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# Overcoming Ideology: Examining the Tension between Sex Work and Anti-Human Trafficking Advocacy

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OVERCOMING IDEOLOGY: EXAMINING THE TENSION BETWEEN SEX WORK AND  
ANTI-HUMAN TRAFFICKING ADVOCACY

by  
Emily R. Williams

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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ANTI-HUMAN TRAFFICKING ADVOCACY

Emily R. Williams, M.A.

Western Michigan University 2017

Human trafficking has become a national conversation and concern. Grassroots organizations designed to combat human trafficking spring up rapidly and help shape public perception on what trafficking is – and what it isn't. Drawing on participant observation and in-depth interviewing, I speak with anti-trafficking advocates determined to eradicate human trafficking and sex workers who prefer to stay in their profession. This thesis will largely explore the unintended consequences of well-meaning advocacy, and the tension between their views on the sex industry and the views from within the sex industry. I aim to use this work not only as a local case study through which to view notions of victimization, advocacy and agency, but also to contribute to a growing body of knowledge that incorporates the voices of sex workers and highlights their experiences as valuable contributions to policy and discourse.

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It is difficult to overstate how indebted I am to my informants for all the time they spent with me, offering up their wisdom and insights. I hope this does you justice. To my family – thanks for putting up with this graduate school endeavor, even if you didn't totally understand why I was doing it. And finally, to Jeff - I still think I'm getting the better end of this deal.

Emily R. Williams

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Once, when I was working at an Emergency Shelter in Alamosa, CO, a family with two young boys arrived in the middle of the night and needed a place to stay. They lost their home in a nearby town and Alamosa had the closest temporary shelter. I watched the mother and father trade roles every other day – one would scour the ads and local businesses looking for jobs. The other would take the kids out on a walk, to the park or for a drive so they did not have to be in the shelter during the day. They were always on time for meals, always kept their room tidy and the children were polite and well mannered – not an easy feat for two boys under the age of 5.

A week had passed and the mother shared with me that she was beginning to feel desperate. They were running out of money and running out of time before they hit absolute rock bottom. We brainstormed new ideas and connected them to welfare benefits. Although they were paltry, it enabled them to have some money in their account.

Some days after our conversation, Child Protective Service (CPS) showed up to our shelter asking to speak with the family. The mother over heard and opened the door to her room. CPS pushed past their door and proceeded to take her children. The kids screamed and screamed, and the parents had no idea why anyone would take their kids away. It was a desperate and confusing situation, with staff and the family scrambling for answers and pleading for explanations instead of just removing the children. Watching this chaotic, impossible scene unfold still haunts me to this day.

After speaking with the CPS staff, they told me that they found the parents panhandling on the streets. A concerned citizen called them because they were holding up a sign asking for



money with two kids in tow. CPS decided immediately to remove the kids pending an investigation. Not helping matters was the fact that they lived at the shelter and had no real source of income. All of these factors painted a portrait of their lives, and in this instance, the portrait was not helping them plead their case.

As a shelter staff person who watched this family work desperately to crawl out of poverty, the answer seemed obvious to me. The family was clearly struggling, and just needed support. Panhandling might not have been the best choice, but when people are desperate, a hierarchy of options does not exist. There is only waiting and acting. Doing something, anything, to restore stability is better than doing nothing. To someone on the outside, that can look a lot like bad parenting at best, child abuse at worst. The criminal justice and family courts system, priding themselves on objectivity, tallied up the sums of the family's transgressions and left the burden of proof on the family to demonstrate they were not harming their children.

The case was ugly and prolonged. It was particularly traumatizing for the children, since their parents had worked diligently to maintain some semblance of normalcy for them while living at the shelter. CPS would not let the kids return until the parents found stable housing, but mercifully, one caseworker took pity on their situation and granted visiting rights. In a tiny Colorado mountain town with harsh weather, long winters and lack of economic opportunity, finding work was nearly an impossible task. After all, they came to Alamosa because this was the only temporary housing available. In the end, they were "lucky" – they found jobs and transitioned to apartments subsidized by our shelter organization, and their children were able to live with them.

Even though their story ended with reunion, the ugly journey it took to get there reveals what happens when stigma and well-meaning intervention collide (Link and Phelan 2001). Marginalized populations understand this collision in a deeply personal way. To live in the margins is to live with a constant barrage of systemic barriers that prevent social and economic upward mobility (Haan, Kaplan & Camacho 2017). These individuals are then blamed when they fail to achieve economic stability or social acceptance (Farmer & Saussy 2010). In the preceding example, panhandling parents are generally regarded as neglectful and therefore, taking their children is justified in effort to protect the children. Social service agents mean well by prioritizing the well-being of the child. Yet, instead of recognizing that these parents were trying to claw their way out of abject poverty, the social service system punished them for not taking better care of their children.

While this example is only one of many, the literature confirms these anecdotes. Experts generally agree (Brondolo, Gallo & Myers 2009; Shavers et al. 2014) that stigma, particularly that which is associated with poverty and race, has particularly deleterious effects on health and well-being. According to Penner et al. (2013) heavily stigmatized populations are less likely to engage in timely prevention strategies, adhere to medication regimes, more likely to engage in risky behavior and more likely to be diagnosed with lethal forms of complex diseases.

As someone who has worked for many years in social services and social science research, reading such studies causes me to circle back to the same thought – managing stigma and life on the fringes of society is a full time job. Yet, even though we know this to be the case, the bigger issue at hand is what to do about it. Thinking through action with respect to social problems is the starting point for most social service organizations. It is also the starting point for this thesis.

The case of the family that came through our shelter highlighted the fallout that sometimes happens when state or social service actors decide to intervene and do something about a problem, hoping that it will help. In this case, it is not that the act of intervening was wrong or unnecessary – this family needed all the support available to them. It's that the particular intervention implemented was completely wrong and ended up making it more difficult for this family to transition back to stability. In other words, the intentions were in the right place but the outcome was the wrong result.

The issue of unintended consequences of interventions is an important dimension of anthropological inquiry (Agustin 2007, Krusi et al. 2016, Showden & Majic 2014). Examining the ways in which policies, programs and interventions affect the people that they are designed to help can illuminate areas of inquiry to test internal assumptions about marginalized people. Additionally, consistent reflection on whether or not advocacy strategies and policies are improving the lives of people in the way they are designed to do can inform new engagement approaches when interacting with the community. Gleaning this type of input can help advocates understand the complicated and unique struggles that people face, which in turn can help advocates maximize their impact.

To that end, this thesis will explore a similar tension that emerges when anti-trafficking advocates reproduce problematic stigmas and tropes about those in the sex industry, and how sex workers react to awareness raising campaigns promoted by advocates. My research explored, in a small case study, the tension between a grassroots trafficking prevention organization – the Kalamazoo Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition (KAHTC) – and individuals in the sex industry. I did not have a research question from the outset as I initially set out to simply observe a grassroots anti-trafficking organization and learn more about trafficking in West Michigan.

Through this, I became curious as to how dominant discourses of the sex industry came to be, and how that affected the perspectives of people working in the sex industry. Thus, my thesis focuses on the advocacy strategies deployed by the KAHTC and what actors in the sex industry thought about their work.

While the KAHTC was focused solely on trafficking victims, my informants felt that many approaches implemented by the KAHTC (and other national networks) reproduced problematic stereotypes and stigmas about sex workers that made it harder to access services they need and maintain safety networks. That this had an effect on sex workers in a different part of the industry should give policy makers pause, as this effect could potentially be carried over into instances of trafficking. Although the KAHTC was earnest and well-meaning in their efforts, my informants from the sex industry will discuss why it is problematic to marginalize their voices from anti-sex trafficking policies.

