

How Evangelicals Took Sex Trafficking From Feminists and Made It a Christian Cause Célèbre

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When evangelicals picked up the issue of sex trafficking around the turn of the millennium, they drastically expanded the existing movement's influence and reach.

Every January, tens of thousands of Christian college students from all over the world attend the conference Passion, where they sing, pray, and hear from a variety of pastors, authors, and activists about issues resonating within evangelical culture. For the last several years, conference founder Louie Giglio has made the issue of human trafficking an increasingly central part of these activities. In 2013, 60,000 students gathered at Passion in Atlanta for a late-night candlelight vigil dedicated to celebrating “Jesus, the ultimate abolitionist, the original abolitionist,” Giglio told CNN. The organization’s anti-trafficking project designated Feb. 27 as “Shine a Light on Slavery Day,” encouraging young people to

raise awareness by taking selfies with red X’s drawn on their hands.

Human trafficking—and sex trafficking in particular—has become something of a Christian cause célèbre. There are prayer weekends, movies, magazine covers, Sunday school curricula, and countless church-based ministries. More unusual efforts include lipstick sold to help “kiss slavery goodbye” and tattoo alteration services for victims who say they have been “branded” by their captors. An extraordinarily complex global issue has somehow become one of the most energetic Christian missions of the 21st century.

Many of the new anti-trafficking advocates compare their work to the 19th-century abolitionist movement against chattel slavery—with some leaders in the movement referring to themselves (and, apparently, Jesus) as “abolitionists.” But, according to Gretchen Soderlund, author of the 2013 book *Sex Trafficking, Scandal, and the Transformation of Journalism, 1885–1917*, the better comparison may be to the “white slavery” panic of the late 19th century. Like the current rhetoric around anti-trafficking, “white slavery” engaged both feminist and Christian activists. It also focused primarily on protecting female virtue—often depicting prostitution as “slavery.” The phenomenon of women being forced into selling themselves on a widespread scale was mostly malarkey, as it turned out. But the movement was triumphant anyway: The 1910 White Slave Traffic Act, which made it illegal to transport women across state lines for “immoral purposes,”

effectively ended an era of commercialized prostitution (and criminalized plenty of consensual sex along the way).

Today's anti-trafficking cause again finds evangelicals and feminists in wary cahoots—but it has also earned plenty of skepticism. Second-wave feminists began driving the current conversation about trafficking in the late 1970s, when a book by sociologist Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery*, brought the issue to many people's attention for the first time and argued that it should be a feminist cause. Meanwhile, some feminists were finding common ground with conservatives on pornography, another issue defined by some as the sexual exploitation of women. Though it's not in fashion these days for mainstream feminists to be categorically opposed to pornography, conservative Christian anti-trafficking advocates often connect trafficking to porn: As one prominent pastor writes in a new book, "Every time someone views pornography ... they're contributing to a cycle of sex slavery."

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Feminist organizations including the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women were active in the 1990s but had little support within the U.S. government. That began to change in the late 1990s, when a confluence of factors encouraged evangelical NGOs to become increasingly involved in global issues. Christian conservatives at the time were more known for domestic issues: opposition to gay marriage and abortion and support for prayer in schools. Meanwhile, as government funding for foreign development was shrinking, NGOs of all kinds were increasingly taking on that work. In 2001, President George W. Bush established the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, which gave religious organizations new access to federal funds for causes including anti-trafficking work.

By 2004, the president of the National Association of Evangelicals characterized sex trafficking as a cause that "just jumped off the pages of the newspaper." Based on the popular image of sex trafficking—innocent victims, usually female, forced into something like literal slavery—it seems obvious why it quickly became a marquee issue. Who could possibly dispute the travesty of helpless women and children forcibly sold into sexual bondage? For Protestants, it's particularly resonant, said Yvonne Zimmerman, an associate professor of Christian ethics at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio and author of the 2012 book *Other Dreams of Freedom: Religion, Sex and Human Trafficking*. "Evangelicals on this issue were working out of really deeply held values," she said, including the notion that sexual morality is a powerful window into a person's true character.

Justin Dillon, a Christian filmmaker who directed a 2008 "rockumentary" about trafficking and spoke about the cause at the Passion conference in 2012, has another explanation for why sex trafficking in particular may have caught on as a Christian issue. "Christianity is centered around one word: redemption," Dillon said. "It's about taking something that's going down a path of peril—you could say slavery, spiritual slavery—and redeeming it, Christ redeeming it into something free. ... It's not hard for the Christian church to get that idea of freedom."

When evangelicals picked up the issue of trafficking around the turn of the millennium, they drastically expanded the existing movement's influence and reach. By now it has spawned major institutional efforts by nonprofits like World Relief, not to mention both state and federal legislation. According to some critics, however, Christians also changed the movement's

character. “It wasn’t until this evangelical coalition emerged that sex trafficking became this huge everyday issue,” said Soderlund. “Once the evangelicals got on board, it became a much more mainstream issue, and less feminist. You had innocent victims, and you had evildoers, and it wasn’t as much about patriarchy.”

The contemporary anti-trafficking movement has attracted plenty of criticism. Some point out the disproportionate focus on sex trafficking, when labor trafficking is a much more common phenomenon. (Many evangelical organizations do tackle labor trafficking as part of their missions, even though the issue doesn’t attract as much attention. Dillon now runs a nonprofit, Made in a Free World, which focuses on labor trafficking.)

The strategy of “rescuing” supposed slaves has also been criticized as paternalist, moralist, and ineffective. Then there’s the numbers of the forcibly “enslaved,” which seem to be wildly overestimated by many sources, although the numbers are also hotly disputed. Meanwhile, some of the most prominent trafficking stories of this century have come under intense scrutiny. An alarming 2004 New York Times Magazine cover story was eviscerated for exaggerations and unproven claims by critics including Jack Shafer at Slate. Somaly Mam, a Cambodian activist championed by American advocates, including Nick Kristof, turned out to have fabricated significant elements of her heart-rending personal story.

One of the most persistent criticisms of the movement is that it’s not opposed only to explicitly forced prostitution and child prostitution, but to prostitution as a whole, even when it’s engaged in by adult women who say they are sex workers by choice. That’s one point that some activists have no problem acknowledging.

“FAAST and all of our partners are very intentional in that we say that all prostitution is inherently harmful,” said Mandy Porter, coordinator at the Faith Alliance Against Slavery and Trafficking, a Baltimore-based Christian coalition whose members include World Relief and the Salvation Army. “Whether or not it’s consensual, whether or not they want to do it, if it’s high-end or streetwalking, it’s harmful, and it’s not good.” She is careful to say that not all prostitution is trafficking, but adds that the “chains” in most trafficking situations are psychological, not physical. Under that definition, almost any sex worker could indeed be classified as a victim of trafficking.

As the contemporary anti-trafficking movement matures, it shows no signs of slowing down. This month, FAAST will launch a seven-week anti-trafficking curriculum aimed at 8- to 13-year-olds in Sunday schools, home schools, and other religious settings. “Change Agents” includes lessons on topics like Internet safety and sex trafficking and frames certain Bible stories as “abuse stories,” including the tale of Abram accepting rewards from the Egyptian pharaoh who has taken his wife. As evangelicals continue to champion the cause, the next generation of activists will view trafficking through this lens, making a political and economic question a religious one, too.