

**Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism:  
The Politics of Sex, Rights, and Freedom in  
Contemporary Antitrafficking Campaigns**

**D**uring a blustery New York City winter in the final weeks of 2008, two very different cinematic events focused on the politics of gender, sexuality, and human rights stood out for their symmetry. The first event, a benefit screening of *Call and Response* (2008), a just-released “rockumentary” about human trafficking made by the Christian rock-musician-cum-filmmaker Justin Dillon, showed at a hip downtown cinema to a packed and enthusiastic mixed-gender audience of young, predominantly white and Korean evangelical Christians. The second event, a public screening of the film *Very Young Girls* (2008), a sober documentary about feminist activist Rachel Lloyd and her Harlem-based nonprofit organization for teenaged girls in street prostitution, was populated primarily by secular, middle-aged professional women with a long-standing commitment to the abolition of the sex trade. Despite the obvious demographic contrasts between the participants and the different constellations of secular and religious values that they harbor, more striking still was the common political foundation that the two groups have come to share.

Over the past decade, mounting public and political attention has been directed toward the “traffic in women” as a dangerous manifestation of global gender inequalities. Media accounts have similarly rehearsed stories

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of the abduction, transport, and forced sexual labor of women and girls whose poverty and desperation render them amenable to easy victimization in first- and third-world cities (see, e.g., Kristof 2004; Landesman 2004; Lopez 2006). Meanwhile, a remarkably diverse group of social activists and policy makers—a coalition composed of abolitionist feminists, evangelical Christians, and both conservative and liberal government officials—have put forth an array of new legislation at the local, national, and transnational levels.<sup>1</sup> Despite renowned disagreements around the politics of sex and gender, these groups have come together to advocate for harsher criminal and economic penalties against traffickers, prostitutes' customers, and nations deemed to be taking insufficient steps to stem the flow of trafficked women.<sup>2</sup>

The key constituencies in the U.S. coalition of antitrafficking activists routinely insist that the commitments that unite them are both bipartisan and apolitical—a claim that is on one level difficult to dispute, since, as religious studies scholar Yvonne Zimmerman has noted, no one could plausibly claim to be “for” sex trafficking (Zimmerman 2008, 83).<sup>3</sup> In a different ideological register, the political scientist Allen D. Hertzke has celebrated the humanitarian agenda that has linked left and right, secular and Christian around this issue, going so far as to hail the wide-sweeping antitrafficking coalition as “one of the most significant human rights movements of our time” (2004, 6). Despite the eager embrace of the antitrafficking movement by activists occupying a wide spectrum of political positions—one that extends from radical feminist groups like the Coalition against Trafficking in Women and Equality Now to such well-established

<sup>1</sup> The term “abolitionism” was used in the late nineteenth century to describe North American and European feminist efforts to eliminate prostitution. It has been reclaimed by those sectors of the contemporary feminist movement that share the conviction that prostitution constitutes a harm tantamount to slavery that nation-states should work to extinguish. Although the discourse of trafficking is transnational in both genesis and scope, the present essay focuses on the contemporary antitrafficking movement in the United States. As such, I employ the common U.S. distinction between “conservatives” and “liberals,” where the latter is understood to represent the center-left range of the political spectrum.

<sup>2</sup> See, most recently, the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008 (HR 7311); see also the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 (Public Law 106-386) and the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (resolution 55/25, November 15, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Sex workers' rights organizations have objected to the prevailing rubric of “sex trafficking,” arguing against the analytic separation of trafficking for prostitution from trafficking for other forms of labor.

Christian-right organizations as Focus on the Family—in this essay I shall argue that what has served to unite this coalition of strange bedfellows is not simply a humanitarian concern with individuals trapped in “modern-day slavery,” as commentators such as Hertzke have maintained, nor activists’ underlying commitment to “traditional” ideals of gender and sexuality, as various left-leaning and critical feminist commentators have offered (e.g., Saunders 2005; Berman 2006; Weitzer 2007). Instead, this article seeks to demonstrate the extent to which evangelical and feminist antitrafficking activism has been fueled by a shared commitment to carceral paradigms of social, and in particular gender, justice (what I here develop as “carceral feminism”) and to militarized humanitarianism as the pre-eminent mode of engagement by the state. I draw upon my ongoing ethnographic and policy research with feminist and evangelical antitrafficking movement leaders in the United States to argue that the alliance that has been so efficacious in framing contemporary antitrafficking politics is the product of two historically unique and intersecting trends: a rightward shift on the part of many mainstream feminists and other secular liberals away from a redistributive model of justice and toward a politics of incarceration, coincident with a leftward sweep on the part of many younger evangelicals away from the isolationist issues of abortion and gay marriage and toward a globally oriented social justice theology.<sup>4</sup>

In an earlier article (Bernstein 2007a), I sketched these trends in terms of the two groups’ shared commitment to neoliberal (i.e., market-based and punitive as opposed to redistributive) solutions to contemporary social problems, with trafficking or so-called “modern-day slavery” representing the antithesis of low-wage work in the purportedly free market. In the present essay, I draw upon my ethnographic data to trace developing points of intersection on two key political fronts—carceral feminism and militarized humanitarianism—elaborating on the distinctive sexual and gender politics that undergird each of these modes of activist intervention.

<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the numerous analyses of U.S. antitrafficking policy that derive solely from a review of textual materials, my research melds an analysis of policy documents and published writings with a multisited ethnographic approach focused on state- as well as activist-sponsored policy meetings, conferences, and strategy sessions. Between 2005 and 2009, I attended seventy-two events with feminist and/or conservative Christian antitrafficking activists and conducted twenty-eight in-depth, face-to-face interviews with antitrafficking movement leaders. This research is also informed by a decade of ethnographic investigation with sex workers (Bernstein 2007b), which demonstrated that the rubric of trafficking is inadequate to describe sex workers’ highly diverse experiences under conditions of late capitalism, consistent with a growing body of anthropological and sociological inquiry (see, e.g., Kempadoo 2005; Agustín 2007; Cheng 2010).

