



Image AP Images/Pat Sullivan

MISERY to MINISTRY: Kathryn Griffin's Prostitution Rehab in Texas

“I know that I was not created to be a prostitute or a drug addict,” said Kathryn Griffin, the founder of a Texas reform program for incarcerated sex workers, “but because this entered into my life, I learned how to turn this misery into a ministry that covers all levels.”

In the Harris County Jail of Houston, Texas, recovered drug addict and former street-based sex worker Griffin has found a captive audience for her stories of redemption. Selecting 18 to 20 women at a time for her 90-day rehabilitation program, Griffin says that the mission of the program is to help “victims of prostitution, drug abuse, and/or sex trafficking” to “build self-esteem” and re-establish “healthy” relationships with men, so they can “clean up” their lives.

Running on only \$40,000 a year, over 30 women have been court-sentenced into Griffin’s taxpayer-supported “diversion” program since January, and only one or two women are known to have relapsed so far. But it is still too soon to see the long-term effectiveness of this program.

The women in the program are hesitant about sharing personal details, but Griffin pushes them to confess in what she believes to be a safe, non-judgmental space with peers. “To get well, you got to tell,” she has the women repeat after her. The inmates sing in unison through their tears, and clap their hands. “I am your recovery coach,” Griffin promises them – in a [video exposé](#) with the Texas Tribune and the New York Times, Griffin delivers her sermon to her hand-selected “victims,” who, according to the New York Times, “can not be freed until they release the filth of their pasts.”



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“What made me decide [to come here]?” said one of the women in Griffin’s program, who agreed to be in the video, “You decided” – she points to Griffin and laughs, jokingly.

The daughter of a songwriter, who still earns royalties from the songs her father has written for Marvin Gaye, Kathryn Griffin is not to be confused with the self-proclaimed “D-List celebrity” comedian, who had a reality TV show on Bravo about scheming to climb up the Hollywood ladder. This Houston-based Kathryn Griffin became addicted to cocaine 30 years ago, while on tour with R&B singer Rick James. To support her drug habit, she sold sexual services on the street, a lifestyle that she now regrets. After completing over two dozen drug treatment programs, and seeing what works and what doesn’t work, Griffin has stopped using cocaine for 10 years, and now speaks to others in the language of rehabilitation.

Griffin has been through much personal struggle, and it’s certainly admirable how she has changed her own circumstances. But with her Christian moral values at the forefront of her engagement with incarcerated sex workers, she broadcasts a loud and tough message of reform, which is targeted at “victims” of prostitution, and is certainly not for everyone. Her experiences with drugs and street-based sex work are not representative of everyone’s experience in the sex trade.

While volunteering at the Houston City Hall, Griffin befriended then City Councilman Adrian Garcia, who has since become the Harris County Sheriff. With his help, Griffin has lobbied to push through legislation to create mandatory prostitution courts with a focus on rehabilitation, which is being implemented this year in other counties throughout Texas. Jurisdictions across the country from Seattle to New York are now paying attention to her “diversion” strategies.

However, there is [very little research](#) that indicates that prostitution diversion programs have been successful in the United States. With high recidivism rates and a lack of long-term support for program graduates, these programs often fail to focus on the main underlying reasons why people turn to prostitution: poverty, lack of desirable employment alternatives, lack of adequate or stable housing, and sometimes drug addiction and psychological illness. It is not “lack of self-esteem,” but rather lack of funds that entices people into sex work. Being neuroatypical limits people from employment in other jobs, and an expensive drug habit makes the black market of sex work more appealing than other jobs with equally low barriers to entry.

In a 2006 [study](#) on a prostitution diversion program in Salt Lake City, researcher Stephanie Wahab concluded that the greatest benefits of the program for its participants are firstly, the opportunity to avoid incarceration and expunge prostitution charges from criminal records; secondly, the unintended consequence of creating a community space for sex workers to share emotional support with one another; and thirdly, harm reduction and rights-based counselling along with referrals to other legal, financial, and medical services.

Griffin’s moralistic reform program does not seem to prioritise any of these proven benefits.

By taking on an individual-blaming tone of sin and reformation, mixed with a merciful “second chance” mantra, Griffin’s tactic of condemnation, confession

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merciful second chance mantra, Griffin's tactic of condemnation, confession, and redemption has strong religious parallels. The forced confession that Griffin pushes program participants to do, in the name of "sharing" in a safe space, can also be extremely exploitative. Furthermore, this rhetoric emphasises individual reform rather than address the structural inequalities and social institutions related to street-based sex work. More importantly, it does not question why sex workers are incarcerated to begin with, or question the additional harms that criminalisation brings.

