so I weighed the responses in order to arrive at a more realistic (yet still flawed, as sampling error and the actual rate of longevity within prostitution are unknown) "average age of entry," which

Chapter 3: Vulnerability

“The average age that a pimp recruits a girl into prostitution is 12 to 14 years old, and these pimps are traffickers. They know how to target the girls who are the most vulnerable. Her greatest vulnerability is her age. 12- to 14-year-olds are still naïve about the world. So the danger is compounded for girls who have an unstable home life and those who are already victims of sexual abuse.”⁹⁴

— Linda Smith, Founder and President, Shared Hope International

Average Age of Entry into Prostitution



*The total # of victims surveyed is 103

Traffickers, like all those seeking to expand a business, respond to the preferences of the market — in this case, the buyers of sexual activities.

Research has shown that the average age of entry into prostitution and pornography is 12 to 14 years old in the United States. This startling statistic has also been confirmed through a survey of juveniles arrested for prostitution in Clark County, Nevada. Below is a chart outlining the breakdown of ages of entry into prostitution.⁹⁵

First responders from across the country report that the average age of victims with whom they come into contact is 15 years. However, it is important to note that most of these youth report having been prostituted for some time before coming into contact with services or juvenile justice. For example, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the youngest domestically trafficked minor receiving services from Healing Place Church in August 2008 was eight years old.⁹⁶

It is not surprising that young children and adolescents are the primary targets of traffickers/pimps, given their operational methods. Youth have less life experience, fewer coping mechanisms, and smaller social support mechanisms to draw from

turns out to be 15.92—two years older than the upper end of the “statistics” and three years older than the supposed average.

This figure, by the way, is actually more consistent with other studies that are, like Estes and Weiner study, funded by Department of Justice. For example, *The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in New York City* published by the Center for Court Innovation found:

Many of the professionals who offered guidance to the John Jay research team believed that the average age of entry for girls was much younger than for boys, but boys and girls differed only slightly in our sample. The average age of entry for females was 15.15 years and males 15.28 years, but a higher percentage of boys (19%) entered the market under the age of 13 than girls (15%). And transgender youth tended to start out later in their teens (16.16 years) than boys or girls. Where boys, girls and transgendered youth differed the most was not in their age of entry, but in how they entered the market.

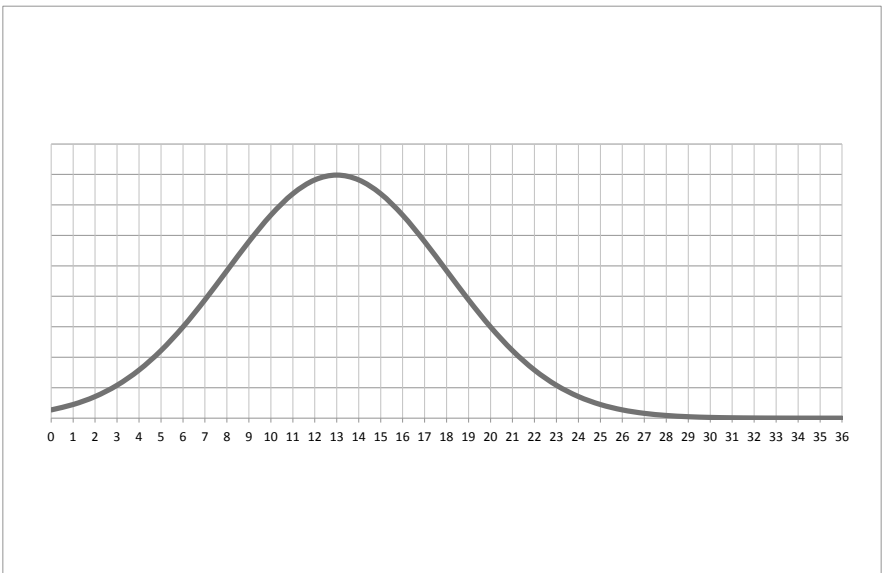
This study is still not perfect, as it is still a survey of only underage youth in the sex trade. But it seems to have a better and elaborate method of recruiting more representative sample, and strikes me more realistic than the standard figure of age 13 as the average age of youth entry into prostitution.

This is not a small distinction. Make no mistake: whether youth are entering into prostitution at 12, 13, and 14 year olds, or 15, 16, and 17 year olds makes a huge difference when it comes to determining how to best protect safety and well-being of these youth.

If we were to assume that 13 is the typical age at which children are trafficked into prostitution, for example, we might conclude that what we need is to increase policing and surveillance at schools and public spaces such as shopping centers. We might enact curfews to bring these young children home after certain time.

But if the typical age is more like 16, these same tactics would not only be a complete misdirection of scarce public resources and attention, but they may induce youth to look for adults in the community who may or may not be safe to spend the night with just to avoid curfews and police harassment.

Without understanding the nature of the problem that we are trying to address, we cannot enact rational and sensible responses that actually work. And yet, too many anti-trafficking activists opt for the most shocking yet demonstrably flawed “statistics” to maximize the emotional impact of their campaigns, while neglecting harms their irresponsible campaigns of dishonesty and fear-mongering are causing.



Myth #2: 300,000 children are at risk of being sexually exploited

The second most cited “statistics” about prostitution and minor sex trafficking that anywhere between 100,000 to 300,000 children are “at risk” of being trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation comes from the study by Estes and Weiner, the same paper that is often used as a basis for the earlier claim that “average age of entry into prostitution is 13.”

Anti-prostitution groups state:

100,000-300,000 children are at risk for commercial sexual exploitation each year in the United States (GEMS)

According to the DOJ it is believed that approximately 293,000 American children are at risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking. (Not For Sale)

An estimated 200,000 to 300,000 are at-risk of being commercially sexually exploited (Love146)

Some groups as well as news media often cite the 300,000 figure and claim that it is the number of youth who are *actually trafficked* for the purpose of sexual exploitation, rather than that they are “at risk,” which is a big difference.

It is estimated that between 100,000-300,000 children are sexually exploited in the United States every year (Rebecca Project for Human Rights)

Dr. Estes estimated that the number of 10 -- 17 year olds involved in commercial sexual exploitation in the US each year likely exceeds 250,000. (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children)

In just the United States, between 100,000 and 300,000 children are enslaved and sold for sex. (Demi and Ashton Foundation)

At least 100,000 and perhaps as many as 300,000 children in America are victims of sex trafficking each year. (“Sex trafficking: An American problem too.” CNN, 11/25/2009)

These statements are clearly wrong, as they are simply a misinterpretation of the report by Estes and Weiner (or their second- and third-hand derivatives), but what about the original claim about those “at risk” itself? This, too, is suspect due to flawed methodology and inadequate data.

In order to arrive at this estimate, Estes and Weiner identified many categories of youth that they considered “at risk,” and to what degree. For example, they

estimated that there are 3,000 “transgender street youth” in the country, 100% of whom are “at risk” whereas 25% of 27,000 “female gang members” are “at risk.” These estimates are made on the basis of their interviews with 300 youth, but they remain somewhat educated guesses. The total number of “at risk” youth is calculated by adding number of youth in all of these categories, multiplied by the percentage.

These “risk groups” are not mutually exclusive, for example a transgender street youth could also be a female gang member. Estes and Weiner also provide “lower estimate” to account for duplication, and do not actually know how much duplication occurs.

This methodology can basically produce any desired number as the “number of youth at risk” by including additional “risk groups” or excluding them, even those that overlap with the existing categories, and therefore lack methodological integrity. It is, at best, just a guess.