### A genealogy of sex trafficking

I arrive late and breathless to the *Call and Response* screening, where I am struck by the crowd of several hundred that has spilled out onto the streets—the number of people is remarkable considering that this is an evangelical Christian human rights event in the heart of New York City, that it's 10 p.m. on a Tuesday night, and that the film has already been showing for several weeks. The young and fashionable attendees are brimming with excitement. I have barely enough time to make my way through the lobby to investigate the row of tables packed with NGO flyers, posters, and other merchandise when I observe a black-clad young woman with a tiny gold cross around her neck who is explaining her organization's "market-based solutions to sexual slavery" to a ring of eager listeners.

The film begins with sinister and grainy footage of young girls in Cambodian brothels, footage that the film leaves unattributed but which I recognize from a previous TV special. Following a clip of several school-aged children negotiating with a white Western client to exchange money for sex, the film cuts abruptly to performance footage of a Christian rock band whose members strum their guitars intently in urgent lament. This hip, fashionable version of Christianity merges so seamlessly with popular culture and with secular humanitarian impulses that the muted evangelical Christian perspective may not be apparent to secular viewers.

The next segment of the film features a number of antitrafficking "experts," including the *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof as well as various movie stars who have recently taken an interest in the issue, like Ashley Judd and Julia Ormond. Even the philosophy professor and public intellectual Cornel West makes an incongruous appearance, discussing the history of race-based, chattel slavery in the United States. The film moves back and forth impressionistically between images of black bodies being whipped and close-ups of the faces of white Christian rock musicians whose eyes tear up when they recount the ravages of sexual slavery that they have heard about from others or in some cases witnessed. These scenes dissolve into footage of scantily clad women in the windows of Dutch and then geographically unspecified brothels until the camera finally settles upon a young Asian woman who declares to ominous sounding music and to audible gasps from the audience that she has slept with over 1,000 men. "I haven't been to school so I can't add it up," she offers meekly. This protagonist is the first of several to offer the

audience a decontextualized and sensationalistic focus upon trafficking-as-rape and sacrificed virginity. Despite Kristof's insistence in the film that the exchange of sex for money per se is not what is most salient about trafficking, but rather the presence of force and brutality, here it is mundane prostitution scenarios from points around the globe that serve as the rallying cry for action. (From my field notes, New York, January 7, 2009)

As commentators such as legal scholar Jennifer Chacón (2006) have noted, trafficking as defined in current federal law and in international protocols could conceivably encompass sweatshop labor, agricultural work, or even corporate crime, but it has been the far less common instances of sexually trafficked women and girls that have stimulated the most concern by conservative Christians, prominent feminist activists, and the press.<sup>5</sup> Members of these groups themselves acknowledge (sometimes with frustration) that a focus on sexual violation, rather than the structural preconditions of exploited labor more generally, has been crucial to transforming what had previously been of concern to only a small group of committed activists into a legal framework with powerful material and symbolic effects. As Brian McLaren, a progressive evangelical author and activist, observed to me during an interview, "It's disturbing that nonprofits can raise money to fight sex trafficking in Cambodia but it's much harder to raise awareness about bad trade policies in the U.S. that keep Cambodia poor so that it *needs* sex trafficking."<sup>6</sup>

Various commentators have noted the similarities between the moral panic surrounding sex trafficking as modern-day slavery in the current moment and the white slavery scare in the postbellum years of the nineteenth century (Saunders 2005; Soderlund 2005; Agustín 2007). While this earlier wave of concern engaged a similar coalition of "new abolitionist" feminists and evangelical Christians, prior to the Progressive Era the goal of eradicating prostitution had not seemed particularly urgent to either group. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, as

<sup>5</sup> In the TVPA of 2000, "trafficking" is defined as "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery." In the 2000 UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, "trafficking" is understood to include "the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs."

<sup>6</sup> Brian McLaren, telephone interview, November 10, 2008. Transcript on file with the author.

tensions mounted over migration, urbanization, and the social changes being wrought by industrial capitalism, narratives of the traffic in women and girls for sexual slavery abounded. Although empirical investigations would eventually reveal the white slavery narrative to be largely without factual base (the evidence suggested that large numbers of women were not in fact forced into prostitution, other than by economic conditions), anti-white slave crusaders were nevertheless successful in spurring the passage of a series of red-light abatement acts, as well as the federal Mann-Elkins White Slavery Act, which brought the nation's first era of wide-scale, commercialized prostitution to a close.<sup>7</sup>

During the past decade, the term “trafficking” has once again been made synonymous with not only forced but also voluntary prostitution, while an earlier wave of political struggles for both sex workers' and migrants' rights has been eclipsed (see, e.g., Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Chapkis 2005; Agustín 2007). According to observers both laudatory and critical, this displacement has been facilitated by the embrace of human rights discourses by abolitionist feminists, who have effectively neutralized domains of political struggle around questions of labor, migration, and sexual freedom via the tropes of prostitution as gender violence and sexual slavery. From the perspective of abolitionist feminist antitrafficking organizations, the shift to the human rights field in the mid-1990s was crucial to relocating a set of internecine political debates among feminists about the meaning of prostitution and pornography (one that had divided the U.S. feminist movement throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, and in which the nonabolitionist factions were emerging triumphant) to a humanitarian terrain in which the abolitionist constituency was more likely to prevail.<sup>8</sup>

A simultaneous and similarly profound shift occurred during the same years within the U.S. evangelical movement. If in the early 1990s most evangelicals had little to do with the human rights field, by 1996 a greater reliance on NGOs by the United Nations, coupled with an awareness of the increasingly global spread of evangelical Christianity, would encourage many newly formed evangelical NGOs to enter the international political fray. Doris Buss and Didi Herman (2003) attribute this to the proliferation of UN-hosted conferences in the 1990s, which facilitated the expansion

<sup>7</sup> The 1910 Mann Act (chap. 395, 36 Stat. 825) prohibited the interstate traffic in women for “immoral purposes.” It later became notorious for its use in prosecuting instances of interracial sex (Langum 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Jessica Neuwirth, personal interview, New York, December 3, 2008. Transcript on file with the author.

and further institutionalization of NGO involvement in international law and policy making. In combination with U.S. evangelicals' growing interest in the issues of international religious freedom and the persecution of Christians, this shift served to propel new sets of religious actors into the trafficking debates and to make religious voices more prominent in the human rights field (Hertzke 2004).