Griffin's program participants are filtered through a justice system that conducts discriminatory arrests of street-based workers, the most marginalised and most vulnerable of sex workers. More than 80% of arrests for prostitution in the United States and Canada are of street-based workers, who constitute less than an estimated 20% of total sex workers; these are more often people of colour, immigrants, the homeless, people using drugs, and the poor. The [revolving door](#) of criminalisation makes it more difficult for these people to attain employment alternatives after completing their sentences, especially if their criminal records are not expunged by certain diversion programs that are designed for this purpose. Griffin's program, which takes place inside the prison system, rather than as an alternative to incarceration, is not created in this restorative justice model.

As a reformed drug user and former sex worker, Griffin is given the spotlight as the spokeswoman for others in the sex trade. Delivering insightful and important interviews from ABC News to the Steve Wilkos Show, Griffin presents a straightforward "tough love" that may be honest to her personal experience of people on the Stroll. Her program, [We've Been There Done That](#), seems to show a sense of solidarity with other street workers. While Griffin may be effective at communicating with some others who share her experience; and while she may also doing good work in changing public perception of former child prostitutes, such as Tricia Chambers, who have suffered much abuse and severe victimisation throughout her lives; the popular American media would be mistaken if they take Griffin and Tricia's experiences as representative of the diverse range of sex worker experiences in the United States, or indicative of how all prostitution cases should be treated by the law.

Griffin's moral ministry does not speak to the experiences of all street workers, and certainly, not all sex workers. While delivering much needed social services to sex workers in jail, she does not go far enough as to inquire as to whether the jailhouse is the right place for street workers to be receiving these services.

INTERNATIONAL PROSTITUTION REFORM & AMERICAN MEDIA

Griffin's photogenic heroism is reminiscent of the rescue-and-reform strategy that Americans employ in many other parts of the world; in which the sensationalist media is quick to join their international crusades. Recidivism is rampant in America's reform projects abroad, but the failures of these moralistic interventions are largely silenced by the anti-trafficking hero narrative.

In 2004, Gary Haugen, from the International Justice Mission (IJM), a Christian human rights organisation, courted MSNBC Dateline in a quest to rescue "sex slaves" in Cambodia, through dramatic raids and arrests on Svay Pak brothels, all captured by a hidden digital camera to be packaged for American TV: "Guns were drawn, sirens blared, children wailed, and panicked men and women ran in every direction." [wrote](#) sociologist Gretchen Soderlund from the University of

...and, indeed, [these](#) sociologist Gretchen Spreitzer from the University of Chicago about Haugen's rescue project, but "shelter escapes are commonplace in areas where anti-trafficking groups are currently targeting their efforts....At least 40 percent of the women and girls taken to his shelter escape and return to work in Svay Pak's brothels. Indeed, six of the teens taken by MSNBC/IJM had run away from the home within a week of the televised busts."

The well-respected New York Times journalist Nicholas Kristof, is also guilty of unsolicited American heroism. In 2004, the columnist bragged about how he bought two Cambodian teens out of the sex trade, and praised the Bush administration for policies defending the human rights of women abroad. Later, when one of the teens returned to her brothel in Poipet, Kristof accused her of having "low self-esteem" and an "eerily close relationship" with the brothel owner. Reflecting deeply on his failed Samaritanism, Kristof crafted this paternalistic response:

"Aid groups find it unnerving that they liberate teenagers from the bleak back rooms of a brothel, take them to a nice shelter—and then at night the kids sometimes climb over the walls and run back to the brothel...It would be a tidier world if slaves always sought freedom. But prostitutes often are shattered and stigmatized, and sometimes they feel that the only place they can hold their head high is in the brothel."

These are not the words of a non-judgmental helper. American organisations in Asia seem not to understand how differences in cultural attitudes towards sex work in countries like Thailand, as well as vast differences in the wages that can be earned in menial labour between sex work and other jobs, sometimes make the brothel a far more desirable place to work than the clothing factory, where many organisations place their program graduates, puzzled why they would run away when faced with the even more exploitative wages.

While preventing children below the age of consent from involvement in sex work is a good practice, many American organisations do not discriminate between consensual and non-consensual sex trade in their raids and rescues. Instead of helping the "victims" of coercive sexual labour practices, these raids, rescues, and moral reform tactics often result in the coercive detention of Asian sex workers for months to years without legal recourse. Refusing to acknowledge the human rights of sex workers, and only granting sympathy if "victims" fit the "sex slave" narrative, much like the selection process of Ms. Griffith in Houston, these condescending and moralising attitudes shown by many religiously-motivated Reform organisations, only serve to heighten the stigma faced by people in the sex trades, rather than raise anyone's "self-esteem."