Further, it is not clear how many of those “at risk” *actually* engage in prostitution or are trafficked. Perhaps that was not the point of Estes and Weiner’s study, but it is important to stress that not all “at risk” youth are sexually exploited. Many groups and journalists do not seem to care.

Estes and Weiner, to their credit, caution that their study took place when the number of runaway or throwaway youth was at its peak. They state:

Inasmuch as 60% of all the children we estimate to be at risk of commercial sexual exploitation fall within the runaway and throwaway categories [...] the findings from this updated national incidence study of runaway and throwaway children [...] is expected to have a significant impact on our estimates of the number of children at risk of commercial sexual exploitation. Preliminary discussions with investigators associated with NISMART-2 suggest that the number of runaway and throwaway children may have declined by as much as 30%-40% between 1988 and 2000—a finding that would be consistent with recent reports of other types of violent sexual risks to which children are exposed.

A 30%-40% reduction of the population that account for 60% of “at risk” youth would indeed have a large impact on the final estimate, especially if it is indicative of larger economic and social trend that reduces number of youth in other “at risk” categories. But regardless, the figure of 300,000 “at risk” youth remains a highly unreliable foundation to base our public policies on.

Myth #3: 1/3 of 1.6 million annual runaways are sold within 48 hours

The last of the three most commonly promoted “statistics” about minor sex trafficking is made up from two parts: that there are about 1.6 million runaway youth each year, and that a third of them are trafficked, sexually exploited, or forced into prostitution within the first 48 hours.

An estimated 1.6 million children run away from home each year in the US. The average time it takes before a runaway is approached by a trafficker or solicitor is 48 hours (GEMS)

It is estimated that it takes as little as 48 hours for a child to be lured into exploitation by individuals promising love, money and lavish lifestyles (Rebecca Project for Human Rights)

Within 48 hours of hitting the streets, one-third of these children are lured or recruited into the underground world of prostitution and pornography (Stop Child Trafficking Now)

As many as 2.8 million children live on the streets, a third of whom are lured into prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home (Shared Hope International)

The figure is variably attributed to National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, National Runaway Switchboard, or *National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children* (NISMART-2), which is the report Estes and Weiner mention in the previous page. These sources do in fact estimate the number of runaway youth to be 1.6 million annually, although none of them actually have any data about what percentage of them are trafficked, or how long that takes.

The figure is also inconsistent with another myth that 300,000 children are “at risk” to be trafficked: if 1.6 million/one third/48 hours story were true, it would mean that 533,000 children are not just “at risk,” but are *actually* trafficked each year. Perhaps that is why GEMS has removed this line from its literature in Spring of 2011 after I criticized this figure on my blog (and some folks contacted GEMS about it).

This “statistics” also has many mutated forms. Some groups claim that a third of runaway youth are trafficked within 48 hours, while others say it takes an average of 48 hours for someone to be trafficked, or simply that it may only take 48 hours for some to be trafficked. These statements all point to different realities, and yet they coexist in the anti-trafficking literature without anyone seriously questioning them.

That might be enough to conclude that the “statistics” is unreliable, to say

the least, but you may wonder: where did it come from, if not from National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, National Runaway Switchboard, or NISMART-2? The only document that seem to show some actual numbers is on the website of Gracehaven House, a faith-based organization in Northwest Ohio providing “shelter, security, and rehabilitation” to female victims of commercial sexual exploitation under the age 18.

On its “fact sheet” about commercial sexual exploitation of children, Gracehaven House cites another Ohio group, Huck House. It states:

Huck House FY 2007

- Served 1,409 youth in 2007
- Approximately 600 girls
- 1/3 will be approached within 48 hours by a pimp
- 200 girls <18 approached by a pimp
- 60-90 involved in prostitution

Huck House, or Huckleberry House is an organization in Columbus, Ohio that provides safe place for runaway youth. The one-third figure seem to come from a survey of its client/participant base for the fiscal year 2007, which included about 800 boys and 600 girls. Assuming that this report is accurate, here are some things to consider:

First, I would point out that the one-third/48 hours figure often presented as a national statistics but it is based on a survey of participants at a single social service agency in Columbus, Ohio.

Second, while it is often claimed that one third of runaway youth are recruited into prostitution within first 48 hours, the data do not support this. Huck House figure states that one third of *girls* who came to Huck House have been approached, but they make up only 14% of the all “runaway youth” at the agency, not 33%.

Third, even if a third of girls who showed up at Huck House have been approached by a pimp, it does not mean that a third of runaway girls are. We can reasonably assume that short-term or casual runaway youth (who might spend a night at a friend’s house before returning home, for example—and they comprise majority of runaways) are far less likely to be approached by a pimp or engage in prostitution than those who run away longer period of time or farther distances. Client base at agencies like Huck House consist of youth from the latter group, and therefore its survey does not include the former.

To illustrate this point, let’s imagine that 100 girls ran away from home in a hypothetical city or region. Imagine that 70 of them are casual runaways (i.e. low risk of being exploited), and 30 are high-risk runaways. Pimps generally approach girls in the high-risk group, so let’s say 10 out of the 30 are approached. Once the 70 casual runaways return home or find other arrangements, it leaves 30 longer-term, high-risk runaway youth who show up at Huck House.

Huck House surveys these 30 who showed up, and report that a third of its client base have been approached by a pimp. But you cannot conclude, based on this study, that a third of all runaway youth (or even just girls) are approached:

we started with 100 girls, 10 of whom are approached, so the actual rate should be 10%.

Huck House, or other groups like it, does not serve a representative sample of runaway youth; they serve those who are part of a higher risk group. Therefore, you cannot take figures from its survey and generalize it to the entire runaway youth population.

Fourth, even though a third of the girls who showed up at Huck House report to have been approached by a pimp within 48 hours, only 10-15% of the girls (60-90 out of 600) are involved in prostitution (and this includes any girl who became involved at any point during their time away from home, not just within the first 48 hours), according to Huck House.

In other words, it is false to claim that one third of the girls at Huck House are “forced into prostitution” or “trafficked”; they are simply “approached”—and at least a majority of girls are smart and empowered enough to turn them down.

Further, if we include all youth into the analysis (and there is no reason not to, because anti-trafficking groups claim that a third of all runaway youth are recruited, not just girls), it is 60-90 youth engaging in prostitution at Huck House among 1,400 total. That is 4-6% of the group surveyed, far lower than the anti-trafficking groups’ claim.

And this figure is for those involved in prostitution at any point, not just in the first 48 hours, and also includes girls who do not have a pimp or trafficker. Actual recruitment by pimps and traffickers are rarer and less successful than the anti-trafficking groups claim them to be.

None of us wants to see any number of runaway youth, whether 33% or 4% or even a fraction of 1%, having to engage in prostitution to survive on the street, with or without pimps. But there is a large gap between the claim that “a third of runaway youth are trafficked within the first 48 hours on the street” and the actual figure of 4-6% over the course of their homelessness.

Bad “statistics” misinform the public about this very important issue and mislead our discussions over what to do about it. Those who traffic fake statistics and launder its true source must stop doing so.