## **METHODOLOGY**

I undertook the required Ethnographic Methods course in the spring semester of 2014. It was through this course that I began my internship with the Kalamazoo Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition (KAHTC). My internship mainly comprised of administrative duties such as help preparing PowerPoint presentations, keeping meeting minutes, helping to organize outreach events and generally assisting the director with whatever was necessary. I began my fieldwork in January and ended in July, working on average 6 hours a week. The internship ended because the organization was on hiatus. Since the organization was comprised solely of volunteers, the summer months were hectic and busy for everyone involved, so meetings did not occur.

I chose to conduct participant observation in the field in effort to glean insight into the inner workings of a grassroots anti-trafficking organization. Specifically, I was curious about trafficking in Kalamazoo, how the organization makes the community aware of trafficking and ongoing efforts to combat it. Participant observation demands that the researcher immerse themselves in the habits and practices of their informants (Van Maanen 2011). It is a useful method to see informants in their context, watch how they operate and glean indigenous meanings. This was my goal for my internship with the KAHTC.

As the internship progressed, I decided to supplement my field work with some semi structured, in depth interviews because I wanted to get a sense of member's beliefs and attitudes towards the sex industry. The major themes of these interviews touched on how they got interested in volunteering with KAHTC, what they think about the sex industry, what constitutes sex trafficking and how they feel about the KAHTC awareness events (did they agree or disagree with the content and why or why not). Since the organization just held weekly meetings and did not have an office, I did not interact regularly with other members outside the director and

associate director. Because of this, I wanted to learn more about the attitudes and beliefs of various members within the organization, so I spoke with six other members who regularly attended meetings and regularly volunteered to help the KAHTC secure 501(3)(c) status and other tasks related to outreach. These volunteers will be detailed in the “meet the informants” section of this thesis. I was not necessarily looking to hit saturation, only to see how individuals came to learn of the organization and their beliefs about the sex industry and sex trafficking. Since people could attend weekly meetings as they pleased, I defined a member as an individual who attended two or more meetings during my tenure.

In the middle of my internship, I realized that I had not yet spoken with anyone in the sex industry. Therefore, I wanted to talk with sex workers about their perspectives on the sex industry and sex trafficking. I spoke with several, but due to lack of interest or time on the part of sex workers with whom I spoke, I formally interviewed three sex workers. I used a more open ended, conversational style with sex workers, as the goal was to learn as much as possible from them. Since speaking with them was exploratory for me, I let the conversation meander from topic to topic, asking for clarifications and further explanations when necessary.

The sample of sex workers is limited due to the difficulty of reaching a clandestine population. Since I was a master’s student, I could not offer compensation. Additionally, the HSIRB only allowed me to sample through a sex worker with whom I already had connections. This limited my ability to enroll more subjects. While a sample size of three is small, their voices make an important contribution to this thesis. The limitations of a small sample prevent generalizability, but that was never the point of this thesis. More important than the size of the sample is the scope. I did not speak with any trafficking victims, or any street level sex workers. I only spoke with escorts, who have a certain privilege within the industry that affords them

access to background checks, electronic forms of payment and even an online network through which to check clients. I want to make clear that there are other types of sex workers who have had different experiences, and their voices are not represented in my interviews.

Interviewing sex workers who may have access to more capital does not necessarily speak to the perspectives of trafficking victims, but it does speak to how advocacy and policy efforts to prevent trafficking are operationalized within the sex industry, and how that affects their safety and well-being. While they do not provide first-hand accounts of trafficking, they are a proxy for how the effects of anti-trafficking policy are received and implemented within the sex industry.

I obtained a waiver of signed consent for sex workers, as it would have posed undue risk to sex workers to have them sign their names. Volunteers in the KAHTC were asked to sign a consent form. Everyone was administered a consent form and given a copy to keep.

Everyone in this thesis has a pseudonym to protect his or her identity. As part of their consent, I would not reveal their identity. I have also changed small details about their mannerisms and personas so as not to make identification obvious. Additionally, all linkages between identity and pseudonym have been destroyed.

Some interviews were audio recorded and some were not. I did not audio record interviews with sex workers because I did not want to risk accidental identification should my computer or audio recorded be stolen. I did audio record some interviews with the KAHTC. Those tapes have been destroyed per IRB protocol, as it has been three years since the original research took place. I took extensive notes throughout the interview, asking my subjects to pause

so I could write down what they said and confirmed they said it verbatim. After the interview, I organized my notes, wrote more about my impressions and re-wrote the quotes.



## **CAST OF MAIN INFORMANTS**

### **Penelope**

Penelope is the director and founder of the Kalamazoo Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition. She founded the KAHTC after she heard a presentation on human trafficking through her volunteer work and was moved to begin the fight against trafficking.

### **Tonya**

The co-founder of the KAHTC. She describes herself as a feminist activist, and she agreed to take on this task because she wants a better world for her girls.

### **Cynthia**

She is the director of the Michigan Coalition to end Trafficking. I interviewed her as she was tangentially involved with the KAHTC and served as an advisor to the organization.

### **Richard**

Richard is the director of a large anti-trafficking organization in Grand Rapids, MI. His organization has worked with young victims of trafficking and served as a shelter and safe place for young girls trying to escape the sex industry.

### **Celeste**

Celeste was a member of the KAHTC who often brought her daughter with her. She is a local librarian and interested in human trafficking after she went to a presentation hosted by the KAHTC.

### **Sheriff Fuller**

Sheriff Fuller retired from the Kalamazoo Police Department in 2011 and has an interest in human trafficking from a criminal justice perspective. He joined because he learned about trafficking on the police force and was interested in contributing his time and knowledge to the anti-trafficking movement.

### **Sari**

My primary sex worker informant, Sari and I became friends over the course of my research. I owe a great deal to her, and her willingness to meet with me and talk about the sex industry and her experiences therein.

### **Sonya**

I interviewed Sonya as part of my class, and she offered a wealth of experience and knowledge. A former librarian turned call girl, she had strong and informed opinions about the anti-trafficking industry (she refers to it as the “rescue industry” – a term coined by renowned migration and sex work scholar Laura Agustin).

### **Tera**

I interviewed Tera as a contact through one of my informants. She has a professional day job and is an escort in her free time to help pay off her school debt.

## **ANTI-TRAFFICKING ADVOCACY AND SEX WORK ADVOCACY**

The case of human trafficking, and particularly sex trafficking, is a complicated, multifaceted one. Mobile populations are notoriously difficult to study due to the clandestine nature of their existence, but with increasing calls for immigrant reform and the rise of nationalist sentiments, it becomes even harder to earn their trust. When it comes to anti-trafficking advocacy, the strategies that organizations adopt are often predicated on their ideological orientation toward the sex industry. Those who see it as an inherently victimizing and violent place will structure their discourse around painting a picture of the sex industry that is degrading and will advocate for policies that will curtail its reach. On the other hand, advocates that see the sex industry as a problematic but not necessarily any more of less exploitative than other types of labor will advocate for an approach that does not involve further criminalization but works to provide more services and opportunities for sex workers to organize and be more visible without fear of reprisal.

For instance, the advocacy promoted by the Polaris Project and Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), two of the largest anti-trafficking organizations in the world, seek to punish those that purchase sex and those that sell others. Additionally, they advocate for sweeping technological regulations that require companies to intervene when they suspect trafficking could be happening on their websites and require certain websites to shut down (SESTA 2017).

Conversely, the advocacy promoted by Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP), an advocacy organization run entirely by sex workers, argues that the sex industry is a legitimate form of labor that many individuals use to support their livelihood. They generally eschew acts

and policies that prohibit the use of technology because, as one informant tells me, that is primarily how they make their money and conduct background checks. Additionally, SWOP advocates for the right to organize as sex workers and decriminalization of the sex industry.