Evangelical advocacy around human trafficking would receive another burst of energy after George W. Bush's administration expanded upon President Clinton's "charitable choice" initiative to allow avowedly faith-based organizations to become eligible for federal funding. Since 2001, the year that President Bush established the Office of Faith Based Initiatives, evangelical Christian groups have secured a growing proportion of federal monies for both international and domestic antitrafficking work as well as funds for the prevention of HIV/AIDS (Mink 2001; Butler 2006).

In a recent essay, the sociologist Ron Weitzer has described feminist and conservative Christian campaigns against sex trafficking in the United States as a "moral crusade" akin to previous social mobilizations against alcohol consumption and pornography. Weitzer demonstrates that although the campaigns' empirical claims about the extent of sex trafficking into the United States and its more general relationship to prostitution are flawed, they have nonetheless been successfully institutionalized in a growing number of NGOs and in official state policy (Weitzer 2007). While Weitzer's argument is an important one and dovetails with various critical feminist perspectives on the issue (see, e.g., Saunders 2005; Berman 2006), his account stops short of looking at other sociologically significant links between the two unlikely new-abolitionist constituencies—specifically, that which has united the two groups around a punitive and far from historically inevitable paradigm of state engagement, both domestically and internationally. While the sexual "loyalty oath" insisting that anti-trafficking groups explicitly denounce prostitution has been amply criticized by various left-leaning commentators, the *carceral* loyalty oath that implicitly undergirds such politics has gone largely unchallenged. In what follows, I describe how a sexual politics that is intricately intertwined with broader agendas of criminalization and incarceration has shaped the framing of trafficking for both conservative Christians and mainstream feminists, helping to align the issue with state interests and to catapult it to its recent position of political and cultural prominence. I begin by tracing the contours of what I term "carceral feminism," providing a closer examination of those sectors of the contemporary feminist movement that have embraced the antitrafficking cause.

### The sexual politics of carceral feminism

I've spent about 17 years working on this issue—most of that time I was on the losing side, as those who supported “sex worker” rights won almost every political battle. . . . Those were the depressing years. . . . Now the truth about prostitution/sex trafficking is emerging and agencies are responding as never before. I think more pimps and traffickers have been arrested in the last year than in the whole previous decade. (Donna Hughes, antitrafficking activist and University of Rhode Island professor of women’s studies, in an interview in the *National Review Online* [Lopez 2006])

Trafficking is like domestic violence. The only thing that prevents recurrence is fear of arrest. (Dorchen Leidholt, feminist activist from the Coalition against the Traffic in Women, speaking at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, March 2, 2007)

What do we want? A strong trafficking law! When do we want it? Now! (Call and response cry at National Organization for Women rally for a New York State law that would increase criminal penalties against prostitutes’ customers, New York, February 1, 2007)

For grassroots feminists of the early second wave who were interested in criticizing mainstream economic and familial institutions and in advocating on behalf of women’s reproductive rights, it would perhaps have been a strange specter to imagine that a generation hence, pioneers of the early women’s movement such as Laura Lederer (author of the classic volume *Take Back the Night* and a founder of the antirape movement), Dorchen Leidholdt (a prominent feminist lawyer for victims of domestic violence), and Donna Hughes (Carlson Endowed Chair in Women’s Studies at the University of Rhode Island) would find themselves one bright July morning as the featured speakers at a panel sponsored by the neoconservative Washington, DC, think tank the Hudson Institute, titled “The Profits of Pimping: Abolishing Sex Trafficking in the United States.”<sup>9</sup> Sharing the stage with them were influential Hudson Institute fellows such as Michael Horowitz (a veteran of the Reagan Administration and a prominent architect of the contemporary antitrafficking movement), U.S. Ambassador Mark Lagon (a former aide to the five-term far-right Republican senator from North Carolina, Jesse Helms, and the director of the Trafficking in Persons Office at the U.S. Department of State), and Bonni Stachowiak

<sup>9</sup> The event took place on July 10, 2008.



(professor of business administration at the evangelical Christian Vanguard University). As the all-white array of panelists spoke to the audience about the urgent need to root out inner-city street pimps and “pimp culture,” to stigmatize the patrons of prostitutes, and to promote “healthy families” domestically and globally, the audience, comprising representatives from assorted right-wing organizations including the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and Feminists for Life, erupted into frequent applause.

Of course, for those familiar with the evolution of what Janet Halley has termed governance feminism (in which feminism “moves off the streets and into the state”; Halley 2006, 20), as well as the historical precedent of the white slavery panic, the inclusion of prominent feminist activists at the Hudson Institute event might come as somewhat less of a surprise. In addition to the echoes of white slavery, there are also important historical resonances between the current U.S. antitrafficking campaign and the Meese Commission antipornography hearings that took place during the 1980s, in which conservative Christians and secular feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin similarly joined forces for the sake of sexual reform (see, e.g., Duggan and Hunter 1995; Vance 1997). As Judith Walkowitz (1983) and Wendy Brown (1995) have previously observed, the feminist embrace of state-anchored sexual moralism is particularly apt to resurface during periods of right-wing ascendancy like the Reagan and Bush years, when opportunities for more substantive political and economic change are elusive. While a resurgent feminist-conservative alliance was actively fostered by the George W. Bush White House—both rhetorically, as in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and through the cultivation of explicit political ties, as in the appointment of renowned feminist activist Lederer as Senior Director for Global Projects on Trafficking in Persons at the U.S. Department of State—various feminists would go on to actively and publicly embrace Bush Administration initiatives.<sup>10</sup> Notably, in a February 2004 article in the *Washington Post* co-written by iconic second-wave feminist Phyllis Chesler and women’s studies professor/antitrafficking activist Hughes, the authors provided a vigorous defense not only of the Bush Administration’s antitrafficking policies but also of its military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq,