“Pornland” and other problems with Operation Cross Country

In May 2010, former CBS news anchor Dan Rather produced an episode of his new cable program, *Dan Rather Reports*, titled “Pornland, Oregon: Child Prostitution in Portland.” It claimed, among other things, that Portland was one of the country’s leading hubs of domestic minor sex trafficking. But Portland is hardly the only city or region to be given this title:

“Portland a center for human trafficking” (*The Oregonian*, 01/09/2011)

“Houston is hub of human trafficking” (*The Houston Chronicle*, 11/26/2008)

“Oklahoma’s position [...] makes it a hub for traffickers” (*The Oklahoman*, 04/15/2011)

“Las Vegas: ‘Hub’ of Human Trafficking” (*Las Vegas Tribune*, 04/10/2011)

“California [...] is a hub for both international and domestic traffickers” (*Oakland Tribune*, 01/09/2011)

“Toledo’s reputation as a hub for enslavement of people for the sex trade” (*The Blade [Ohio]*, 01/04/2009)

“Chicago is a major ‘hub’ for human trafficking” (*The Chicago Sun-Times*, 04/23/2006)

“Atlanta is the east coast hub for human trafficking” (*WALB News [Georgia]*, 03/30/2011)

“North Carolina’s location makes it an increasingly attractive regional hub for human trafficking” (*Gaston Gazette [North Carolina]*, 04/08/2011)

“The city [San Francisco] is a major hub on the global trafficking network” (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 03/09/2007)

“New Jersey a hub for human trafficking and sex trade” (*Newsroom Jersey*, 05/09/2011)

When Oklahoma and North Carolina are considered “hubs” of human trafficking, it is perhaps not that noteworthy that Portland was crowned with the label “Pornland, Oregon” by Dan Rather. But it had an enormous impact on residents’ psyche, as many believed it was actually the worst in the country.

The perception of Portland as a hub of domestic minor sex trafficking came about after the city's initial participation in FBI's nationwide simultaneous sweeps targeting commercial sexual exploitation of youth, Operation Cross Country.

There have been five such campaigns to this date, which started out with 16 cities in June 2008. Portland participated in the project for the first time in Operation Cross Country III in February 2009, in which Portland ranked second only to Seattle in the number of children "rescued" by the law enforcement. The actual number was 7 (compared to Seattle's 10), to be exact.

There are many problems with using the data from Operation Cross Country, some of which even FBI concedes. For example, methodologies used in the sweeps as well as its duration differ across cities, making it useless to compare results across different cities. Some cities focus on the street, while others also conduct stings on the internet; some simply go up to the youth they had identified in previous interactions. Some cities continue the sweep for full three days, while others conduct it for a few hours only.

It also does not distinguish youth who are forced into prostitution and those who are involved in survival sex without the presence of pimps or traffickers. And the total number of "rescues" are too small to be informative.

Below is a table indicating the number of cities that participated, youth "rescued," and others arrested in the past five Operation Cross Country campaigns. The figures are parsed from FBI press releases after each Cross Country sweeps, which is why there are more information for some dates than others.

	Date	City	Rescues	Arrests
I	06/2008	16	21	389
II	10/2008	29	49	642 (72 pimps, 518 pros)
III	02/2009	39	48	571
IV	10/2009	36	52	700 (60 pimps)
V	11/2010	40	69	885 (99 pimps)

As you can see, Operation Cross Country does not actually identify thousands upon thousands of youth who are supposedly being trafficked; instead it only "rescues" somewhere between one to two minors per each city that participates in it. It is a tragedy to see even one youth being trafficked, but these results do not strike me as an evidence for a massive national epidemic.

On the other hand, FBI and local law enforcement agencies arrest hundreds of people—mostly adult women who are engaging in prostitution, followed (by a large margin) by "pimps," and even smaller number of johns (642 total arrests minus 72 pimps and 518 prostitutes leave 52 unaccounted, which I assume are the johns). Contrary to the supposed purpose of exposing and prosecuting trafficking of children in the sex trade, Operation Cross Country routinely punish adult women in prostitution to much greater degree than any other group.

The number of “pimps” arrested seems unnaturally high, considering the fact that most women and girls who work for pimps try to hide their pimp’s information from the law enforcement. I have a hard time believing that 69 youth and 885 adult women collectively would “rat out” 99 pimps.

I suspect, even though I do not have access to the actual information (someone please make a Freedom of Information Act request—I personally don’t want to interface with the FBI), that most people who are arrested as “pimps” are not actually pimps, although they may meet the legal criteria of “promoting prostitution” or “living off of the earning of prostitution,” which anti-pimping laws actually are.

I suspect that many of these 99 “pimps” are actually not someone who controls or trafficks the women for their own profit, but boyfriends, husbands, brothers and sisters, friends, and others that the women considers family. They may be drivers, landlords, motel clerks, bodyguards, and others who are hired by the woman (or who may be helping her as a friend) so that she can work safely. They may include “bottom” women, who are often themselves prostitutes or former prostitutes, who mentor other women and collect the money for the pimp. Some “pimps” may also be minors, for example a boyfriend who is dating a girl who engages in survival sex and buys him stuff even though he does not force her to work.

But they are all labeled “pimp,” with all the negative racial and class stereotypes associated with it, and are considered equivalent to rapists and slave traders. Such social and legal structures make it illegal for women in prostitution to have family, friends and business associates or for anyone else to be part of her immediate support system, isolating them socially and putting them in greater danger. It also damages communities they live in, which are disproportionately communities of color, immigrant communities, queer communities, and communities on the street.

I have personally violated “promoting prostitution” laws when I helped women learn how to increase their safety while they work. I did not receive any payment for it, and I believe that what I did is ethically equivalent to handing out condoms. But I feared being prosecuted under broad anti-pimping laws, and it prevented me from helping more women.

I have also had friends drive me to “dates” or stay in the next room while working so that I would be safe. If I was arrested on these days, I would get a ticket for misdemeanor prostitution while my friends could face a felony. There must be a better way to prosecute and punish those who abuse and exploit women without contributing further to the threats to our safety and health.

World Cup, Super Bowl, and the Olympics: an international panic

In the months and weeks leading up to the 2011 Super Bowl, the widely anticipated championship match in Dallas, Texas to determine the winner of 2011 National Football Association tournament, anti-trafficking groups and mainstream media claimed that a huge wave of human sex trafficking was expected to accompany the football event.

One newspaper, *Dallas Morning News*—which I assure you is not a shock tabloid, but a regular daily newspaper—even stated in the headline: “Prostitutes will invade Dallas-Fort Worth for Super Bowl” (09/04/2009). Online petitions demanding NFL to take an official stand against child sex trafficking—a request NFL gladly complied.

Traffick911, a Texas-based anti-trafficking group, viewed Super Bowl as an opportunity. Executive director Deena Graves was quoted in the *Dallas Morning News*, “We believe, without a doubt, that God gave us the Super Bowl this year to raise awareness of what’s happening with these kids.”

The panic over human trafficking surrounding major sporting events dates back to 2006, when an international coalition of groups and individuals led by anti-prostitution scholar Donna Hughes of University of Rhode Island claimed that “an additional 40,000 women, mainly from eastern Europe, are expected to be brought to Germany to meet demand for commercial sex at World Cup games.”

Germany had just recently legalized prostitution at the time, angering many anti-prostitution feminists like Hughes. They feared that the legal status of prostitution, combined with an influx of tourists visiting Germany to watch soccer games, would result in a vast increase of prostitution and international sex trafficking. It is unclear how they have arrived at the 40,000 figure.

Various international bodies conducted investigations regarding this claim during and after the World Cup, including the Council of the European Union, International Organization for Migration, and International Labor Organization, as did some news media. Their conclusions were consistent: while there were some increase in prostitution in general, there was no evidence that foreign women were trafficked in greater number than before.

International Organization for Migration stated, “the estimate of 40,000 women expected to be trafficked was unfounded and unrealistic.” Even anti-trafficking organizations concede that they did not receive an increased number of request for help, nor did police officers.