Although the two organizations have similar goals – which is ostensibly to prevent human trafficking and make the sex industry safer for those in it and those who would like to exit – they have completely different methods by which to achieve this goal. Because of this, a tension results between actors in the sex industry and those trying to create policy, as they are often not the same people.

However, before I get ahead of myself, it is useful to trace the historical roots of trafficking through to its current permutation as “modern day slavery.”

## **HISTORY**

The commercial sex industry is a term described by the World Health Organization as “the exchange of money or good for sexual services. It always involves a sex worker and a client and it frequently involves a third party” (WHO 2017). Sex workers are “women, men and transgendered people who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, and who consciously define those activities as income generating even if they do not consider sex work as their occupation.” Finally, clients are “people (usually men) who pay with cash or other resources for sexual services either explicitly or within an agreed package that includes other services such as entertainment or domestic services.” (WHO 2017).

The contemporary legal definition of human trafficking, according to the U.N., occurs when an individual enters in to the sex industry under conditions of “force, fraud or coercion.” Human trafficking is separated into two categories – labor trafficking and sex trafficking. Labor

trafficking applies to markets recognized as legitimate but somewhat clandestine. Legitimate in this instance refers to socially acceptable types of labor – those that perhaps people may not want to do themselves, but do not view as inherently criminal. Legally, sex trafficking is separated as a different form of trafficking unto its own, as the exchange of sexual services for money is heavily penalized in most countries (as cited in Polaris Project 2013).

Although the term “trafficking” has splashed itself all over the media headlines in the past couple of decades, the concern of traffic in women has been on the domestic and international agenda since the Progressive Era. In 1904, leading representatives from Europe met in Paris to sign the International Agreement for the Suppression of the “White Slave Traffic”, thereby investigating the international trade in women and deport all “white slaves” to their countries of origin (as cited in McCoy 2010, p. 2). Moreover, in 1907, the US made it illegal to transplant women into the U.S. for the purposes of prostitution or any other “immoral act” (McCoy 2010, p. 3).

In 1910, Congress passed the Mann “White Slave Traffic” Act and declared that “any person who shall knowingly transport or cause to be transported ... in interstate or foreign commerce ... any woman or girl for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any of immoral purpose ... shall be deemed guilty of a felony.” Although technically both men and women could be persecuted under the Mann Act, it was clear that only women and children could be made victims (Doezema 2000, McCoy 2010). That victimization was codified in to law, and carried with it such specificity, laid the groundwork for a social notion of “victim.” A victim in this instance is a woman or child. That very definition excludes men, transgender individuals and other sexual minorities. Additionally, the Mann Act opened up avenues to prosecute racial minorities engaging in relationships with white women.

The notion of women, particularly white women, as sexual victims emerged from this period of Victorian ethics and is maintained through contemporary history. The “Sex Wars” of the 1970’s and 1980’s were divided over the nature of violence against women. Second wave feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon posited that pornography and prostitution were inherently violent acts against women (Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988; MacKinnon 2011). MacKinnon and Dworkin’s now infamous paper details the ways in which laws reproduce and maintain white male interests and power. Historically, women have been chattel property until the 1960’s. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 limited inequality *de jure* but had little power to change *de facto* segregation and oppression women experience under a patriarchal society.

More specifically, the authors make their case by drawing attention to abortion rights. Abortion rights were not protected under civil or human rights statutes, but are protected under privacy laws. The same laws that protect abortion also protect ownership of pornography. Yet, the authors cite a number of studies that demonstrate association between increased incidents of rape and violence with increased access to pornography. Additionally, women, they argue, are unequal in relation to men and therefore, their participation in pornography cannot be consensual.

The counter argument, most notably proffered by Gayle Rubin, was that normative assertions of sexuality divided “sex” into two “good” and “bad” categories, and consequently, vastly oversimplified diverse sexual practices (Rubin 1975). The sex wars, according to Rubin, did not go far enough in incorporating diverse sexual practices into their movement. The sexual revolution did not offer a sufficient framework for articulating a revolution that liberated individuals across the gender spectrum. Rubin’s work highlights a long-standing struggle often

voiced by minority groups (Nelson 2003). Particularly when it comes to sex and sexual minorities, social justice movements have long grappled with how to maintain inclusivity while making the necessary compromises in effort to progress the movement forward.

Although these were not the only two debates on advancing women's rights, they represent the different degrees of inclusivity among movements ostensibly designed to create a more equitable political, economic and social landscape. The contemporary conceptualization of trafficking, and more specifically, sex trafficking can be viewed as a historical product of these overlapping debates (Doezema 2001; Grant 2014). The long history of critiques from marginalized populations against popular social movements sets the stage for the critique against some players in the anti-trafficking movement.

## **THE CURRENT SCOPE OF TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS – AND THE PROBLEMS THEREIN**

According to the International Labour Organization, there are roughly 20.9 million victims of human trafficking. Sixty eight percent of them are trapped in forced labor (including sex trafficking), 26% are children and 55% are women and girls. The US Department of Labor further estimates that 139 different types of goods from 75 countries were made from forced child labor. Furthermore, the Polaris Project hotline has received roughly 32,000 reported cases of trafficking (wherein an individual calls a hotline to report suspected trafficking cases) over the past eight years. The Hotline has received a higher volume of calls in recent years (Polaris Project 2017).

The numbers are clearly astronomical and shocking. They also do not quite add up. A report by the Washington Post in 2015 details the issues with tracking clandestine populations. Definitional issues have plagued the crime of trafficking for a long time. Since the terms force,

fraud and coercion are vague and overlap with similar crimes, individuals who are trafficking victims may be charged with prostitution, or may not be recognized as victims at all, and therefore not recorded anywhere. Conversely, those guilty of trafficking may be prosecuted as a crime related to trafficking but not with an actual trafficking charge since that typically requires a victim to testify. Victims are often reluctant to testify, given that they do not want to face their accuser, be deported or be charged with a crime related to their status as a mobile person or sex worker (Kessler 2015).

The trouble with estimating the number of trafficking victims comes from unreliable data and a vague definition of what trafficking is – and what it is not. Since its inception, trafficking has morphed into an umbrella term for any type of forced labor, even if there is no movement between borders involved. Measuring the scope of this problem suffers from structural problems in how to prosecute trafficking and how to define it. These problems spill over into the ideological split between different advocacy strategies.

## **COMPETING DISCOURSES ON SEX WORK AND SEX TRAFFICKING**

Ronald Weitzer's (2011) article outlines the two main schools of thought when considering the sex industry. The first paradigm, an *abolitionist* paradigm, views sex work through a distinctly victimizing lens (the second, the *polymorphic* paradigm, will be outlined below). That is to say, the very nature of sex work and selling sex is an extension of cultural misogyny and sexism, therefore reinforcing and reproducing existing objectification and oppression of women. I would like to point out, as does Weitzer, that there are varying degrees of subscription to this paradigm and some feminists have been overshadowed by the more extreme forms of abolitionism. For example, CATW (Coalition Against Trafficking in Women)



advocates for legislative action that resembles the Nordic model (accessed 9-8-2017). This model criminalizes the purchase of sex but does not criminalize the sex worker:

### *Redefining Prostitution Law*

CATW advocates for legislation on local, national, and international levels to prevent women and children from becoming victims of human trafficking. CATW supports the Nordic Model, the world's first law to recognize prostitution as violence against women and a violation of human rights. It criminalizes the purchase of commercial sex and offers women and children an exit strategy [from sex work]. The Nordic Model originated in Sweden (1999) and has been passed in the Republic of Korea (South Korea, 2004), Norway (2009) and Iceland (2009).