<sup>10</sup> A figure previously associated with the secular feminist mainstream, Lederer’s career has taken her from Take Back the Night activism to the antipornography movement to campaigns against sex trafficking. Given her recent narration of her conversion to evangelical Christianity (Courtney 2008), as well as her staunch advocacy of Bush Administration policies, it seems unlikely that she would still choose to identify in left-liberal terms.

declaring that contemporary conservatives and faith-based organizations had become more reliable advocates of democracy and women's rights across the globe than the liberal left had ever been (Chesler and Hughes 2004).<sup>11</sup>

While the embrace of discourses of criminalization, democracy building, naming and shaming, and family values by a new crop of avowedly conservative feminists is certainly significant, noteworthy too is the extent to which feminists who identify as secular liberals have found themselves in easy agreement with much of this agenda and have thus been ready and eager partners to conservative-feminist antitrafficking campaigns. While commentators such as Wendy Chapkis (2005), Kamala Kempadoo (2005), and Miriam Ticktin (2008) have previously pointed to a collusion between mainstream feminism and state agendas of border control in contemporary antitrafficking campaigns (where feminist activism unwittingly supports the deportation of migrant sex workers under the guise of securing their protection), my ethnographic fieldwork extends this insight, revealing carceral politics and a securitized state apparatus to be antitrafficking feminists' preferred political remedies.

Liberal feminists' embrace of carceral politics, and the articulation of these politics through a particular set of ideals around gender and sexuality, was made evident at the meetings of the antitrafficking caucuses of the National Organization of Women–NYC (NOW-NYC) and the AAUW that I attended over a six-month period between 2007 and 2008. Angela Lee, from the New York Asian Women's Center, was the final speaker at a 2007 NOW-NYC rally on behalf of a trafficking bill that would increase the possible penalties against prostitutes' customers from ninety days to a year in prison.<sup>12</sup> An impeccably dressed woman in her mid-forties, she made no mention of the role played by global poverty in the dynamics of trafficking and prostitution but had a great deal to say about the sexual integrity of families. "This is a family issue," she declared outright, "especially as Chinese New Year approaches and there are so many victims' families who won't be able to celebrate." In this formulation, Lee located sexual menace squarely outside the home, despite a previously hegemonic feminist contention that homes and families are the most dangerous places

<sup>11</sup> In addition to serving as the Elinor M. Carlson endowed Chair of Women's Studies at the University of Rhode Island, Hughes is a regular contributor to the right-wing magazine the *National Review*. Both Hughes and Chesler were participants in the 2007 right-wing, anti-Islam campaign on U.S. college campuses called "Islamofacism awareness week."

<sup>12</sup> The bill passed with broad support from New York feminist organizations on June 6, 2007.

for women to be.<sup>13</sup> Lee went on to link the dangers faced by trafficking victims to New York State's lack of success in imposing a law that would provide severe enough criminal penalties for traffickers and pimps, declaring with great emotion that "We need to punish the traffickers and to set the victims free!"<sup>14</sup>

At a March 2, 2007, discussion focused on "ending demand" for sex trafficking at the Commission on the Status of Women meetings at the United Nations, the link between sexual and carceral politics was even more powerfully revealed. At this meeting dedicated to problematizing men's demand for the services of sex workers, the panelists used the occasion to showcase how the carceral state could be effectively harnessed to achieve amatively coupled, heterosexual, nuclear families. The opening speaker from the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) explicitly hailed the five white, middle-class men in the room as exemplars of a new model of enlightened masculinity and urged the audience members to "to bring their husbands, sons, and brothers" to future meetings. The model of prostitution and trafficking that the CATW panelists invoked bore little if any connection to structural or economic factors, rendering prostitution wholly attributable to the actions of a small subset of bad men: husbands within the family who might seek the sexual services of women outside of it, or bad men outside the family who might entice women and girls within it to leave.<sup>15</sup> Although the CATW regards itself as a progressive feminist organization, members displayed surprisingly little hesitation in their appeals to a punitive state apparatus. Nor did they demonstrate much awareness of the political-economic underpinnings of the singular form of heterofamilial intimacy that they advocated (see, e.g., Bernstein 2007b; Padilla et al. 2007).

At a legislative level, the liberal feminist position on trafficking is most clearly articulated by U.S. Representative Carolyn Maloney, a Democratic congresswoman from New York previously known for her advocacy around issues such as the gendered wage gap and women's reproductive health. Maloney has taken a leading role in the contemporary feminist campaign against sex trafficking, sponsoring legislation to target the clients of sex workers and to collapse any distinction between forced and vol-

<sup>13</sup> This, in addition to ample feminist research that notes that women and girls often enter into prostitution at their families' behest, so as to better provide for their parents and children; see, e.g., Montgomery (2001), Agustín (2007), and Bernstein (2007b).

<sup>14</sup> The rally took place on February 1, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Laura María Agustín (2007) has described the anxieties that circulate around trafficking in terms of displaced concerns about women leaving home for sex.

untary prostitution in federal antitrafficking law.<sup>16</sup> She has also worked closely with feminist groups like the National Organization for Women and Equality Now, as well as with the Hudson Institute's Horowitz and conservative Christian constituencies such as Evangelicals for Social Action. In a chapter of her recent book, tellingly titled "The Pretty Woman Myth" (thus making plain that the only form of trafficking that concerns her is heterosexual prostitution; Maloney 2008), two things are particularly noteworthy. The first aspect of Maloney's discussion to note is the moral elevation of the heterosexual nuclear family in the pathways toward female sexual slavery she wrenchingly describes. Although Maloney mentions incest suffered by girl children within the family as a common pathway into prostitution, in this analysis incest does not in and of itself amount to the human rights violation of sexual slavery, a term she reserves for extrafamilial forms of violence. A second key element in Maloney's book is the extent to which carceral politics and gender politics are mutually implied. By way of her conclusion to "The Pretty Woman Myth," Maloney insists that the best means to fight slavery is through the arrest and incarceration of prostitutes' johns and pimps, together with more vigilant protection of children.