But the myth did not die. In the lead-up to the next World Cup 2010 in South Africa, the same story about “40,000 women” being trafficked into the country was resurrected and spread among well-meaning people concerned about human trafficking. But it, too, turned out to be a false alarm, according to an investigation by United Nations Population Fund and SWEAT, a sex workers’ rights group in South Africa. A similar concern was raised for the 2010 Winter

Olympic Games in Vancouver, Canada, with the same result.

Given this history, we should know better by now—but still, many people fell for the hysteria over claims of 40,000, or even 100,000 prostitutes “invading” Dallas, many of whom are presumed to be youth or trafficking victims.

But consider this: the World Cup takes place over a month across many cities in a country, with 32 teams competing in qualifying groups and then top two teams from each group advancing to the final tournament. Super Bowl, on the other hand, is just two teams playing against each other in one game. Dallas Cowboy Stadium is an enormously large venue, the fourth largest among NFL teams in fact, but it can only seat 80,000 spectators, 110,000 if it is standing room only. How can anyone rationally explain the influx of tens of thousands of additional prostitutes to service just 110,000 potential johns (which includes women and children) in a weekend? It makes no sense at all.

As expected, there was no such increase of prostitution or trafficking in Dallas. But the panic lives on: anti-trafficking activists are now alerting the public about the possibility that the 2012 Olympic Games in London, U.K. will be the magnet for prostitution and sex trafficking of tens of thousands of women from eastern Europe. A headline on *The Daily Telegraph* (03/27/2010) states: “London 2012 Olympics: vice girls hope to strike gold.”

The police is already conducting disproportionate number of brothel raids in the two London boroughs “expected to play host to the majority of tourists who come to the capital for the games,” According to *The Observer* (04/10/2011). Between January and August 2010, more than double the number of brothel raids took place in these two boroughs (33) compared to all 25 other boroughs combined (29).

The Scotland Yard has formed a new “human exploitation and organized crime command” to address the potential increase of sex trafficking, which consists of experts from “vice, human trafficking and immigration crime.” At this point, we would have to wonder: does the police actually buy into the myth, or are they merely using it as a convenient justification to persecute sex workers and immigrants?

The censorship of Craigslist: unintended consequences

In early summer of 2010, a campaign was mounted to force Craigslist, a popular internet classified ad site for general purposes, to shut down its “adult services” section. Adult services section was commonly understood to be a place to advertise prostitution, although the site carefully avoided declaring as such for obvious reasons.

Led by Coalition Against Trafficking in Women and Prostitution Research and Education, both of which are feminist anti-prostitution groups, anti-prostitution/trafficking activists collected online signatures and held a protest outside of Craigslist’s headquarters in San Francisco in July 2010.

But Craigslist did not back down, at least initially. Representatives of Craigslist released statements and went on the media to defend the company against the charge of tolerating human trafficking. They pointed out that they have always cooperated with investigations involving human trafficking, and verified phone numbers and credit cards of anyone who posts an ad in the adult services section, which would be helpful if an investigation is needed. They even sent large contributions to organizations serving survivors of sex trafficking, unsolicited and without any strings attached, although some groups turned down the money.

One of the factors that influenced public opinion and attitudes of political leaders was the Women’s Funding Network’s announcement of the result of its “research” on minor sex trafficking on the internet.: In just six months in 2010, the group claimed, online postings advertising children for sex increased by 20.7% in New York, 39.2% in Michigan, and 64.7% in Minnesota.

A 65% increase in just six months? Something was clearly wrong, but the media and politicians rushed to embrace it. But as Nick Pinto points out in *The Village Voice* (03/23/2011), the study was far from objective and the methodology was deeply flawed.

According to *The Village Voice*, the researchers first recruited volunteers and showed them (non-erotic) pictures of girls and young women, whose age was known. Then they asked participants if they thought the model was a minor or an adult, and recorded how often they successfully identified girls under 18.

Once the “rate of successful guesses” was determined, they went on to Craigslist and other websites in which “escorts” are advertised. They counted how many of them “looked young” (i.e. either a minor or a young adult), and multiplied that by the “rate of successful guess,” conveniently presuming that it is constant regardless of the actual proportion of underage girls among those whose pictures are posted as escort ads, or the kind of pictures observed. There is no logical reason to believe that is a constant, and that is where this study breaks down.

After months of protests, hate mails, bomb threats, and an invitation to explain itself at a U.S. Congressional hearing, Craigslist shut down its adult services section in September 2010. For several days, Craigslist defiantly placed the word “CENSORED” over the area that used to read “adult services,” but it was removed soon. The anti-prostitution groups declared victory and moved on to the next target: Backpage.com, which is owned by Village Voice Media.

But shutting down Craigslist adult services section does not make prostitution go away; it only makes them less visible. Like police sweeps pushed prostitution off the street and on to Craigslist, it is now being pushed out to Backpage and other online sexual marketplaces. Johns will always find where sexual services are advertised, but it will be more difficult to investigate cases of human trafficking online.

Further, Craigslist had allowed women to work without pimps or managers. Placing escort ads in alternative weeklies or other publications cost a lot of money, as they have to pay special “adult” premium for advertising spaces. Craigslist was much more affordable and made it possible to advertise without a large initial capital. Even investigators of minor sex trafficking used Craigslist to identify missing youth: they downloaded pictures posted on Craigslist and run a facial recognition and pattern matching software with the existing database of missing youth to identify them.

That institution is now all gone, simply because some people preferred to push prostitution out of their sight even if that did not actually reduce or eliminate them.

jobs	religion	tickets	photo+video	technical support	
jokes	rofo	tools	toys+games	transport	
kink	science	wanted	video gaming	tv / film / video	
l.t.r.	shop			web / info design	
legal	spirit	services		writing / editing	
linux	sports	beauty	automotive	[ETC]	
loc pol	t.v.	computer	farm+garden	[part time]	
m4m	tax	creative	household	gigs	
money	testing	event	labor/move	crew	writing
motocy	transg	financial	skill'd trade	event	computer
music	travel	legal	real estate	labor	creative
npo	vegan	lessons	sm biz ads	talent	domestic
open	w4w	pet	therapeutic		
outdoor	wed	censored	travel/vac	resumes	
over 50	wine		write/ed/tr8		
p.o.c.	women				
parent	words				
pefo	writers				

“End Demand” approach harms women working in the sex trade

Many anti-prostitution and anti-trafficking groups (as they are 95% overlapped in the United States) promote “end demand” approach to prostitution. The “demand” in “end demand” refers to the “demand side” of prostitution: the johns who purchase sexual services.

The strategy calls for enacting public policies to disincentivize johns from purchasing sex through a combination of harsher laws (jail time, higher fines, civil forfeiture of assets), public humiliation (names and mugshots printed or broadcast on newspaper, cable television, internet, or even billboards), and education (public announcement ads and “john school” to teach them harms of prostitution).

The appeal of this approach is obvious: many people understand that women who trade sex for money do so under dire economic and personal circumstances, and feel that it would be unfair to punish them for their predicament. On the other hand, few people feel any sympathy toward johns: in fact, some may find it deeply satisfying emotionally to have them punished severely. Even those of us who do not support this approach agree that it is preferable to the status quo in the U.S., which prioritizes punishing women for their poverty.

Proponents of “end demand” approach claim that it is an application of basic idea from Economics 101: eliminate the demand, and the supply will diminish. But they cannot seem to find a single legitimate economist to endorse this strategy, as evidenced by the absence of economists on the roasters of groups such as End Demand Illinois, which is pushing an “end demand” legislation at the state level (which, by the way, increases penalty for women involved in prostitution, not just for johns).

