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In recent years a motley crew of government agencies, police forces, human rights activists, feminists, religious groups and celebrities have turned human trafficking into one of the biggest issues of our time.

The anti-trafficking lobby claims that millions of people around the world – mostly women and children – are being smuggled across borders by means of threat and coercion and are forced into prostitution, bonded labour and domestic servitude. The UK media – both broadsheet and tabloid – has slavishly accepted this narrative, filling column inches with salacious reports of foreigners trapped in cellars, used for tawdry sex and held under the threat of murder and even voodoo.

But this modern-day slavery scare is underpinned, not by hard evidence, but by speculation and prejudice. It is a moral panic which masks a fear of foreigners, of fluid borders and of women who exercise their agency by moving across the world in the pursuit of a better life.

Despite the alarmist reports, time and again the thousands of victims and perpetrators that the anti-trafficking lobby claims are out there fail to materialise. Activists say that because trafficking is a “covert activity” that happens in “the shadow economy”, it is hard to gather accurate data on it. Yet even large-scale “rescue operations” have failed to prove that trafficking is endemic. Take the UK-wide Operation Pentameter Two, for instance: involving raids on hundreds of brothels, it was heralded as ‘the largest-ever police crackdown on human trafficking’ – and it led to the conviction of precisely zero people for forcing women into prostitution.

It is true, of course, that those who are denied free movement are forced to take roundabout and risky routes across the world, relying on middlemen who charge hefty fees. Once they arrive at their destination, as illegal immigrants, they don’t have many options open to them. Some are indeed forced to work long hours for very little pay and in degrading conditions.

But the only way to avoid such exploitation is to open up *legal* means of movement and work for foreigners so that they don’t have to put their fates in the hands of strangers. The anti-trafficking lobby, however, is not interested in extending full rights to migrants. Instead, they pose the greatest risk to would-be migrants, helping to redefine more and more forms of movement as “trafficking” that must be restricted for the migrants’ own good. “Anti-trafficking” is now a PC term for repatriation.

Instead of showing solidarity with migrant workers, arguing for the right of foreigners in the UK to earn decent wages and to enjoy good working conditions, feminists, human rights campaigners and religious groups have joined forces with the police to clamp down on migration, helping to criminalise migrant workers.

For anti-trafficking activists, migrants are either vicious thugs who must be locked up (the

traffickers) or helpless victims who must be rescued (the trafficked). Whilst their missions to rescue “fallen women” and to free “slaves” might give anti-trafficking activists a moral boost, most migrants probably experience their campaigns as patronising, restrictive and freedom-robbing.

*Throughout October and November, The Independent Online is partnering with the Battle of Ideas festival to present a series of guest blogs from festival speakers on the key questions of our time.*

*Nathalie Rothschild is commissioning editor for the online magazine spiked <http://www.spiked-online.com>. She is speaking at the Battle of Ideas debate “Trafficking: New slave trade or moral panic?”, taking place at the Royal College of Art on Sunday 31 October at 1.45pm. For more details, [click here](#).*

*(Picture: An art installation entitled ‘The Journey against Sex Trafficking’, displayed in Trafalgar Square in 2007, Getty)*