As the observer may note, the CATW specifically refers to prostitution as “violence against women” and a “violation of human rights.” Ergo, if the commercial sex industry itself is a form of violence against women, advocacy to stop this violence entails the ultimate aim of abolishing the sex work entirely. By abolishing the sex industry, the purported aim is to offer an exit strategy to women and children specifically from sex work.

Conversely, Weitzer (2011) describes another lens through which to view the sex industry. This framework, known as the *polymorphic* framework, takes a critical approach to the sex industry. Instead of operating under the assumption that sex work is a form of violence against women, the polymorphic framework interrogates the conditions under which individuals enter the sex industry and the unpredictable and changing circumstances that accompany work in this sector. Examining the sex industry in this light situates the sex industry within the historical, political, economic and social contexts that empowers some actors, disempowers others and renders generalizability completely impossible (Agustin 2006). In other words, the polymorphic framework demands that observers move away from generalizations and examine the particulars of the sex industry. An example of the polymorphic paradigm will be discussed during later sections when I interview sex workers.

These two competing paradigms frame the ways in which different advocates approach awareness campaigns. They also form the lens through which actors within the commercial sex industry see themselves. While there are nuance present within these approaches, and certainly there is overlap between intersectionality theories and the polymorphic framework, the tension between these two paradigms is largely representative of the tension I witnessed during my fieldwork. The next section will discuss the particulars of anti-trafficking advocacy and legal strategies to combat human trafficking.

## **CONTEMPORARY LEGAL STRATEGIES**

The aforementioned “Nordic model” is one of the more popular strategies by major players in the anti-trafficking industry. Criminalizing those who purchase sex is a more palatable option to those uncomfortable with the sex industry in general. It also relocates sex workers from criminal to crime victim.

In the United States, “Safe Harbor Laws” mirror the Nordic model, but are applied to instances of trafficking. The laws include heavier fines and punishment for solicitors of sex, and opens up avenues for victims of trafficking to seek restitution from their perpetrators. Additionally, Safe Harbor Laws decriminalize the sex industry for individuals less than 18 years of age (as cited in Polaris Project 2013). The logic behind this set of laws is predicated on consent. Since individuals 18 years or younger cannot legally consent to sexual intercourse outside of marriage, all instances of sex outside marriage is a crime enacted upon them.

It is worthwhile to note that while the notion of consent is the conceptual framework to determine the legality of individuals entering into sexual transaction, consent itself is troubled by power relationships and the assumption that people have free will and choice. While the debates

on moral responsibility and free choice available are beyond the scope of this thesis, the main thrust of consent relies on the notion of free will, which arguably does not exist when actors are constrained by different social structures. As Nancy Scheper Hughes once quipped as she discussed individuals selling organs in the underground organ trafficking market “But is there still agency? Yes, of a limited sort. I usually rephrase Marx: people make history but they don’t make it just as they please. Or under conditions of their making. Well, people here are making choices but not just as they please.” (Bartozcko 2011) As with consent, people often make choices about their own circumstance, but it is not synonymous with free will.

The Safe Harbor Laws are part of a larger package within the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) which was initially passed in 2000 and has undergone a series of amendments and expansions. The TVPA opens up avenues under the Racketeering Influenced Corrupt Organization (RICO) statute to prosecute traffickers. It has also enhanced some definitions of trafficking to make it easier to prosecute potential traffickers. There are also provisions that prevent victims from deportation and allocate funds for the state departments to fight international sex tourism, screen all alien children under 18 for human trafficking and provide grants to local anti-trafficking agencies (Department of State 2017).

These laws were designed to open up channels to protect victims and punish traffickers, and get at the root source of trafficking. The language of these laws place heavy emphasis on child sexual exploitation, and most of the funds are used to target minors. In Congress, these bills are one of the few that enjoy bipartisan support because, as Zimmerman (2010) notes, no one is for trafficking.

The peculiar crux of these Safe Harbor laws is actually a site that illustrates how the conceptualization of the sex industry represents how the problem is presented to be, and therefore, how to structure policy that curtails the problem. Although the Safe Harbor laws make strides in relocating a sex worker from criminal to victim, they do not fully embrace the sex industry as a labor industry and therefore, sex workers do not receive the same protections under federal law. Bernstein (2012) articulates this in further detail as she examines:

The extent to which evangelical and feminist anti-trafficking 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 preeminent mode of engagement by the state" (p. 47).

Her article posits that feminist and evangelical interest groups are not necessarily interested in finding ways to make the sex industry safer, but in punishing men who purchase sex and pimps and/or madams who run sex selling businesses. In other words, this style of activism is still committed to criminalizing the sex industry, but in new and different forms, and under the guise of "ending modern day slavery."

The tension between polymorphic and abolitionist frameworks, in addition to examining the history of trafficking and the shape and tone of modern forms of advocacy, fuels my inquiry into the Kalamazoo Anti Human Trafficking Coalition and later on into the nature of sex work from the perspectives of sex workers themselves.

## **ANTI-TRAFFICKING IN KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN**

On a cold day in November 2013, I rush into the medical school office where I volunteer as a researcher. I am supposed to meet with the director of Health Equity for Kalamazoo County, but I cannot find her office for the life of me. When I finally navigate the maze that is the public

health building, I walk in to find a friendly young woman with a smile on her face. “I’m so sorry I’m late!” I exclaim, breathless.

Michelle is poised and lovely. “No worries, it’s cold out there and we can be hard to find.”

I sit down and pull out my notebook. I requested an interview with Michelle months ago to learn more about domestic violence, as I was working on a project focused on intervention efforts for victims of domestic violence. I begin the conversation by asking about how her office is involved with domestic violence cases, and if they have any awareness or educational initiatives going on. As we discuss the difficulties tracking and addressing domestic violence, Michelle pauses for a moment and says to me:

“Did you know that one of the biggest problems we are facing is teens trafficking teens.”

I pause. At this point, trafficking was on my radar but I did not know fully what trafficking was or why it had any place in a small county in Michigan. I recall seeing several stories about child sex exploitation. In fact, just a few months after I spoke with Michelle, a report from the UN emerged that deemed “Trafficking in children on the rise” (UN 2014). With all of this in the back of my mind, I ask her to elaborate further.

“Teens mistake love as violence. A lot of girls are being pimped out by their older high school boyfriends.”

At the time, I did not quite understand what she meant. Michelle went on to say that these teen girls are so desperate for love and so enamored with older boys, who may seem like father

figures, that the girls will do anything to maintain their relationship. That means allowing these boys to offer sexual favors for money on behalf of the girls.

I ask her how she knows this exists, and where she has learned of this information. Michelle said that she has had a series of conversations with local high school teachers and principals, but this is still quite new and she is not sure how to handle it. I ask her if there is any organization locally dedicated to anti-trafficking advocacy, and she mentioned she thought a task force was just beginning. I headed home and do some digging.

For days, I spent time learning about trafficking and local efforts in Kalamazoo to combat trafficking. This is how I learned about the Kalamazoo Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition (KAHTC). Since I needed a project for my Masters and specifically, I wanted my project to focus on collaborating with an organization devoted to a cause about which I felt passionate, I emailed the Director and asked if I could help as an intern. She responds quickly with an enthusiastic yes and a request to meet.

A couple of weeks later, I met in person with Penelope, the founder of the organization, and the co-founder, Tonya. The two women could not have looked more different. Penelope is a towering woman, almost 6 ft tall with bright blonde hair, impeccable makeup and perfectly coordinated designer clothes and purse. Tonya on the other hand, is short, small and quiet. Her half-shaved, dyed purple hair belies her quiet nature. Where Penelope is bursting at the seams with energy, ready to jump headfirst into action, Tonya is reserved and thoughtful. We sit for a moment as the women tell me how they got started, and what they hope to achieve.