The moral judgments against sex work also prevent self-promoting heroes from recognising and supporting the successful efforts of sex workers who [collectively organise](#) to prevent sex trafficking and underage labour within their own workplaces and communities; such as the 65,000-person strong [sex worker union](#) in India, which has a strong record of [combatting trafficking](#) and other forms of labour exploitation in the Sonagachi Red Light District.

Griffin's reform project in the prisons of Houston, Texas, is at least commendable for one important reason: it is a sex worker-led organisation (or at least, it is led by a former sex worker, with a particular set of experiences in drugs and sex work – in the United States, where sex work is criminalised, this may be the only legitimate way for a project to be sex worker-led). Best

practices from evidence-based organisations around the world show that sex worker-led organisations are, in fact, the most effective in tackling exploitation and promoting public health within our own communities.

However, Griffin's message of Christian moralism does not create a truly "non-judgmental" space, and she may be silencing her participants, who may not share her experiences or her view on sex work. Given the power dynamics of the situation, where Griffin is teaching an audience of prisoners, there is little room for challenging the way Griffin frames sex work by bringing up contrasting experiences. Similarly, many former participants in American human trafficking reform programs abroad have also felt silenced by the anti-prostitution attitudes and moral judgments of these organisations, especially when they are incarcerated in rehabilitatory detention centers much like this one, where participants have literally killed themselves in attempting to escape from "anti-trafficking" help programs.

In Thailand, the sex worker-led organisation, [Empower](#), along with the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers, composed of over 100,000 sex workers from across India, Southeast and East Asia, condemn the U.S. for its imperialistic, Christian reform programs in the name of "anti-trafficking," strengthened during the Bush era of religiously-motivated sexual moralism, which violate the human rights of sex workers worldwide.

"We have now reached a point in history where there are more women in the Thai sex industry being abused by anti-trafficking practices than there are women exploited by traffickers."

In an Open Letter to the Prime Minister of the Royal Government of Thailand, Empower wrote:

"We accuse the United States government of using the issue of human trafficking to coerce its allies into tightening border and immigration controls. The US agenda has also created a climate where women crossing borders are all seen as suspect 'victims' of trafficking. Recently on the 21st February 2012 Empower released an in-depth research report, [Hit & Run](#), done by sex workers, which clearly identifies how the State is breaching rule of law and police procedure while arresting wrong people."

The narrative of moral reform is used both domestically and internationally to serve a sort of American charity-heroism, which is embarrassingly insensitive to the experiences of the people they purport to be helping, and actually exacerbates the structural conditions of harm. The United States also uses the anti-trafficking moral crusade to tighten immigration border controls and promote its other geopolitical interests: ranking countries according to their "progress report in human trafficking" through an annual U.S. Trafficking in Persons report, and placing certain countries like Cuba and North Korea into lower tiers than American political allies, with little justification, in order to exercise economic and political leverage on seemingly moral grounds.

By adopting a policing and a criminalisation model for tackling harm in the sex industry rather than a labour rights model that supports collective organising, the politics of moral reform blames and silences the individual, while failing to make any efforts to change the economic conditions that motivate this work.

In this past year, international organisations from the [United Nations](#) Global Commission on HIV and the Law, to the [World Health Organization](#) and [Human](#)

[Rights Watch](#) have issued reports recommending the decriminalisation of sex work, in the interest of public health and sex worker human rights.

Rather than addressing the economic inequality between and within nations

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chooses to create a narrative of good versus evil, blaming individuals rather than unjust global economic relationships, and silencing voluntary sex workers rather than recognising the pragmatic decisions many make in the absence of labour opportunities and labour rights.

The Violence Against Women framework for human rights activism insists that all sex work is “violence” against women, rather than acknowledging the individual acts of violence that occur when sex work is criminalised, or acknowledging that global poverty and inequality, which compels some women to travel across the world to become nannies and servants at low wages for middle-class people in the First World, is also a form of violence – and sex work is one choice for many within the constraints of the violence of poverty.

BEST PRACTICES FOR PROSTITUTION DIVERSION IN THE UNITED STATES

Domestic rescue and reform organisations, and the social work profession, have long used a [language of moral reform](#), rescue, and rehabilitation, when talking about prostitution, while failing to address the problems of discriminatory policing, homelessness, domestic violence, drug abuse, and psychological illness, as separate conditions in a subset of diverse sex work experiences.