The above examples highlight an important alliance between feminism and the carceral state, one that extends beyond recent feminist partnerships with the religious right wing. In her recent book tracing the coemergence of second-wave feminist attention to sexual violence and neoliberal agendas of incarceration, Kristin Bumiller (2008) has similarly demonstrated the ways in which a myopic feminist focus on the criminalization of rape and domestic violence during the 1990s contrasted with grassroots and early second-wave feminist concerns about women's social and economic empowerment. Arguing that the neoliberal carceral imperative has had a devastating impact on the ways that feminist engagement with sexual violence has been framed, Bumiller demonstrates that the reciprocal is also true: once feminism became fatally inflected by neoliberal strategies of social control, it could serve as an effective inspiration for broader campaigns for criminalization.<sup>17</sup> Bumiller observes that by the early 2000s, the neoliberal sexual violence agenda of feminism was increasingly being exported as part of U.S. human rights policy, solidifying the carceral im-

<sup>16</sup> Maloney's version of the bill, HR 3887, did not ultimately pass.

<sup>17</sup> See also Marie Gottschalk (2006), who traces the evolution of the antirape and battered women's movements in the United States in terms of the shift from the Fordist welfare state to the neoliberal carceral state as the enforcement apparatus for feminist goals.

perative within feminism domestically and spreading the paradigm of feminism-as-crime-control across the globe (see also Grewal 2005).

The evidence indeed suggests that U.S. antitrafficking campaigns have been far more successful at criminalizing marginalized populations, enforcing border control, and measuring other countries' compliance with human rights standards based on the curtailment of prostitution than they have been at issuing any concrete benefits to victims (Chapkis 2005; Chuang 2006; Shah 2008). As Bumiller argues, this is not just a question of "unintended consequences" but rather has transpired as a result of feminists directly joining forces with a neoliberal project of social control (2008, 15). This is true both within the United States, where pimps can now be given ninety-nine-year prison sentences as sex traffickers and sex workers are increasingly arrested and deported for the sake of their "protection" (see Bernstein 2007a, 2007b), as well as elsewhere around the globe, where the U.S. tier-ranking of other countries has led to the tightening of borders internationally and to the passage of punitive antiprostitution policies in numerous countries (Sharma 2005; Shah 2008; Cheng 2010).

Most recently, with gathering feminist attention to "domestic" forms of trafficking (which films like *Very Young Girls* have sought to ignite), it has become clear that the shift from local forms of sexual violence to the international field back to a concern with policing U.S. inner cities (this time, under the guise of protecting women's human rights) has provided critical circuitry for the carceral feminist agenda. According to U.S. Attorney Pamela Chen (2007), a full half of federal trafficking cases currently concern underage women in inner-city street prostitution.<sup>18</sup> Enforcement-wise, this has resulted in an unprecedented police crackdown on people of color who are involved in the street-based sexual economy—including pimps, clients, and sex workers alike (Bernstein 2007a).

The carceral feminist commitment to heteronormative family values, crime control, and the putative rescue and restoration of victims (or what Janet Jakobsen has alliteratively glossed as "marriage, militarism and markets"; 2008) and the broad social appeal of this agenda is powerfully illustrated by the recent film *Very Young Girls*. The film has been shown

<sup>18</sup> Some commentators have speculated that the shift from an international to a domestic focus in U.S. antitrafficking policy has occurred because the U.S. government has consistently failed to identify the overwhelming numbers of transborder victims that it previously claimed existed (see, e.g., Brennan 2008). Since the passage of the 2000 TVPA, the government has downgraded its estimates of U.S. transborder victims, from 50,000 to 14,500–17,000 people per year (U.S. GAO 2006). In cases of domestic trafficking, the force requirement is waived if the women in question are underage.

not only in diverse feminist venues but also at the U.S. State Department, at various evangelical megachurches, and at the conservative Christian King's College. Under the rubric of portraying domestic trafficking, the film seeks to garner sympathy for young African American women who find themselves trapped in the street-level sexual economy. By framing the women as "very young girls" (in the promotional poster for the film, the seated protagonist depicted is so small that her feet dangle from the chair) and as the innocent victims of sexual abuse (a category that has historically been reserved for white and non-sex-working victims), the film can convincingly present its perspective as antiracist and progressive. Yet the young women's innocence in the film is achieved at the cost of completely demonizing the young African American men who profit from their earnings and who are presented as irredeemably criminal and sub-human. The film relentlessly strips away the humanity of young African American men in the street economy along with the complex tangle of factors beyond prostitution (including racism and poverty) that shape the girls' lives. At one screening of the film that I attended at a white-shoe law firm in New York, following the film some audience members called for the pimps not only to be locked away indefinitely but to be physically assaulted. In *Very Young Girls* as in carceral feminism more generally, a vision of social justice as criminal justice, and of punitive systems of control as the best motivational deterrents for men's bad behavior, serves as a crucial point of connection with state actors, evangelicals, and others who have embraced the antitrafficking cause.

**"Our God of [criminal] Justice": Militarizing humanitarianism in new evangelical antitrafficking campaigns**

Citychurch [a pseudonym] is a Christian megachurch in Manhattan that I have attended occasionally since beginning this project, a church that several young evangelicals in the antitrafficking movement have recommended to me highly. Tonight I am at an event sponsored by the women's ministry, a discussion with faith-based movement leaders that is dedicated to the issue of sex trafficking. Our meeting takes place at the church's midtown headquarters, where some eighty-five young women have gathered.

The session begins with a brief collective prayer led by a young white woman who addresses her entreaty to "our God of Justice" as we bow our heads solemnly. She beckons Him to allow His spirit to move tonight's speakers in sharing what He is doing "to bring

about justice in the world.” The panel moderator approaches the podium next: she is an exuberant young woman who describes how she has dedicated her life to helping the broken and the hurting. She explains that her own activism around trafficking was initially inspired by Maria’s story, that of a virgin who left her hometown in Mexico only to find herself in a brothel. Although it remains unclear how she first learned about Maria, and the story itself is short on specifics, her eyes well up as she speaks to us, as do those of many other women who are gathered in the room.