“I want to start raising awareness that this is happening and we need to do something about it.” – Penelope

“At this point, since we’re not formally organized yet, we really just want to get the word out and educate the community.” – Tonya

After a while, the conversation turns to my internship. We discuss goals and objectives. Penelope was looking for an assistant – someone to help take meeting notes, help with planning and just general support. Since they had only formed maybe 8 months prior to our meeting, Penelope and Tonya were still firming up the logistics and overall structure of the KAHTC. At the time of our conversation, they held regular meeting times every other week. My job was to take notes at meetings and help them plan an upcoming community awareness event.

From here forward, I spent roughly six hours a week over the course of six months engaged in participant observation. I helped organize events and meetings, spoke with local community members and did general clerical duties – attended all meetings, took meeting notes, email correspondence on behalf of the organization, some research into how to secure 501c3 status.

## **INTERNSHIP BEGINNINGS**

With the turn of the New Year, January 2014, I attend my first meeting. The following excerpt from my field notes characterizes my impressions and observations:

*The meeting was held at a local church. I rush in to the meeting, a little late because I am lost. The building was easy to find, but after walking down a maze of hallways and dead ends, I finally find the stairs that lead to a basement. It’s a typical church basement with white-washed brick walls, grey industrial tables and a few photos with Biblical inspiration quotes. The tables are set up in a U shape and there are approximately 15 attendees. The majority of the attendees are female and appear to be in their forties. Some have brought their daughters. There is one*

*gentleman who looks to be approaching 60 and wearing a hat signifying that he was or is part of the Kalamazoo County Police Department. There are a couple of other gentleman in their late forties or early fifties. One by one, I am introduced to each member of the organization. Most are concerned citizens, but one is a retired sheriff, and there is a nurse, social worker and attorney present from a local farmworker advocacy.*

Each meeting began with an update on where we are to date on certain tasks – some of the clinicians are hoping to schedule a presentation at their place of work and have KAHTC facilitate a training on human trafficking. One member offers that they have been working with an organization in town and have secured a reservation at a local community center for a community outreach event. This event is the cornerstone of their organization and it is similar in style to a seminar. For this particular outreach event, KAHTC invited a high school teacher, social worker, a sister of a trafficking victim and an FBI agent to give presentations on what trafficking is and how, as citizens, to prevent it.

After discussing the details for a while longer, the conversation switches to a campaign that Penelope wants to enact immediately. This particular campaign involves distributing soap in hotel rooms with the national human trafficking hotline on the label. Theresa Flores, a well-known survivor of trafficking, initiated the SOAP (Save Our Adolescents from Prostitution) campaign. Penelope describes the logic behind the campaign “sometimes the only alone time these girls get is in the bathroom. The wrapper is something they can take with them and use if they get ahold of a phone.”

Tonya chimes in and mentions an anecdote<sup>1</sup> that was popularized and spread by anti-trafficking activists. This particular statistic claimed the incidences of sex trafficking spike



around the time of the Super Bowl. At the time, the logic behind this assumption was that athletes, particularly male athletes, have surging amounts of testosterone and as such, “purchase girls” before the game. This statistic was the impetus for Penelope’s sense of urgency with the SOAP campaign, except she is concerned about the same thing happening at the Kalamazoo Marathon, which was only a few weeks away. Penelope wanted to infiltrate the local hotels and get labeled soap into hotel rooms as quickly as possible so that trafficking victims have information and that perhaps vigilant citizens who are concerned that they witness trafficking can call the hotline to tip them off.

The SOAP project is instructive of the KAHTC’s construction of a “trafficker.” Traffickers are males in power, according to the KAHTC. That the organization is recirculating a story about male athletes engaging in paid commercial sex before a game reveals what they tell the community to look for. In all the discussion about SOAP, conspicuously absent were any concrete studies or even actual cases to substantiate their claims. As O’Brien (2016) argues, the construction of the problem is as important to examine as the problem itself. In this case, the construction of the problem is the male sex drive and ergo, only men are traffickers.

This construction plays out further in their first awareness event. During this event, the audience learns lurid details from a high school teacher of student after student succumbing to online predators. She tells the audience “there is a prevalence of porn and promiscuity among high school girls.” This, she says, contributes directly to rendering teenage girls vulnerable to hypersexualization and online predators looking to capitalize off their youth and sexuality. She continues, “high school girls glorify and idolize these [sexual] images. These girls believe that

1: There was a popular myth, which has since been subject to further scrutiny, that sex trafficking increases dramatically during sporting events. See here for more details: <https://polarisproject.org/blog/2016/02/05/super-bowl-myth>

sex gives them power. They are conditioned to feel empowered when they are at the sexual center of attention.”

The FBI agent that presents shortly after her reaffirms her assertions. This FBI agent is a specialist in domestic human trafficking and discusses the ways in which teenage girls are groomed to recruit other girls through social media sites. Additionally, she details ways for citizens to spot trafficking on a site like Craigslist. “It’s common to find ‘no black men please’ on a trafficking victim’s Craigslist ad. This is because they assume that certain ethnicities will be other pimps, and the traffickers don’t want competition.”

The SOAP project, coupled with the awareness event, illustrates how the KAHTC conceives the problem of “trafficker” to be, both implicitly and explicitly. As an intern who was relatively new to the field of trafficking, my takeaway from these presentations is that a trafficker is a male predator lurking around the corner waiting to snatch young women at any given moment and sell them on the internet. Additionally, there is an underlying racial tone coming directly from a FBI agent.

The problem here is that they may not be wrong per se. Some “traffickers” probably are men waiting in the shadows. I just have a hard time thinking that is *all* that they are. Isn’t it possible that women could be guilty of the same crime? Alternatively, is it possible that the FBI agent made mention of pimps being only male and black because there is an over-representation of males of color as perpetrators of crime? Actually, what is the sex industry like, anyway?

I realize at this point that I have no idea because I have never talked with anyone from the sex industry. Thus far, Penelope told me they have yet to meet any survivors of trafficking or

anyone who has worked inside the sex industry. It was at this point I decided to reach out to sex workers and hear what they have to say.

## **SEX WORKERS SPEAK OUT**

As it turns out, contacting sex workers is not as difficult as it may seem (although I will note that the initial contact is largely as awkward as one may expect). I contacted my primary informant, Sari, through [backpage.com](http://backpage.com), the villainized website accused of harboring traffickers. I emailed her through her website in early 2014, introducing myself as a master's student. I was frank in telling her that I currently serve as an intern with the KAHTC and I'd never interacted with anyone in the sex industry. I just wanted to learn from her.

Sari responded right away. Her email was incredibly articulate and insightful; she had clearly spent a great deal of time thinking about anti-trafficking discourses. Her primary concern was that anti-trafficking advocates misunderstand her profession. She also makes mentions of the alliance between religious groups and radical feminists that seek to abolish the sex industry (see Zimmerman 2010 and Campbell and Zimmerman 2014 for further insight). I suggested meeting for coffee if she was all right with it, and we set a date to meet.

I arrived early at our local eclectic coffee shop and attempted to find a seat out of plain sight. I wore a bright colored scarf for easy identification, but to my surprise, Sari waved me down immediately. She had already staked out a private corner in the back, as she would tell me later, so as not to be overheard.

Sari is striking. She is small, with mocha colored skin and bright, searing blue eyes. I offer to buy her a coffee and after we order, we sit down and begin talking. Our conversation

starts out as though we are friends, pouring over several different topics for hours – sex work, trafficking, dating, family life, and anything else that came up.

Sari expresses her concerns eloquently. She seems equal parts angry with anti-trafficking advocates and scared of the growing influence they seem to have over policy agendas. When the conversation turns to her feelings about advocacy efforts, she laments the lack of involvement by sex workers.

Have you heard of Norchest [sic]?