Other organisations serving street-based sex workers in the United States, such as [Streetwise and Safe](#), [Young Women’s Empowerment Project](#), [HIPS](#), [Different Avenues](#), and [Safe Sex Work](#) recognise that for street workers, criminalisation and discriminatory policing is the biggest source of violence and harm.

Why does Griffin refrain from acknowledging this fact?

Neglecting to recognise the harms of criminalisation, and only granting sympathy and legal recourse to “trafficking victims,” - Griffin corroborates in the silencing of sex workers who demand more than moral redemption, who demand their human rights.

But it is no surprise that some former sex workers, when caught by law enforcement or when deciding to exit the sex industry of their own volition, would find support and validation from reformers and abolitionists, particularly when their personal experience with sex work is compounded by other negative experiences, such as drug abuse and domestic violence. However, it must be recognised that these individuals do not speak for the experiences of all sex workers.

Many former sex workers, like Ms. Griffin, who find social recognition through confession and condemnation of the sex trade, are genuinely trying to help other individuals gain the same kind of social re-acceptance that she has found through moral repentance. It is important to recognise the good that Ms. Griffin may be doing on an individual level to comfort and support some incarcerated sex workers who may share her Christian moral views on prostitution, or share her negative experiences of drug abuse. However, Ms. Griffin could be going further to help these people by questioning why they are

... could be going further to help these people by questioning why they are incarcerated to begin with, and thinking about what truly supportive alternatives and diversion programs might look like.

Here are some things Griffin could do, based on some best practices of other U.S. diversion programs:

1. Make sure that upon completion of her program, the criminal records of her participants are expunged so that they have better opportunities to find alternative employment.
2. Provide realistic, quality training for alternative employment, and support in accessing these jobs.
3. Create a truly non-judgmental “safe space” in her program, so participants can share experiences and mutual support, and be recognised as people of dignity, agency, and great survival strength, instead of fallen “victims” in need of moralising rehabilitation. Make no stigmatising assumptions about the “self-esteem” of participants.
4. Make sure that people exiting her program have access to supportive housing, should they need it, and other social services, including drug treatment programs, health care, and child care solutions, so that they are not compelled to return to sex work to meet these basic needs.
5. Create a “diversion” program that takes place as an alternative to incarceration (like many other diversion programs in the U.S.) rather than one that only takes place within the prison system. Use fundraising gains from any media attention she is currently getting to strengthen programs with supportive social services for people outside of jail, who are at risk of incarceration for prostitution.
6. Acknowledge the realities and benefits of sex work: that it is by and large the most lucrative “unskilled” employment option, which carries many benefits, including a flexible work schedule, especially desirable for mothers with childcare responsibilities during the day. Accept and acknowledge the possibility that some people may choose legal forms of sex work, such as stripping or porn, over other non-sex work employment; and allow space for respectful dissent for people who don't feel like what they were doing was wrong.
7. Use the harm reduction model, which has been proven to be most effective, for meeting people where they are at, and observe the best practices and methodologies of these existing programs.

Instead of catering to mainstream rhetoric, Griffin could be using her platform to talk about the dire lack of social services for sex workers outside of prison, due to criminalisation and social stigma - and use her spotlight to bring the public a far more nuanced look at the sex trade.

There are many unhappy workers in the sex industry, just as there are many unhappy workers in many other kinds of work, and criminalisation only serves to exacerbate the level of exploitation and violence in this market; nevertheless, sex workers demand the same human rights and labour rights as all other people. Moral reform lectures, delivered to prison inmates, are not the best use of state resources when many other preventative social services are direly needed.

We have yet to see the long-term impact of Griffin's project. It is encouraging to see strong women like Griffin rise out of oppressive personal circumstances and support others. It would be much more hopeful to see Griffin deliver truly

non-judgmental social services without the moralism of reform,” and empower other former sex workers to build much needed peer-led community spaces.

In the New York Times video, one participant of Griffin’s program tells the cameraman that she was doubtful in Griffin’s program at first. But after meeting Griffin, she has decided: “I see you shine. I want exactly what you have.”

From misery to ministry, Griffin has made herself into a powerhouse, and she aims to become a “trainer of trainers” – to teach other former sex workers how to preach in diversion programs like hers. She instructs the participants of her program to sing in unison - a song from the movie Sister Acts, where Whoopi Goldberg plays a singer who wants to make it big, and disguises herself as a nun in a convent to avoid trouble from her past:

*“If you wanna be somebody /
If you wanna go somewhere /
You better wake up and pay attention”*

Griffin has surely grabbed a lot of attention this year. The hope is that she will now direct this attention to creating truly empowering, sex worker-led solutions for addressing the complex social problems surrounding prostitution in Texas.

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