The first panelist is a thin, white bespectacled woman in her mid-thirties who runs a New York organization for women coming out of “sexual slavery.” Recently, her group has begun a collaboration with the New York Asian Women’s Center, a Christian-secular alliance that works to the benefit of both groups: the fact that her own organization’s funding comes from the Church means that they are not beholden to government guidelines in order to identify victims. This allows them to work with people “they know have been trafficked” even if the women in question refuse to admit it. Members of the organization locate victims by stationing themselves in Queens and Manhattan community courts and approaching women who have pled guilty to prostitution charges after their brothels have been raided. She explains that “by them pleading guilty, they’re court mandated to receive services from us which at least gives us some opportunity to gain their trust.”

[ . . . ]

The last speaker is a young woman from the International Justice Mission, the largest and most established evangelical antitrafficking organization in the United States, with operations in fourteen countries. She begins her presentation by declaring her joy at being a part of “this global transformation of the Church.” She applauds the new work that churches are doing to fight injustice, urging those in the audience to reconsider Psalm 10. “Listen to this description of an oppressor,” she offers, before pausing briefly for dramatic effect: “He lies in wait near the villages. From ambush he murders the innocent. Watching in secret for his victims, he lies in wait like a lion in cover. He lies in wait to catch the helpless. He catches the helpless and drags them off in his net.” (From my field notes, New York, March 17, 2009)

Among many left-leaning secular critics of contemporary antitrafficking campaigns, old stereotypes persist about the underlying cultural politics

and broader social interests that have resonated with contemporary evangelical Christians, a group that is frequently assumed to be one and the same with the antipornography, antiabortion, and anti-gay rights activists of generations past. Although avowedly Christian-right groups such as Concerned Women for America and the Salvation Army have also been active participants in the contemporary antitrafficking crusade, my research in “justice-oriented” churches such as Citychurch, at prayer gatherings for trafficking victims, and at evangelical antitrafficking conferences and film screenings suggests that such groups do not represent the preponderance of evangelical Christian grassroots activity.

Instead, a new group of young, highly educated, and relatively affluent evangelicals who often describe themselves as members of the “justice generation” have pursued some of the most active and passionate campaigning around sexual slavery and human trafficking. In contrast to their Christian-right predecessors, the young evangelicals who have pioneered Christian engagement in the contemporary antitrafficking movement not only embrace the languages of women’s rights and social justice but have also taken deliberate steps to distinguish their work from the sexual politics of other conservative Christians. Although many of these evangelicals remain opposed to both gay marriage and abortion, they do not grant these issues the same political priority as their more conservative peers. Instead, young evangelicals have argued that the best way to forge an effective politics is to move away from hot-button controversies around gender and sexuality and to focus their attention on what they understand to be uncontroversial and consensus-building issues such as global warming, human trafficking, and HIV/AIDS.

Yet the new-evangelical pursuit of social justice that has spawned the antitrafficking movement remains wedded to a particular constellation of sexual and gender politics, one that, while sharing key points of continuity with their Christian-right brethren, is in equally important ways quite distinct. At a basic level, new evangelicals’ embrace of human trafficking as a focus of concern must be situated as a culturally modernizing project rather than a traditionalizing one. Under the guise of moral condemnation and prostitutes’ rescue, women in particular are granted new opportunities to participate in sexually explicit culture, international travel, and the previously forbidden corners of urban space. Moreover, contemporary evangelical antitrafficking activists hew closely to a liberal-feminist vision of egalitarian heterosexual marriage and professional-sphere equality in which



heterosexual prostitution, as for many middle-class secular liberals, represents the antithesis of both these political aims.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the genuinely modernizing aspects of new-evangelical sexual politics, a recent spate of celebratory declarations in the press about the fatal fracture of the U.S. evangelical movement (e.g., Kirkpatrick 2007; Wicker 2008) may also be overstated, since there remain several elements that continue to connect the various developing factions. Although new evangelicals do care less about culture-war battles than they do about humanitarian issues and global social justice, in their vision social justice equates directly with criminal justice, and, as I shall demonstrate below, to the extent that economic issues are considered causal factors in human suffering, the solutions that new evangelicals forge are imagined in neoliberal, consumer-friendly terms.<sup>20</sup> In this way, new evangelicals remain beholden to an underlying carceral politics that serves to link them not just to those sectors of the contemporary feminist movement that have themselves veered rightward in recent decades but also to the entire right-wing spectrum of criminal justice-oriented social and economic conservatives.

A stark example of the neoliberal criminal justice agenda that undergirds new-evangelical humanitarian interventions is the International Justice Mission (IJM), which has been at the forefront of the media-friendly militarized humanitarianism that has characterized the faith-based response to human trafficking since the late 1990s.<sup>21</sup> In the rescue-and-restore model of activism that IJM has promulgated, male employees of the organization go undercover as potential clients to investigate brothels around the globe, partnering with local law enforcement (as well as mainstream press outlets) in order to rescue underage and allegedly coerced brothel occupants and to deliver them to rehabilitation facilities. Gary Haugen, IJM's founder and chief executive, provides the justification for

<sup>19</sup> While not necessarily identifying themselves as feminists, most of the new evangelical antitrafficking activists that I interviewed rejected the old evangelical idea of male headship in the family while supporting women's leadership roles professionally and in the church.

<sup>20</sup> Shane Claiborne and Brian McLaren, popular figures on the progressive evangelical speaker circuit, constitute important exceptions to this trend in highlighting the political-economic underpinnings of injustice. Their sexual politics do not range far beyond heteronormative liberal feminism, however.

<sup>21</sup> Inderpal Grewal has used the term "military humanitarianism" to describe the Bush Administration's policy of using women's human rights to justify U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and elsewhere (2005, 132). I use "militarized humanitarianism" in a more expansive sense, one that includes not only state-sanctioned military interventions but also activists' own application of carceral politics to the global stage.

these techniques in his recent book, *Just Courage* (2008), arguing that the epic struggle of good versus evil necessitates the choice between being “safe or brave” (111). Haugen’s muscular vision of social justice activism explicitly identifies human trafficking as an issue that can redirect lives accustomed to suburban safety toward action and adventure: “We fret over what might happen to our stuff, our reputation, our standing. . . . All the things we value were never meant to be *safeguarded*. They were meant to be *put at risk and spent*” (107).