I shake my head.

Right, so Norchest [sic] is a place where trafficked victims can sell jewelry or whatever. It's supposed to provide economic opportunity to victims of trafficking ... but the whole organization is part of this anti trafficking movement. They subscribe to this abolitionist view that the sex industry is bad, and it should just be abandoned. They can't separate consenting behavior from coercion. It's a choice for some of us to enter in the field. It's a choice even if we want to do it under duress. To say that rape is synonymous with prostitution is to say that sex is synonymous with rape. Not all prostitutes are rape victims, and they aren't raped each time they have sex. Sometimes they are, sometimes they aren't and sometimes they stay in the industry even after a violent encounter because *they want to.*"

Sari's point alludes to the abolitionist paradigm often espoused by trafficking organizations, and her critiques of it echo similar critiques in the literature outlined in the previous section. Human trafficking is a complicated issue and the sex industry is no less a complicated space. As Sari asks more about my internship within the KAHTC, she inevitably asks whether anyone in the organization has spoken to sex workers. I mention that everyone I have spoken with prioritizes trafficking over labor rights within the sex industry. Sari nods solemnly, as though that is what she expected. She told me that she looked up the website and just felt outraged at what she read:

People need to realize there are many different reasons why people get in to this work. There are financial reasons, financial duress, and the time factor and time management. It is especially attractive for single mothers and grandmothers. It is easier to pursue

education and family goals working a couple of nights a week so that you can be debt free. If Penelope does not get that, in the long run, she will not last.

The spirit of her assertion illustrates an important point – if sex work becomes a source of labor and economic security for certain populations, is abolishing the sex industry an effective way to create conditions that afford those already working in commercial sex, trafficked or otherwise, an economically viable and sustainable lifestyle?

## **CLASS, POWER AND PRIVILEGE**

When people ask me about my research, most want to know if what they have seen on TV is true. They ask about the salacious details of sex work, if trafficking is really happening right under our noses, and psychologize about individuals working in the commercial sex industry. Since interviewing with Sari, these conversations tend to be less about confirming their preconceived notions of sex work and more about disabusing them of oversimplified or grossly exaggerated claims.

To be honest, the conversations tend towards that trend even as I speak with some activists in the KAHTC. Whenever I speak with Penelope informally or formally as an in-depth interview, I know she has strong feelings about the sex industry. I also know that she cares deeply about victims. When I ask Penelope directly what she thinks about the sex industry, she has this to say:

I don't know. I mean, I see a lot of it as victimizing ... There was a woman in the porn industry who said she was raped in Steubenville and that's exactly why she got into porn. I think girls learn to sell their body for sex, that's what they learn it's for. You can be trafficked and then you can traffick yourself. And who's buying it?! The men! If we stopped that, girls wouldn't need to sell themselves. We need to teach our men not to rape.

Penelope is clearly uncomfortable with the sex industry, but interestingly, she and Sari do agree on one thing – that the most visible actors in the sex industry are often the most vulnerable either to exploitation or to prosecution. The difference is how they arrive at their conclusions about who is vulnerable and who is safe. Sari describes the following:

Cops get paid overtime to patrol internet boards, but here's the dirty secret – they don't actually have to produce anything. So I think they go after low hanging fruit – after girls that are being exploited. But the problem is that cops are trained to look for criminals, not victims. So they don't have any training on how to establish trust. They also are ill equipped to go after the people exploiting these victims. Pimps make a living out of being evasive. They're smarter than you might think.

Both of them articulate a point well documented in the literature about hierarchies within sex work. According to Hoang (2011), who conducted her extensive ethnographic research in Ho Chi Minh City, clients and sex workers alike “draw on different economic, cultural, and bodily resources to enter into different sectors of HCMC's stratified sex industry” ( p 367). Moreover, sex workers in the low end sector – think street work – often do a direct exchange of money for sex whereas sex workers in the middle to high end sector – think escorts, dominatrixes, courtesans – engage in more relational and intimate exchanges. Her research is particularly apropos to the discussion of victimization and vulnerability in sex work since disenfranchised individuals make salient power relationships that directly influence social inequality (Wojcicki 1999). The discussion of hierarchy and privilege is conspicuously absent when discussing what constitutes a victim. However, they are important concepts to examine when the process of how victimization happens comes under further scrutiny.

## **WHO IS A VICTIM?**

In an article from USA TODAY entitled “*Who's a victim of human sex trafficking?*” (2013), journalists interview Michigan and Illinois based attorneys who work with trafficking

victims and run legal clinics educating advocates and other professionals about the dangers of trafficking. Specifically, Bridget Carr, who runs the University of Michigan Human Trafficking Law Clinic, spells out the difficulties of victimization within the trafficking industry:

Can people be ‘victims’ if they sell their bodies for sex – and keep some of that money or trade it for drugs? Are they victims if a pimp provides cell phones, buys them clothes, cars or even places to stay/? In some instances, some prostitutes have children with their pimps.

Do we believe that people who make bad choices are victims?

Around the same time as the article came out, I ask to interview with another person who works with trafficking victims and is a well-known activist in the Midwest. Richard graciously offers to meet with me for coffee one morning. He is an unlikely character to be an anti-sex trafficking activist. He towers over me and is heavily tattooed. When we first meet, he gives me a firm handshake but his demeanor is mild and soft spoken. As we talk, I can feel the passion he has for working with young people who have difficult lives. Unlike Penelope, he focuses more on marginalized teens. He describes the children he works with as “runaways” or “throwaways” - kids who were kicked out of their home and have suffered unimaginable trauma. As our conversation turns to the sex industry, his feelings are ambivalent:

Yeah, sex work is complicated. The [Safe Harbor] legislation really targets teens, and that is what we focus on. I don’t really think any teenager can consent to being a prostitute, not in any sense that doesn’t still make them a victim of other circumstances. But I am not sure what to think about the sex industry as a whole. Seeing what I do, I wouldn’t mind seeing the sex industry go away. But I have to remember that my perspective is colored somewhat by my own work with teens who are often runaways or throwaways.

Since Richard works regularly with teens that have been trafficked, his disdain for the sex industry is understandable. He also expresses a type of ambivalence not present when I speak to Penelope, and not present in the public awareness campaigns through the KAHTC.

Tonya shares similar reservations about the sex industry, but indicates her willingness to listen to people within it. In a conversation we have after a meeting one day, I am curious about her perspective. She is often reserved during meetings, but I know she has done some of her own outreach amongst trafficking victims who have their own blogs and websites. Tonya shares with me some of her concerns:

Oh hey! I read that blog you told me about. Born Whore.” - Tonya

“Oh yeah! What did you think?” - Author

Her eyes widen and her voice softens, “I was just floored. I hadn’t ever heard anyone speak positively about sex work before. It really opened my eyes.”

I pause. “How does that make you feel in response to working in anti-trafficking?”

“It just makes me think that this is way more complex than we know and we need to be sensitive to that.”

“How do you see yourself and the organization attending to some of the complexities?”

Well, we focus on people that are being coerced. Maybe in the future we could expand, but right now, we really want to focus on those who are victimized. I really want to raise awareness so prostitutes aren’t throwaways and no one cares about them as people.”

While Tonya and Richard intimate ambivalence and a desire to think through the more muddled aspect of the sex industry, Penelope sees it in different terms. During a weekly meeting, Penelope was discussing the SOAP project when other members of the organization voiced some concerns:

“What happens when they call this anti-trafficking hotline? Does Polaris call the police?”

“What if they arrest the victim for prostitution?”

“Where can we find information on what happens?”

Penelope brushes off our concerns and just says that we need to get these girls out of this situation. She reassures us that “these people are professionals and they know what they’re



doing. If you think something funny is happening, you should call the hotline.” To Penelope, reporting as much as possible is the best case scenario, as uncovering one trafficking case is better than to not do anything at all.