The only individual frequently referred to as an “economist” who supports this idea is Siddharth Kara, the author of *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery*. He does not actually have a background in economics; he has an MBA (master’s degree in business administration) and has worked as an investment banker at Merrill Lynch prior to becoming an anti-trafficking researcher and activist. Insert your own snide comment about how investment banking industry and Merrill Lynch in particular have contributed not just to the financial meltdown of 2008 but also to human sufferings and tragedies around the globe, including human trafficking.

The standard economic model does predict that reduction of the demand leads to an adjustment that reduces the supply. How does this happen? When the demand goes down, suppliers will have to compete for a dwindling number of purchasers, which make it necessary for them to lower their prices. As prices come down, some suppliers realize that they are not making as much money as they used to, and switch their business to something else that is more profitable. Eventually, the supply would be reduced to the point that all suppliers that have

other, more profitable business opportunities have left, and a new equilibrium of supply and demand is reached at a lower number of total transaction and a lower price point.

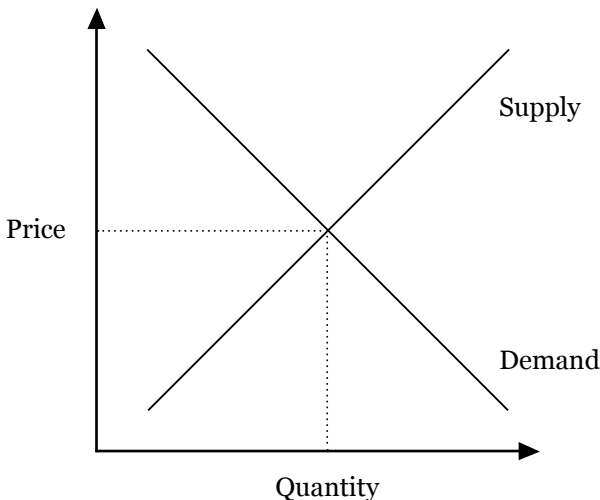
Yes, at a lower price point—which directly means that women’s income would suffer as the result of “end demand” policies. But that is not hard to understand, even without the economic theory: if there are less johns out there, women have to lower their prices to stay competitive.

What many people often do not understand is that the reduction in demand can lead to far greater impact on the income and the bargaining power of women who work in the sex industry than on farmers who grow cabbages or companies that produce electronic gadgets, because *supply of sexual labor is downwardly inelastic*, to borrow language from economics.

What this gibberish means is that the reduction of the demand for sexual services does not result in the proportionate reduction of the supply, and to compensate for that the price would go down much further than the standard market model may predict.

There are several reasons for this. Many women who work in the sex industry do not have many other options and opportunities and may feel “stuck” even when their johns disappear. Prices johns pay for sex may appear insultingly low from a middle-class observer, but they may be much more than what the women could make in the current economy doing cleaning, childcare, food services, or farm labor: prices for their sexual labor must come down quite a bit before it becomes less attractive than these options.

Many women work in the sex trade because they would not have the time or energy to provide care for children and other family members if they worked in another field. Many more cannot get or keep other jobs because of mental health issues, addictions, criminal record, immigration status, or discrimination (and a severe lack of social resources to help them with these issues).



For whatever reasons, women working in the sex industry do not switch industries as easily as big corporations renew their product lines to follow the latest trend in consumer behaviors. Thus, market saturation is not resolved through the “invisible hand of god,” but by lowering women’s earnings to a greater extent than the reduction of the demand would lead us to predict.

But it is not just prices that are reduced: suppressing or reducing the demand also result in a drastic reduction of women’s bargaining power, and the price women receive is just a small part of that.

When the demand goes down, women will have to compete for a smaller pool of johns, forcing them to do more for less money. It gives remaining johns greater bargaining power, because it would become easier for them to “take the business elsewhere,” that is to go find another woman willing to do more for less, unless their needs are completely satisfied. For example, a woman who had always insisted on using a condom may be forced to engage in less safe practices simply to stay competitive.

Increased pressure on johns displaces prostitution onto less populated or traveled areas (typically an industrial area), where johns are less likely to be reported to the authorities or caught in a sting. The same environment makes it more dangerous for the women, both because it would be less familiar to them, and also because nobody would be around when they call for help.

And finally, the profile of a typical john would change as we make it riskier to buy sex, since not all potential johns respond to the increased risks equally. “End demand” approach drives out those men who are relatively rational and sensitive to risks, while the reckless and/or impulsive types remain undeterred. These johns are precisely the ones likely to demand sex without condoms, haggle mercilessly over price or specific acts, or use threats or violence to get what they want because they do not consider consequences and think they can get away with it.

In short, “end demand” campaign is harmful to women because it diminishes their bargaining power, forcing them to do more for less money, with more dangerous johns, under less safe environments. We cannot criminalise our way out of the current situation; we must address social and economic concerns with solutions that aim at achieving social and economic justice. We can begin to do so by funding affordable housing, childcare, treatment programs on-demand (instead of many months’ wait list), and education and job training programs, instead of more jail beds or police cars or some “class” for the johns to take.

Does “economic coercion” equal human trafficking?

An “economic coercion” argument often invoked by anti-trafficking and anti-prostitution activists holds that, even though many prostitutes and other sex workers appear to be making a free choice to engage in their work without “force, fraud, or coercion” (which characterize adult human trafficking), they are nonetheless victimized by the sex industry and should not be viewed as freely choosing to do what they do because they have little or no other means for self-sufficiency, and are therefore “economically coerced.”

I do not disagree that freedom to choose means of survival is severely restricted for many sex workers as well as for others who occupy low end of the American workforce. Under neoliberal capitalism, we all have to make choices under socioeconomic constraints to make ends meet, although some of us have more and better options than others do. The “choice” to engage in sex work is often (but not always) made by people who do not have very good pool of options to begin with.

But it is not useful to talk about “choice” and “free will” in abstract or absolute terms, or to equate one’s difficult decision to choose the “least bad” option available to her in a pool of bad options with “coercion” in a more traditional sense. Instead, I suggest that we start from this simple question: “If a better opportunity or option comes up, is she free to take it?”

	“No”	“Yes”
Why is she in prostitution?	because she is not allowed to choose something else	because it is the best (or least bad) option among what is available to her
What will benefit her?	freedom and resources that would allow her to make decisions for herself	more and better options within and outside of the sex industry; support to enhance her capabilities
How will “rescue” action impact her?	freedom, provided that appropriate support and services are provided	possible criminal record; forced to choose among inferior options
What should the society do for her?	intervention to restore her freedom; resources to rebuild her life	no persecution; make more and better resources and options available

What this chart demonstrates is that we must reject the equation of so-called “economic coercion” with “force, fraud ,or coercion” that involve another actor (i.e. the trafficker) because there are very significant differences between the two. Conflating them leads to wrong policies and interventions that harm the women they are intended to help.

That of course does not mean that we should not address the fact that many people “choose” sex work under dire economic constraints. It just means that we need to understand the problem correctly and intervene in ways that are actually helpful rather than harmful. We must work toward reducing economic desperation among women, homeless youth, immigrants, queer people, and others by enhancing programs that ensure that everyone’s basic needs are met, and creating better and wider range of educational and employment opportunities for all.

Yes, “economic coercion” exists. But the problem is not the selling and the buying of sex; it is the lack of options due to economy, laws, oppressions, and lack of capabilities resulting from all the above. Let us actually address the problem, rather than depriving the “least bad options” from the already disadvantaged population.