Although IJM’s operations have attracted some controversy, the undercover and mass-media-oriented model of activism that IJM propounds has become the emulated standard for evangelical Christian and secular feminist organizations alike.<sup>22</sup> The liberal feminist organization Equality Now, for example, has recently enlisted male volunteers to go undercover to find traffickers and to work with local law enforcement to bring them to trial (Aita 2007). Notably, IJM’s tactics have been hailed both by the Bush Administration and, more recently, by secular humanitarians in the Obama Administration such as Samantha Power. As Power notes in her recent interview with Haugen for the liberal-leaning *New Yorker* magazine, “Haugen believes that the biggest problem on earth is not too little democracy, or too much poverty . . . but, rather, an absence of proper law enforcement” (Power 2009, 52). Through IJM’s rescue missions, men are coaxed into participating in women’s and other humanitarian issues by being granted the role of heroic crime fighters and saviors. Unlike in other Christian men’s groups, however, here it is not headship in the domestic enclave of the nuclear family that draws men in but rather the assumption of a leadership role in and against a problem that is global in scope and that requires transnational actors to combat.<sup>23</sup>

But more than a newly transnationalized middle-class masculinity is at stake here, particularly since the majority of the organization’s grassroots activists—as in antitrafficking campaigns in general—are middle-class young women. In contrast to a previous generation of evangelical Christian activist groups that avowedly embraced sexual and gender traditionalism for Western women, IJM’s members make frequent reference to the backward traditionalism of third-world cultures as one of the primary

<sup>22</sup> Controversies arose in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where “rescued” women used bed-sheets to escape through the windows and climb to the ground in order to run back to the brothels from which they had been “liberated,” and also in India, where a local sex workers’ organization threw rocks at IJM staff members (see Soderlund 2005; Power 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Haugen’s perspective is also in line with that of male secular liberals such as Nicholas Kristof (2004) and Siddharth Kara (2009) who have recently fashioned themselves as the rescuers and saviors of trafficked women.

causes of sex trafficking, a framework that helps them to define and reinforce their own perceived freedom and autonomy as Western women. In this regard, they follow what Inderpal Grewal (2005, 142) has identified as the contemporary feminist model of human rights activism, produced by subjects who imagine themselves more ethical and free than their “sisters” in the developing world.

The embrace of the third-world trafficking victim as a modern cause thus offers these young evangelical women a means to engage directly in a sex-saturated culture without becoming “contaminated” by it; it provides an opportunity to commune with third-world “bad girls” while remaining first-world “good girls.” Whether by directly entering the third-world brothel or by viewing highly sexualized media portrayals, the issue of trafficking permits a sexualized frame to exist without threatening these women’s own moral status or social position. One twenty-three-year-old evangelical antitrafficking activist whom I encountered at the *Call and Response* screening bluntly reflected upon the Christian concern with trafficking in terms of the issue’s “sexiness,” noting that “*Nightline* does specials on it . . . it would be hard to do a *Nightline* special on abortion.”<sup>24</sup>

Evangelical antitrafficking efforts thus extend activist trends that have also become increasingly prevalent elsewhere, embodying a form of political engagement that is consumer- and media-friendly and saturated in the tropes and imagery of the sexual culture it overtly opposes—a feminine, consumptive counterpart to the masculine politics of militaristic rescue. A recent photograph from a special issue of the magazine *Christianity Today* on sex trafficking titled “The Business of Rescue” makes this dynamic quite clear. The image depicts a smiling young activist from a Christian human rights group who is ministering to a sex worker in a Thai brothel (see fig. 1). Although the magazine’s evangelical readership would be likely to interpret the woman’s happy affect as evidence of Christ’s love (see Wilkins 2008), young missionaries’ brothel visits are also situated within the contemporary practices of consumer-humanitarianism, in which touristic adventures in exotic settings serve to reinforce Westerners’ sense of freedom and good times.<sup>25</sup>

Although consumer-friendly politics have become a stock feature of

<sup>24</sup> Field notes, January 7, 2009, on file with the author.

<sup>25</sup> Practices of humanitarian tourism reach their pinnacle in the social justice “reality tours” that both evangelical and secular groups now sponsor, including a sex trafficking tour of Cambodian red-light districts that is jointly sponsored by the evangelical Not for Sale Campaign and the secular-progressive organization Global Exchange (see <http://www.globalexchange.org/tours/974.html.pf>).



**Figure 1** Photograph of an evangelical “red light rescue” that originally appeared in *Christianity Today*. The original subtitle reads “She’s Got a Friend: Rachel Theisen, right, a volunteer with Just Food, Inc., with Apple, a prostitute and manager of a bar in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The bar girls look forward to the twice-weekly visits to speak to women who care about them.” © 2007, Jimi Allen Productions. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

many forms of contemporary social justice activism, they occupy an especially prominent place in evangelical antitrafficking campaigns in which new abolitionists are frequently summoned to make purchases that will contribute to faith-based organizations (as in the ironically titled Not for Sale Freedom Store; see <http://www.notforsalecampaign.org>) or by purchasing items that women who have purportedly been freed from sexual slavery have crafted. For contemporary evangelicals, the purchase of consumer goods in the name of fighting trafficking serves a dual purpose in solidifying the distinction between freedom and slavery: on the one hand, “freedom” resides in Western consumers’ ability to purchase the trinkets and baubles that “trafficking victims” produce; on the other hand, it pertains to the practice that new evangelicals call “business as mission,” in which former “slaves” are brought into “free” labor by producing commodities for Western consumers. Ultimately, business as mission can be seen as a global-capitalist refashioning of the nineteenth-century evangelical practice of “rescuing” women from prostitution by bringing them into domestic labor or teaching them to sew (see Agustín 2007).