Penelope quickly changes the subject. We have talked before about her feelings towards the sex industry but most revealing about her conceptualization of a victim is her paragraph on the KAHTC website (accessed February 2014):

***Who are the victims?***

Theresa Flores, a human trafficking survivor, was the keynote speaker, and she shared her personal story with the group. There was not a dry eye in the room. The idea that this could happen to a white, middle-class, Irish-catholic girl was dumbfounding. It made the journey real. She had two loving, married parents and two brothers. She was the oldest and expected to be the perfect, “good” girl. And, she was until she met “him”. He was different. He dressed in slacks, not jeans and ball caps like the other boys. She had red flags going off in her head the whole time she was around him. But, he used three words, “I like you,” and she ignored the red flags and was trafficked for two whole years while she lived with her family in Birmingham, Michigan. Her father worked for GE and was transferred to another town—that is what finally saved her.

Penelope circulates this anecdote frequently throughout our meetings and clearly has a great deal of respect for Theresa Flores. Nevertheless, she often uses Theresa’s story, the one of a good girl snatched up by a lurking male predator, as the awareness raising strategy for why people should care about trafficking. It is easy to see why this story wins people over – the trope of the ideal victim removes all complexity and stigma associated with anyone in the sex industry. Prostitutes tend to make people skeptical, and since it is a criminal activity, those prejudices are more difficult to erase.

According to a recent interview with the director of End Slavery Now, another prominent anti-trafficking organization, this story is not representative of trafficking victims. The director contends that most often, they see what the USA TODAY article referenced – many

trafficking victims are very different from the ideal victim<sup>2</sup>. They are often teens from broken homes, similar to what Richard experiences.

These questions lead into the territory of unintended consequences. Foucault (1979) makes the distinction that often times, individuals are aware of what they do, but not aware of how what they do will set in motion a chain of events that could have unforeseeable consequences. In the next section, my sex worker informants discuss the impacts of advocacy on their daily lives.

### **SEX WORKER OR VICTIM?**

During a separate conversation with Sari, we talk about “Safe Harbor” laws. When we met up, it was about the time of year when the TVPA should be reauthorized by congress (this happens every couple of years, as the program needs Congressional funding in effort to exist). As we discuss the relative merits of the Nordic model that punishes the people who purchase sex, Sari quips:

You know what the thing is about this anti-trafficking business? It is more dangerous now to be a sex worker.

I pause. Me: Can you explain that?

Sari: Yeah. When I first started this business, I used to travel with a woman who was kind of like a mentor to me. We looked out for each other, helped keep each other safe. After a while, she told me we could not travel together anymore, and that I should not travel with anyone, because new laws in the works made it such that sex workers traveling in groups can be arrested for human trafficking. But that is an important part of our network, how we look out for each other. Now, we can't do that anymore.

The full weight of what she says takes me a minute to process. For all that activists talk about

2 – See the full interview here - <http://www.endslaverynow.org/blog/articles/the-myth-of-abduction>

rescuing girls and saving people from the sex trade, there is little room for critical reflection on how some well-meaning policies could hurt others in the sex industry. For the KAHTC, their awareness campaigns make little room for the possibility that there are workers who do not fit the idealized victim. In addition, in such a case, how does criminalizing the sex industry at all change the lives of those who their policies affect?

Just before the semester ended, I reached out to a sex worker who runs a popular blog discussing sex and politics. I sheepishly ask her for an interview, knowing that I am a master's student with no real reach on social media or even in academia. I cannot offer her a wide reaching platform. I cannot even offer her monetary incentive. To my delight and surprise, Sonya agrees to interview with me.

Most of our conversation focuses on unintended consequences (though if you were to ask Sonya, she would argue that some anti-trafficking advocates deploy willful ignorance at best, malevolence at worst).

People who don't understand the sex industry want to create a false dichotomy between people who are free hookers and people who are trafficked slaves. It doesn't exist. There's a whole spectrum of choice and agency experienced by individuals who enter in the sex industry. I've had people try to discredit me by saying 'Oh, well you just know the good side, you've had good experiences.' Screw you, I'm not brainwashed! I've been brutally raped, more than once and that was by cops. Don't you tell me I don't know how bad it is, I had some awful experiences. But, overall, I enjoyed my time as a sex worker.

Sonya intimates a palpable frustration with another problematic aspect to the abolitionist paradigm. Within the abolitionist paradigm, identities tend to be fixed. While most who consider themselves abolitionist would not think that one could truly be a "happy hooker," Sonya is pointing to the notion that viewing sex workers as one dimensional removes any complexity regarding their experience and the ways it changes over time. It removes the possibility that one could have been trafficked but chose to remain a sex worker for a variety of reasons. Or, one

could have entered in the sex industry willingly, not under duress, but then the situation became volatile and exploitative. The abolitionist paradigm does not account for the ways in which identities change over time. Sonya explains how using a more flexible framework, such as the polymorphic framework, accounts for changes in identity and experience and can yield richer insight into the spectrum of choice and agency she witnessed during her tenure in the sex industry.

Moreover, she offers that oversimplifying the sex industry into false dichotomies and using increasingly draconian measures do little to redress the economic and social structuring of entry into, and persistence within, the sex industry. The failure to address these consequences has had a dire impact on sexual markets overseas. As Kempadoo (2004) and Kempadoo and Doezema (1998) posit, anti-trafficking agendas that focus on criminalization of any aspect of the sex industry ignores the ways in which Western colonialism played a role in the rise of the Caribbean sex industry and is now criminalizing the very industry that women used to make a living. Such stories seem to get lost when only thinking through the sex industry as a type of *especially* exploitative place, instead of thinking through sex work as a type of labor in an inherently exploitative political economy (Benoit, McCarthy & Jansson 2015).

On a separate interview occasion, I speak with a friend of one of my informants. Tera is a social service professional by day and escort by night. I get the sense that Tera would rather be a social worker than do anything else, but there is nothing lucrative about this profession. “You know how doctors take the Hippocratic oath? I think social workers should take the Poverty oath. I mean, I guess we do, but we don’t get a ceremony. We just get more debt.” Tera laughs and shakes her head. “I know it seems like I shouldn’t be in this profession, but honestly, I can’t be a social worker without being a sex worker.”

Given that Tera lives in one of the most expensive cities in the world, it is no wonder she needs to supplement her salary with a job that pays upwards of 600 per hour. In a certain sense, she needs this job. However, she acknowledges she could do other types of labor. “I could be a bartender or do some other kind of work, but honestly, nothing pays as well. And I truly don’t mind the work.”

Her sentiment is similar to Sonya’s outlook on criminalization of the sex industry.

Look, there might be some women who don’t like it or didn’t have a good experience, but that doesn’t make the work itself criminal. As soon as you have people coming in from the outside and telling us that what we do is criminal, or somehow they know better than us, there’s no way to slice it [advice from the outside] that isn’t paternalistic. There’s just not.

Sari, Tera and Sonya all advocate for decriminalizing the sex industry. To them, removing police involvement would open up avenues for them to organize, secure labor protections and advocate for themselves as a legitimate profession. From their perspective, the stigmas associated with the sex industry make it more difficult to construct advocacy strategies and labor organizations specific to their profession, which would help create a safer space for them.

Although their point is well taken that increasingly draconian measures create insurmountable barriers to organization, this is largely representative of current workforce struggles (Liptak 2017). My informants did not speak directly to plans for organizing, but they spoke to advocating for harm reduction strategies and forming networks to ensure that all sex workers have access to the services they need. To them, presence and strength in number is paramount. While it may not directly translate to finding victims of trafficking, having formalized groups of sex workers who can provide services or a listening ear opens up other

avenues for individuals in the sex industry to talk with people who can understand their experience on a personal level.