Fiction, Lies, and the militarization of anti-trafficking movement

The 2008 film *Taken* featuring Liam Neeson as a retired secret agent and a father of a daughter who is kidnapped into sex slavery is a fascinating example of the public's voyeuristic interest in the world of prostitution and sex trafficking. It is also a reflection of their preconceived ideas about sex trafficking, which involves attractive young, white, female victims and darker-skinned male perpetrators who are sadistic, evil, and lacking complex human emotions and personalities.

In the movie, the Liam Neeson character chases kidnappers who took his daughter away, using his counter-terrorism skills to torture and murder those who stand between him and his daughter's captors, even as in the real world George W. Bush administration continued to justify use of torture (or "enhanced interrogation techniques") as a valid means to prevent catastrophic terror attacks, dismissing reported cases of extreme prisoner abuses such as those that took place in Abu Ghraib, Iraq as exceptions. In the end, the Neeson character rescues his daughter and comes home without facing any consequences for the violence he had inflicted.

Retired colonel Bill Hillar of the U.S. Army Special Forces (the Green Beret) was a popular keynote speaker, trainer, consultant, and university instructor on the topic of human trafficking based of his claim that he was a model for the Neeson character in the movie *Taken*. He told the audience that his own daughter was kidnapped while traveling through Southeast Asia with a friend, and sold into a brothel. Using his expertise and professional connections as a specialist in counter-terrorism, he traveled around the globe in search of his daughter. But



unlike the movie, his story did not have a happy ending: his daughter never came back alive.

Hillar gave this biography on his website promoting his lectures and consulting services:

William G. Hillar is a retired Colonel of the U.S. Army Special Forces. He has served in Asia, the Middle East, and Central and South America, where his diverse training and experiences included tactical counter-terrorism, explosive ordnance, emergency medicine and psychological warfare.

His military expertise led him not only to cross-train and serve with Special Forces from allied countries, but to advise governments and military organizations in several foreign nations. He holds a B.A. in Psychology, an M.A. in Education, a Ph.D. in Health Education, and an honorary doctorate in Intercultural Relations.

Hillar provides training and consultation to law enforcement, firefighters, and first responder organizations where quick reaction and rapid recovery are essential for survival. Highly sought after as a speaker on leadership, ethics, stress, and creativity, his clients' comments are consistently full of respect and appreciation. Hillar's wisdom is imperative for anyone serving in civilian, government, and high-risk occupations.

In the pamphlet for the 2010 annual conference of Oregonians Against Trafficking Humans (OATH), Hillar's bio read:

Bill is a retired Special Forces Colonel with an immense background in special ops and counter-terrorism. He has spent years training others including law enforcement, military, and other fast-reaction responders.

The movie *Taken* with Liam Neeson, was inspired by his personal story. The kidnapping of his daughter, and subsequent extensive search through numerous countries to find her, has made him a passionate advocate for victims of human trafficking. She had been forced into sex trafficking and his search for her brought him into personal contact with the scum who profit from this horrific illegal industry.

Hillar was widely acclaimed as an American hero, who despite his loss continues to share his expertise and experiences in an effort to put an end to the trafficking of human beings, to make sure that no one will go through what he and his daughter went through.

But they were all lies. Hillar has never served in the U.S. Army, let alone with the Green Beret. He does not have expertise in any of the areas he advertises, and has not earned any of the academic credentials. And worst of all, his daughter was never kidnapped or trafficked or murdered.

I first saw Hillar's speech at the aforementioned OATH conference in November 2010, but not in person. He was scheduled to present a keynote lecture—he was actually a board member of OATH—but could not come to Oregon due to

personal circumstances. We later learned that the “personal circumstances” was the pending investigation into his long history of fraud, but I did not know that at the time. Instead of his live speech, OATH showed a video recording of another lecture he had presented in the past.

Less than five minutes into the video, I began feeling creeped out by his demeanor. It was not that I felt his story was fake, though I suspected that it was probably exaggerated and dramatized to some extent. There was just something wrong about the way he was talking about the taking, selling, and killing of his daughter. I quickly left the auditorium because I could not stand hearing his voice and seeing his face anymore, and went to an early lunch.

So while it was still surprising to find out that he had been arrested by the Maryland police in March 2011 for multiple counts of fraud for misrepresenting his expertise and qualifications, I felt a sense of validation that my BS-detector was still in good condition.

But *Taken* (and its simulacrum that is Bill Hillar—or was it the other way around?) is becoming part of the reality in the landscape of the anti-trafficking movement. Anti-trafficking newcomer Stop Child Sex Trafficking Now (SCTNow), which is quickly gaining support of companies like Facebook and Microsoft as well as the blessing of celebrities like Ashton Kutcher, describes its “innovative approach” to addressing the problem of minor sex trafficking this way (emphasis mine):

Stop Child Trafficking has chosen to fund a bold, new approach, one that addresses the demand side of child sex trafficking by targeting buyers/predators for prosecution and conviction. [...] SCTNow has launched a national campaign to raise money for retired elite military operatives targeting the demand side of trafficking. These Special Operative Teams gather information on child predators both in the U.S. and abroad, information that will be used to convict child sex buyers. These operatives use the skills developed in the War on Terror in this war to bring down predators. Professional law enforcement have vetted this strategy and are eager to work with these operative teams once funding is secured.

SCTNow further explains its strategy (emphasis mine):

Special Operative Teams gather information about child predators both in the U.S. and abroad. These teams represent the best military, federal and state intelligence and investigative organizations. They track predators to build packages against them that result in convictions.

These teams possess skills beyond the average military or law enforcement individual skills that enable them to achieve their goals in foreign lands independently, without support of U.S. law enforcement resources.

Part of me of course wishes if things could really work out like that. But I am hesitant to trust “elite military operatives” who (unlike the actual Liam Neeson or Bill Hillar) developed their skills “in the War on Terror.” After all, in the War on Terror these same “experts” led us to invade a country that had nothing to do

with 9/11, detained Arab and Muslim Americans without due process, tortured innocent people as well as prisoners of war, conducted surveillance on Arab and Muslim communities in the U.S., “renditioned” suspects to countries to outsource torture, and illegally wiretapped our telephone calls.

SCTNow explains the advantage of its “special operations” over ordinary police work:

As a private organization the Special Operatives are not bound by the same restrictions that keep U.S. law enforcement from conducting research against sexual offenders. The Operatives provide high-level information and evidence to appropriate authorities that is needed to build packages against U.S. child sex offenders.

The “special operatives” enter any information (or “intelligence”) they gather into a computer database, which uses the same architecture as the police database, so that police officers who have been granted access to it can easily search for information without having to learn a new computer system.

The “intelligence” does not have to be limited to something that is directly related to trafficking or even prostitution: operatives are encourage to record anything and everything that they felt were relevant or interesting, which means it could contain information about other issues such as drug dealings, immigration status, and personal lives of innocent people.

What “restrictions” is SCTNow referring to, that “keep U.S. law enforcement from conducting research against sexual offenders”? As a private entity, policies of evidence discovery do not apply to them, nor do prohibitions against racial profiling and entrapment; there is no public oversight that might prevent a police officer from crossing certain a line.

As a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, SCTNow (or rather, its parent organization, Strategic Global Initiative, Inc.) does not directly engage in these “special operations.” Instead, they outsource it to a private military intelligence firm Global Trident, which would hire and deploy “special operative teams.”

List of individuals involved with running Global Trident come from an interesting yet predictable mix of backgrounds. There are a couple of executives from Northrop Grumman, a major defense contractor. There is also the president of Middle East Television, an evangelical Christian station formerly based in the Israeli-occupied part of Lebanon, but is now broadcasting from the Greek-controlled area of Cyprus. Then there are of course retired military and government “experts,” whose backgrounds include Navy SEAL, FBI, and others.