The smiling photograph from *Christianity Today* and the idea of business as mission forge a dramatic contrast with the work of sociologist

Elena Shih (2009), who has done ethnographic research with several different evangelical Christian rescue projects in Thailand and China. She has found that nearly all the “victims” who are employed as jewelry makers by the rescue projects are adult women who had previously chosen sex work as their highest paying option, but who, after accumulating some savings, elect to engage in evangelical Christian “prayer work” and jewelry-making instead.<sup>26</sup> After signing on to the jewelry-making projects, they soon discover that their lives will henceforth be micromanaged by their missionary employers, that they will no longer be free to visit family and friends in the red-light districts, and that their pay will be docked for missing daily prayer sessions, for being minutes late to work, or for minor behavioral infractions. Many come to question whether their current lives really offer them more freedom than they had before.

#### **Conclusion: Carceral politics as gender justice?**

The human rights model in its global manifestation is a pseudo-criminalized system of surveillance and sanctions. At its most extreme . . . human rights policy can be used to justify military intervention. . . . Thus, it becomes imperative to ask in both a local and global context—how do policies designed to “protect” women serve to reproduce violence? (Kristin Bumiller 2008, 136)

Save us from our saviors. We’re tired of being saved. (Slogan of VAMP, a sex workers’ collective in India)<sup>27</sup>

Although sexual intersections are crucial to cementing the coalition between feminists and Christians that has given rise to the antitrafficking movement, I have sought to show in this article that they are not the only points of contact that are vital to understanding how this coalition of “strange bedfellows” was enabled: these intersections must also be situated in terms of a series of broader political and cultural realignments that have occurred during a period in which the consumer and the carceral are increasingly seen as the preeminent vehicles for social justice. These shared political commitments serve not only to link contemporary feminists and evangelicals to each other but also to join both constituencies to a broad spectrum of secular and religious conservatives.

<sup>26</sup> As Shih (2009) notes, many of the women who participate in the “rehabilitation” projects are non-Christians who regard their daily prayer sessions as part of their new jobs.

<sup>27</sup> Seshu and Bandhopadhyay (2009, 14).

There is a large body of critical feminist literature documenting the ways in which Western feminist forays into the international human rights terrain are inseparable from neocolonial state interests.<sup>28</sup> But this analysis points to the ways in which neocolonial humanitarian interventions have also been used as a staging ground for the resolution of internecine conflicts within both Western feminism and evangelical Christian circles. As this article has shown, two different shifts in feminist and conservative Christian sexual politics have made the contemporary campaign against sex trafficking possible: the feminist shift from a focus on bad men inside the home to bad men outside the home, and the shift of a new generation of evangelical Christians from a focus on sexually improper women (as prior concerns with abortion suggest) to a focus on sexually dangerous men. What has also been revealed here is the way both groups are turning away from direct engagement with the gender politics of the family and toward a focus on gender and sexual violence in the public sphere. It has been through these shifts that both groups have come to foster an alliance with neoliberal consumer politics and a militarized state apparatus that utilizes claims of a particular white, middle-class model of Western gender and sexual superiority in achieving its goals.

Although the cultural and political dynamics that I have described here reached their fruition during the years of the George W. Bush Administration and the ascendance of the religious right, a more progressive Obama era does not necessarily portend a dramatic change of course. While some secular liberals have celebrated the fact that U.S. antitrafficking policy will no longer be used as a proxy for religious-right and “radical” feminist concerns about sex (see, e.g., Skinner 2009), as I have sought to demonstrate through my discussion, “liberals” and “conservatives” have tended to agree on the underlying carceral politics that have defined the issue of trafficking from the outset (with debates revolving around the narrow question of whether severe criminal penalties should extend beyond sex trafficking to other forms of trafficking as well).<sup>29</sup> The hesitancy that a number of sex workers’ rights advocates initially voiced when the UN Protocol against Trafficking in Persons was first negotiated as a crime control protocol (see, e.g., Global Rights 2002) has all but vanished from the realm of acceptable political discourse. Meanwhile, the neoliberal car-

<sup>28</sup> Prominent examples include Mohanty (2003), Grewal (2005), and Sharma (2005).

<sup>29</sup> The appointment of former federal prosecutor Lou de Baca (who has promised to direct his prosecutorial eye toward labor trafficking as well as sex trafficking cases) as U.S. Ambassador to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons was thus much heralded by the liberal wing of the antitrafficking movement.

ceral strategies that this article has described are also becoming common in countries where the religious right holds little influence but where the welfare state is under siege (see, e.g., Sudbury 2005; Ticktin 2008).

What may, however, be most significant to the contemporary political landscape around the issue of human trafficking are the possible transformations to neoliberalism itself during an era of economic crisis and the ensuing financial strains that are likely to be placed upon the carceral state (see, e.g., Peters 2009; Steinhauer 2009). Can feminist and new-evangelical carceral politics persist amid rising calls, including from elements of the right (Jacobsen 2005; Liptak 2009), for the downsizing of prisons? One possibility is that as attention continues to shift to so-called domestic forms of trafficking, calls for incarceration may eventually give way to more cost-effective demands for reeducation programs for some offenders and compulsory services for trafficking victims (as feminist and evangelical “treatment” programs for former prostitutes demonstrate). In terms of the international field, it is possible that contemporary antitrafficking campaigns may eventually give way to a focus on other consensus-building humanitarian issues involving violence against women, as we have already seen with rising feminist and evangelical attention to issues such as fistula, and rape in Congo and Sudan (Grady 2009; Herbert 2009; Hopewell 2009). But whether or not the trafficking issue remains a unifying focus for contemporary feminist and evangelical social activism, the general political trend toward the reliance on humanitarian NGOs and the causes that they expose seems clear. In the neoliberal context of a devolving state apparatus, practices of governance increasingly rely on a coalition of state and nonstate actors rather than on the state itself. The symbolic and material allegiances that these groups have with the state (via both carceral politics and funding) ensures that only those humanitarian issues that advance a larger set of geopolitical interests (be it border control, waging war, or policing the domestic underclass) are likely to gain traction in the broader public sphere.

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