It is important to recognize now that the women who interviewed with me make up a higher end section of the sex industry. I did not speak with anyone engaged in stripping, street level prostitution nor did I speak with any trafficking survivors. The evidence at hand is slim with respect to legalization and decriminalization; as there are not many places that have fully decriminalized or legalized prostitution.

Van der Meulen (2011, 2012) argues that incorporating sex work narratives to drive social and legal policy may help remove stigma and social intolerance that many sex workers face. Viewing sex work as a form of labor moves sex work away from a moralistic debate. This would enable more evidence-based advocacy and incorporate the voices of sex workers in constructing policy that affects their livelihoods. To support this assertion, Van der Meulen (2011) compares a decriminalized sex industry in New Zealand with Sweden, which criminalizes the purchase of sex. In New Zealand, the perspectives and input of sex workers were critical to decriminalization efforts. As a result, sex workers are not treated like criminals. Moreover, the state sponsors regular screenings and creates legal channels for sex workers to pursue claims of abuse. The author does not explore how this affects sex workers or impacts the rate of human trafficking, but the latter statistics are almost impossible to measure.

Quast and Gonzales (2016) carry this argument further by examining the impact of regulation on sex work in Tijuana, Mexico. Specifically, the researchers examine the rates of trichomoniasis (the most prevalent STD) prior to, and after, 2005 when the regulations took effect. New policies included carrying registration cards, monthly HIV tests, and quarterly

screenings for other STI's. Sex workers are required to check in with the government and fined if they fail to comply with scheduled check-ins. Researchers determined that the rates of trichomoniasis dropped as much as 37% because of regulating the sex industry, although they admit that the data is quite “noisy.”

With little empirical evidence from which to draw, it is difficult to say whether decriminalization will be a viable alternative in the United States. There are not many templates of decriminalization to instruct the de-regulation of the sex industry. However, that is a secondary outcome to a more important point – the voices of sex workers are not present when forming anti-trafficking agencies and creating awareness campaigns and education events. No one asks them to be at the table when lobbyists advocate for policy or when Congress determines the scope of the TVPA. As Berg (2013) notes, policy makers and law enforcement have a long history of willful disinterest in sex workers voices and well-being. Whether or not sex workers see themselves as victims, laborers, or somewhere in between is irrelevant if they are not considered at all.

## CONCLUSION

It is now 2017 and human trafficking is still a national issue. When I go to look up the KATHC's website to see what, if anything has changed, their website appears to be down. I peruse the social media accounts of the Michigan Human Trafficking Task Force (MHTTF), the statewide task force of which KAHTC is a part. I also look through the Facebook page of the KAHTC, which seems to be current.

Early in my internship, I reached out to Cynthia, the director of the MHTTF. Speaking with her, I could tell she was conflicted about the sex industry because of her years as a police officer, but she said that working in anti-trafficking advocacy caused her to see things differently. In the beginning, when I followed their social media updates, I noticed they would often use unsubstantiated new articles and discuss the statistics surrounding human trafficking (statistics that, due to the clandestine nature of trafficking, are not reliable). Lately, I have noticed more thought provoking articles cautioning readers to be wary of human trafficking statistics and posting articles on a wide variety of experiences within the sex industry. Their approach has shifted, and some of the articles even discuss economic and social factors that influence why some people get into, and stay, in the sex industry.

In contrast, the KAHTC posts articles that are from a variety of sources. I notice articles from Evangelical organizations, articles that champion lawsuits against backpage.com and upcoming events to host film screenings of sex trafficking documentaries. The page has grown even a touch more political, posting a thank you to Ivanka Trump for raising awareness about the plight of human trafficking – which is ironic, given that her brand has come under fire for labor violations in China (Gold, Harwell, Sattar & Denyer 2017) . I also see a video post of Tucker



Carlson, a popular extreme right wing talk show host, doing a segment in which he charges that Google is complicit in human trafficking (KAHTC Facebook page 2017).

As far as I can tell, Tonya is not as active as she was, but I am uncertain if she has left completely. On her personal Facebook page, she writes that infusing ideology with activism did not sufficiently attend to all the multifaceted aspects that comprise any of the causes about which she was passionate. I am not surprised to read this, but having left Kalamazoo some time ago, I still wonder about the KAHTC.

Sari and I have spoken on occasion but have lost touch recently. She is busy with school and work, and we live two time zones away from each other. She says that she has not heard much from the KAHTC in the news or otherwise, and that she has focused her advocacy efforts on combating the Trump agenda. She is also quite busy pursuing the graduate education of her dreams.

Sonya is still blogging actively and her reach has expanded considerably. Richard is still in charge of a successful task force on trafficking and teen violence. I have only spoken with all the others once, so I do not know how active they are.

As I finish writing in the present day, I thought back to one of the articles I read in the very beginning of my research that was controversial among my sex worker informants. Melissa Farley, who gained prominence as a vehement critic of the sex industry and lambasts any initiative to decriminalize or legalize the sex industry (Farley 2004), wrote the article. Farley repeats an oft-quoted statistic that the average age of entry into prostitution is 13. This number came from a study conducted by Estes and Weiner (2001) that surveyed sex workers across the globe.

A prominent sex work activists and former sex worker named Emi Koyama takes Farley to task over this assertion. Koyama does some digging and reveals that the study arrived at that conclusion because they only interviewed people under age 18 (emism.org accessed 10-1-2017). The authors generalized off a low sample size with a skewed age demographic, and that generalization caught on.

An Atlantic article later supported Emi Koyama's claim in 2014. However, it brings to light a question for further research – why is it that some caricatures of the sex industry are accepted without question whereas accounts from those inside the sex industry are dismissed? Why is it beyond comprehension that some people enter in the sex industry willingly? Why do some abolitionists resort to charges of false consciousness when sex workers say they are not victims?

When I think of all the conversations I had with my sex worker informants, one sticks with me the most. Sari and I are having dinner together, and we end up discussing one of her most recent clients that offered to pay her tuition. She describes him as an older man just looking for company and very generous with his money, although she does not feel comfortable taking his gift. My mind wanders back to my internship, and how her experiences are so incongruent with what some anti-trafficking activists think about the sex industry. I ask her, a bit unexpectedly, what she would say if she had a microphone in front of a room of anti-trafficking activists. Sari thinks for a moment, and then says, “Sex workers are living, breathing, thinking, feeling people and we are not brainwashed. We can think for ourselves, and we deserve respect.”

I cannot imagine what the response would be, but she is certainly not the first to offer such a powerful rejoinder, and she will not be the last. Maybe the sex work is truly a victimizing

place. Maybe it is no less exploitative than any other form of work. Maybe it is both to varying degrees. The thing is, after all of my research, I'm not convinced there is a way to know for sure what, exactly, the sex industry is, given all the different actors within the industry, the differential experiences among sex workers and the rapidly changing nature of the profession.

But, I am certain of this – bulldozing social problems through criminalization hoping that they will go away completely seems about as effective as building walls or fences around nation states in effort to stop illegal immigration. If we truly want to eradicate sex trafficking, engaging with the complexity that is sex work, including speaking with people in the sex industry, seems like a good place to start.

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## HSIRB APPROVAL

Date: February 25, 2014

To: Laura Spielvogel, Principal Investigator  
Emily Williams, Student Investigator for thesis

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy Naugle". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned over the printed name "Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair".

Re: HSIRB Project Number 13-12-04

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Professionalizing Sex: A Regional Exploration of Sex Work and Anti-Trafficking Initiatives" has been **approved** under the **full** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., *you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under "Number of subjects you want to complete the study."*) Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

**Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.**

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

**Approval Termination: January 15, 2015**