SCTNow’s parent organization, Strategic Global Initiative was founded by Ron Lewis, the televangelist pastor of North Carolina mega-church Kings Park International Church, and his wife Lynette Lewis who authored the self-help book *Climbing the Ladder in Stiletos*, which actually gives fairly orthodox advice for (middle-class white) women to advance in the corporate world. Kings Park continues to be the organization’s single largest funder, even though several members of SCTNow I have spoken to insist that most of the money come from its nationwide “awareness walks.”

Of course, SCTNow is not the only anti-trafficking organization that is based on

evangelical Christian foundations. Groups such as Not For Sale, International Justice Mission, Compassion2One, Called to Rescue, and many others are explicitly religious; others, like SCTNow and Love146, are less explicitly so.

And although most of these groups do not actively hire counter-terror “operatives” to perform and assist surveillance and raids of American communities, they endorse militaristic responses to prostitution and sex trafficking that focus on law enforcement approaches to target and convict the evil pimps, traffickers, and johns.

If there is anything eight years of George W. Bush administration has reminded us, it is that we cannot rely on the coalition of Christian fundamentalists and vengeful war hawks and law-and-order types for the safety of women and children. The more power they are granted, the more their abuses are overlooked in the name of “homeland security,” women, people of color, immigrants, queer people, and others experience deprivation of their human rights and dignity.

How anti-trafficking movement distorts reality and harms women

Throughout this booklet, I have pointed out how so many of the “statistics” and “facts” used by anti-trafficking groups and activists are baseless or false. In fact, it is hard to find *any* statistics on their websites that do not invite this charge. Some misinformation are so egregious and obviously wrong that no one in their right mind should ever accept it as truth, while some others are contradictory with each other. And yet, they are repeated not just by random people who happened to read it, but also by scholars, journalists, politicians, and movement spokespersons.

This willful ignorance of reality closely mirrors many Americans’ support for the War on Terror in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Instead of untangling resentment and frustration the West has built up all over the world through centuries of violence and exploitation, many people rushed to accept the clearly nonsensical explanation that “they hate us because they hate freedom” because it was much more palatable.

It is not entirely accurate to say that Bush administration lied to the people about the weapons of mass destruction, links between Iraq and Al-Qaeda, domestic wiretapping, or abuse and torture in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. If anyone actually cared to exercise common sense and reason, the truth was always apparent. But too many Americans were invested in believing the obvious lies because they gave us a worldview that was simpler to digest, an understanding of the international problem that had an obvious answer (i.e. military intervention).

Similarly, the anti-trafficking panic and its many falsehoods must be understood as a tacit conspiracy between the promoters of the misinformation and its recipients: misinformation becomes a “fact” only when both supply and demand sides of this informational transaction come to a mutual agreement.

On the supply side, motivations for misinformation are numerous.

- Anti-trafficking groups and activists gravitate toward claims that exaggerate and simplify the problem, even in the absence of conscious decision to misrepresent the facts, because they validate the importance of their work and make more people pay attention to them. It brings in more volunteers, celebrity endorsers, media airtime, monetary contributions, and government and foundation grants. They may suspend critical thinking and overlook obvious flaws in the “statistics” because they feel that the importance of the topic cannot be emphasized enough: “Who cares if the figures are exaggerated? Enslavement of just one person is horrible enough!”
- Some politicians also gravitate toward exaggerated figures and simplistic framework because they like to be perceived as courageous

leaders tackling on a national crisis by making clear and unambiguous statements about evils that must be overcome. They know that American public does not appreciate leaders with sophisticated understanding of subtleties and complexities inherent in the actual social issue at hand.

- Some cities, counties, and states seem to be interested in claiming themselves to be “a hub for human trafficking” by exaggerating the problem in their regions. It brings in much needed federal dollars to increase policing and to provide social services.
- Police officers and others working within the criminal justice system have a particularly large investment in raising the level of fear among the public by creating and maintaining the perception of an “epidemic.” It translates to more officers, equipment, jail space, and authority/power.
- Journalists have an obvious bias for sensationalistic news: An 11 year old girl being rescued from forced prostitution by police officers is a great story, while a 40 year old homeless prostitute struggling to get into a residential treatment facility for drug addiction because the waitlist is 6 month long is not. Journalists are also working on tight deadlines, and do not have the time to verify each and every claim provided to them in the form of press releases and “fact sheets” from anti-trafficking groups.

This list paints a compelling picture of why flawed “statistics” about prostitution and sex trafficking are promoted by these groups and individuals, but it is only half of the equation. In order for the anti-prostitution movement to gain as much ground as it had, there has to be a national audience willing to suspend common sense and critical thinking, and to accept claims that are obviously absurd and/or contradictory.

My theory of why American public has “drunk Kool-Aid” so to speak is that we fell into the same trap that we did in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 when we were told that going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq was the way to make us safer: these falsehoods were more comfortable and comforting than the truth, which was that the spread of anti-American sentiments in many parts of the world was in large part a result of past and current U.S. economic and foreign policies.

For most people in the American middle-class that do not have to face the choice between prostitution and earning the minimum wage (or worse) doing shitty job or jobs that humiliate and dehumanize them, the anti-trafficking movement presented a more alarming, yet simpler picture of the world in which prostitution takes place: prostitution equals trafficking equals slavery.

The U.S. anti-trafficking groups told them that trafficking happens because there are bad people out there, who are threatening to take your kids away and sell them into sexual slavery. This is very scary for parents, yet it is more comforting than a more accurate and nuanced view of the world which says

we must pay attention to the impact of poverty, racism, sexism, neoliberalistic global capitalism and its assault on public safety net, homophobia and transphobia, and unjust immigration laws. We as American people prefer a more simple enemy that we can bomb or throw in jail, whether we are dealing with terrorism or human trafficking.

Further, many people find it more comforting to think that nobody ever “choose” to engage in prostitution unless they are physically or psychologically forced to: it allows them to ignore the role of poverty and other social and economic factors that, once acknowledged, demand our attention. If we believe that prostitution is something that happens because bad people (often associated with men of color) force good children into engaging in it, all we need to worry is how to keep these bad people out of our schools and communities and let the law enforcement handle the rest.

There actually is a historical precedent for what we are witnessing today, which is the great “white slavery” panic of the late 19th century to early 20th century. The panic over the supposedly epidemic “sex slavery” of women and girls took place in the historical context of racial and sexual anxieties in America: Liberated slaves were moving up north, and immigrants were arriving from eastern Europe and Asia, changing the profile of American citizenry. Women were organizing to demand suffrage and equal rights.

Under this very context, an evangelical Christian movement arose, sometimes jointly with suffragists, that targeted brothels, alleging the enslavement of the women who worked there. The presence of Asian women in brothels drew particular attention under the premise that they must be sex slaves, because they were considered hyper-submissive and therefore incapable of exercising agency, in a stark contrast to white suffragists. As an Asian sex worker myself, I honor these 19th century Asian sex workers as my foremothers who created the foundation for the contemporary Asian American communities, although many non-sex worker Asians become uncomfortable when I say this.

The “white slavery” panic eventually subsided without producing any actual evidence for a widespread slavery, but affected the passage of Chinese Exclusion Act, Mann Act (the nation’s first federal law against prostitution and sex trafficking, although they obviously did not use that terminology), and the formation of Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), which was initially founded to enforce Mann Act.

Today, we are experiencing a similar anxieties around racial and ethnic makeup of this country, as well as changing gender and sexual expectations: Anti-immigration sentiment is violently high, and fear of terrorism is being used to justify prejudices toward Muslims and Arabs. Queer and trans people are still marginalized, but coming closer to equality by day, at least in their legal status, including the right to marry someone of the same gender. And of course, we have a President of the United States whose father was an immigrant from Kenya whose middle name is Hussein.

The anti-trafficking groups, which is largely an evangelical Christian movement, construes the issue of prostitution as an issue about young children (and adults are perceived as these children after several years), because children are considered incapable of exercising agency. Many legislations and

regulations are enacted, including USAID’s “anti-prostitution pledge,” “end demand” legislations, and Arizona-style racial profiling laws masquerading as immigration laws.

The chart below shows how the worldview held by the anti-trafficking movement is incompatible with the one that focus on social and economic justice.

	Anti-trafficking movement	Social and economic justice model
Basic assumption about sex industry	nobody ever choose to be a sex worker	sex work can be the best (or least bad) option available for some people
Who are in the sex industry?	anyone can be trafficked into sex industry	anyone, but disproportionately affects vulnerable communities
Entry into sex work and prostitution	very young children recruited or kidnapped from schools and shopping malls	mostly late teens and adults enter as a result of poverty and other socioeconomic factors
Mode of intervention	more policing, curfews, rescue, and prosecution; court-mandated services	voluntary services providing health care and other necessities and support
Measurement of success	conviction of the offender; reduction of prostitution	long-term health and well-being of the individual; economic and social justice

What I find most frustrating about the impact of anti-trafficking movement is that it is undoing collaborative work between public health officials, anti-violence feminists, healthcare professionals, homeless groups, advocates for youth, immigrants, queer and trans people, groups led by people of color organizing within their own communities, sex workers, and other groups that took many years (starting from the early stages of AIDS panic in the 1980s) to develop.

Many of the groups in this broad coalition, especially those led by members of vulnerable communities themselves, were forced to shut down due to harsh economic conditions in recent years, while some groups (mostly those led by religious ideologues and professionals) are expanding their reach as they receive anti-trafficking grants. I know of many sets of traditional allies in the non-profit world that no longer collaborate with each other because one party received anti-trafficking funding and has drunk the Kool-Aid, making their

philosophies and priorities incompatible.

Worse, our social and economic justice movements are being replaced by a movement that promotes laughably simplistic worldviews and solutions based on flawed research and religious ideologies that often involve further militarization of our society. As Incite! Women of Color Against Violence and other feminist anti-violence groups led by women of color have pointed out, we cannot rely on police, court and prison systems, immigration enforcement, and counter-terror “experts” for our communities’ safety. In fact, giving more power to these apparatus of state violence often make girls and young women of color and other marginalized populations more vulnerable.

I would end this booklet by giving a couple of contemporary examples of how government’s militaristic interventions against prostitution and human trafficking are harming women.

First example comes from New Orleans, where a 19th century state law designed to criminalise homosexual acts are being used today to target women of color and queer and trans people who engage in the sex trade. Crime Against Nature statute prescribes harsh punishment for anyone who offers or agrees to have oral or anal sex, which are historically associated with homosexual sex.

The conviction under Crime Against Nature by solicitation triggers a requirement to register as a sex offender, making it difficult for the individual to obtain housing or employment outside of the sex industry. It may result in not being able to access education, drug treatment, or homeless shelter. They are forced to go to a sex offender-only facility when natural disasters such as a hurricane hit.

Sex workers are often victims of rape and sexual assault, too frequently those committed by police officers even, but they are not perpetrators. The local women’s group Women With A Vision is suing the state to overturn this inhumane and seemingly unconstitutional law.

Another example is a raid recently conducted by the Los Angeles Police Department on Club 907, a “hostess club” where men pay women to dance (with clothes on, because nude stripping would be illegal) and to sit next to them and drink non-alcoholic beverages with them. According to *Los Angeles Times* (11/11/2010), the raid was intended to investigate “illegal alcohol service, counterfeit documentation, labor code violations, gambling, lewd acts and human trafficking concerns,” but 81 of the 88 people arrested at the club were women working as “hostesses” using fake IDs.

The working condition at the club was clearly exploitative and illegal. According to *Times*, the women “typically worked 10 hours a day six or seven days a week. They were required to pay money out of pocket to the club if they worked less than 20 hours a week and forced to buy drinking water from the club while on shift.” The editorial on *Times*’ November 13, 2010 edition stated:

Immigration advocates from the Coalition for Humane Immigration Reform, who have interviewed many of the women, said that each dancer is required to earn \$600 a week for the club, which means being selected by men to socialize for at least 20 hours. Women who meet that quota are

paid at a rate of 19 cents a minute plus a \$50 bonus each week. Those who don't meet the quota see their wages drop to 16 cents a minute and receive no paycheck at all until they make up the shortfall. If a customer leaves without paying, the dancer is in debt to the club. These allegations, if true, are violations of California labor law and smack of indentured servitude.

Depending on the charges they can prove on the club management, some women may be eligible for immigration visa relief under Trafficking Victims Protection Act by cooperating with the authorities, especially because public outcry against the women's arrest was strong (which may have taken police by surprise).

But the police must have known in advance that many women working at the club were likely to be undocumented, and that they were likely to be severely exploited by the opportunistic club owners, possibly reaching the legal definition of human trafficking. Yet they moved on as if the women were the criminals.

That over 80 women were arrested on criminal charges arising from their undocumented status when they are likely to be victims of much more serious crimes and exploitation is shocking to me, and does not give me confidence in the authorities' commitment to enforcing labor laws and protecting victims of human trafficking. As long as victims are routinely arrested and face deportation, the conspiracy of silence will continue to keep them vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

Support These Organizations!

Here are some of the groups I know that are led by women of color and indigenous women who are former and current sex workers or our close allies. Check out their websites, and support them any way you can. We need people who can stand up to the anti-trafficking movement as well as the white middle-class "sex workers' rights movement" that focus narrowly on decriminalization and destigmatization of sex work, as if that is the only change we need.

Young Women's Empowerment Project

<http://www.youarepriceless.org/>

Women With A Vision

<http://www.wwav-no.org/>

Native Youth Sexual Health Network

<http://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/>

Different Avenues

<http://www.differentavenues.org/>

Incite! Women of Color Against Violence

http://www.incite-national.org

The End!

i don't write survivor poems
i don't write about the journey
from a survivor to a thriver
from a wounded child to a
bad-ass feminist revolutionary
that is not me most of the time

i don't write about healing
about forgiveness
about grief and letting go

i don't write about strength
i don't write about the courage to heal
and i never want to hear again
oh you are so courageous to speak out
about your story
that i haven't even began to tell

i don't write to inspire

i don't write about finding purpose
about finding jesus
about finding self-love

i don't write about the truth
because truth is too fragile
like a particle whose location and velocity
cannot be simultaneously observed

i write instead
about the lack of counseling
that is actually competent and affordable

i write about the fake sympathy
and the lynch mob that robs me of my rage
and repurposes it to build more prisons

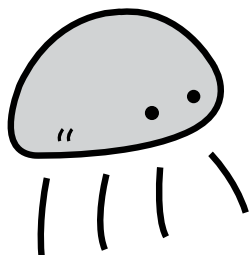
i write about the need for validation
even if our survival involves slashing on the wrist
not eating overeating and purging alcohol drugs
avoiding sex having too much sex

i write, in fact, about survival
through not just the abuse from the past
but survival in the society that doesn't give a fuck

i don't write survivor poems
because my story is not for your consumption
i don't write a coherent and compelling narrative
and i don't exist to demonstrate the resilience of the human spirit

i write survival poems
i survive

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