Sensationalism and its Detrimental Effects on the Anti-Human Trafficking Movement: A Call to a Critical Examination of “Abolitionist” Rhetoric

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INTRODUCTION
A Definition and Preliminary Comments on This Research

Sensationalism is a phenomenon often found within media research, where it is studied for how it affects viewers and their behavior. Often criticized within journalistic practices, sensationalism is a method by which a producer of information attempts to draw the attention of the consumer of such information. It is typically “defined in terms of its capability to provoke attention or arousal responses in viewers.”\(^1\) And therefore, is usually linked to particularly emotional or dramatic techniques that propel the viewer or reader into a distinct state of mind or sentimental feeling. Psychologically, there are no clear indicators of how much or how little an individual may be emotionally aroused by a particular subject. Only through means of self-reporting is the experience of emotional triggering actually measurable.\(^2\) However, some level of arousal is common.

Since the majority of research on sensationalism exists in the context of media, and due to the relatively recent formation of the modern anti-human trafficking movement, sensationalism’s affect on the movement itself has received little critical analysis. As is the case in many human rights causes, more concern is initially spent on combating immediate needs, addressing reactionary services to those “victimized” by the injustice. Now that the anti-human trafficking movement has progressed to the point that a large number of organizations are working on the issue, this paper contends that it’s time to start formulating best practices through direct appraisal by those involved. Best practices, of course, involve an evaluation of how issues at play within the subject of trafficking are handled, and how this treatment positively or negatively affects all major stakeholders. Partnerships and cooperation among both major and minor actors in the anti-trafficking field are necessary to accomplish this fully, but this text hopes to start the process.

Within the scope of this research, it is claimed that sensationalism is, in fact, more detrimental to the anti-trafficking movement than organizations and participating members would hope. Even more, rather than helping to combat trafficking, the arguments herein propose that sensationalism goes beyond “harm” to an actual perpetuation of the larger, systemic problems that delay the resolution of modern trafficking. As there is very little research to correlate this claim, two initial shortcomings are admitted upfront. First, that the breadth of this work is surface level, at best. When addressing the more systemic issues at hand, each is deserving of further data collection and discussion overall. Such substantial systemic problems simply cannot be fully addressed within the constraints of this paper.

Secondly, each of the issues raised here in outlining sensationalist practices are highly debatable. It’s recognized that not everyone will agree, but the purpose of this research is not conversion. Rather, the purpose is to open up a dialogue that rarely receives any due attention. These issues constitute “gray areas” that either get completely ignored or passed off as unimportant or irrelevant. Therefore, it’s the goal of this paper to make clear that there is, in fact, significance to the debate and perhaps to the overall success of anti-trafficking organizations in providing their beneficiaries with appropriate services.

As an added measure of disclosure, because of the controversial nature of the topics involved, the author notes that an increased level of sensitivity is the foremost goal in creating

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2 Ibid, 321.
this dialogue. While it’s impossible to address all triggers for all readers, the author does expect a level of accountability. In the end, however, it’s believed that battling with these tough matters are essential to advancing the movement, and must be addressed regardless of their troublesome nature. Therefore, this discussion will begin with a look at why sensationalism, commonly a triggering mechanism in and of itself, is a technique so frequently employed.

WHY IT’S DONE

Sensationalist Reasoning: Rationale for its Use

When it comes down to it, nonprofit and human rights organizations are in an increasingly competitive market. In order to help their beneficiaries, they must remain open and operating, and—therefore—must continue to find funding, whether directly from the public or from any number of resources like grants or donations. Typically, the more the public knows and cares about their “cause,” the more chances an organization has of not only acquiring sustainable funding, but also shifting public interest, and eventually public response. Theoretically, organizations operate under the mindset that this public response will then affect legislation and ultimately bring an end to the original and peripheral needs.

However, the proliferation of these organizations, caused by a demand to meet more immediate needs, has flooded the current market. Now, in an effort to garner as much of the public attention as possible, organizations must find a way to push through the overwhelming amount of information flowing through society. Not only must they compete with other organizations fighting for often equally worthy causes, they must also compete with the consumer’s own needs and desires. Therefore, organizations must find a way to make their issues truly matter enough to their audiences to the point that their work influences thoughts, attitudes and behaviors, and inspires action. After all, what is it that makes the everyday consumer interested in something so far away—physically, emotionally or spiritually? Generally, the reality is that people typically don’t care enough to act on something unless it affects them personally. As Adam Hochschild affirms in his book, Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves, “People are more likely to care about the suffering of others in a distant place if that misfortune evokes a fear of their own.” Sensationalism often accomplishes this through dramatizing situations enough to kindle emotions and arouse direct connection with the subject.

Additionally, while some organizations use sensationalism to influence public interest with completely sincere intentions, others are found to simply care about their own bottom line, and use it to drive funding aimed at keeping the doors open merely for popularity’s sake—whether amongst the community or within the movement—or, more simply, to keep their jobs. Intentions will be examined a bit more below in reflecting on “moral entrepreneurship,” but it’s necessary here to point out that personal gain may sometimes compel organizations, or at least individuals within organizations, to use sensationalist rhetoric to help peak public curiosity and claim notoriety. Often, the most shocking and dramatic dialogue will bring an individual or organization to the forefront of a cause, even if entirely damaging to the movement. This same idea can be found throughout mainstream media without much digging, which provides a great

3 Adam Hochschild, Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company).
starting point for initial discussion given media’s proclivity to set public agenda and influence public opinion.

**HOW IT’S DONE**

**Ties Between Then and Now**

The mass media generally attribute newsworthiness of a story based on several key factors, including timeliness, proximity, conflict, and human interest. These same concepts are also employed by organizations to create direct connections between an issue and an individual, whether through language or imagery. While newsworthiness does not always equal sensationalism, these factors do create the opportunity for abuse of audience sensitivity, leading to sensationalism, using highly emotive approaches to excite action or interest. In many ways, this has been incredibly successful. Organizations are now rarely viewed as merely charities worthy of an occasional contribution. Instead, many organizations run programs and advocate causes that have become hallmarks of recent social justice-minded generations. Whether emotively idealistic or passionately realistic, these masses have largely spread interest in similar ways.

However, these tactics are far from new. Here, the historic uses of “marketing” within the early anti-slavery movement (largely considered to be the first “abolitionist” movement⁴) will be briefly noted, before moving to more current sensationalist methods employed by anti-trafficking advocates or within the media—this comparison is an effort to suggest that modern techniques reflect old paradigms, often causing more long-term damage and perpetuating the problem even further.

**Historical Examples from Early Abolitionists: Some Initial Systemic Problems**

Several techniques, which might now be called marketing or advocacy campaigns, were used within the first abolition movement through both language and graphic images, particularly between 1787 and 1791. Plays dramatizing the living conditions of slaves, petitions spread door-to-door, and near political “logos” reflecting slaves as “brother[s],”⁵ ignited attention around the United Kingdom over the span of several decades. Around 1791, in likely the most famous campaign, the sugar boycott called for the British to cease using sugar, particularly in their tea. Used in such a vast array of beloved products, the general public felt like boycotting sugar made an undeniable statement. As Adam Hochschild affirmed, “Then, as now, the full workings of a global economy were invisible, and the boycott caught people’s imagination because it brought these hidden ties to light, laying bare the dramatic, direct connection between British daily life and that of slaves”⁶ (emphasis mine). The boycott spread primarily through pamphlet, where the use of sensationalism began to truly take part. From calling tea a “blood-sweetened beverage,” to connecting the “poor [slave’s groaning],” and “claiming that sugar contained, literally not just

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⁴ It should be noted that “abolitionist” is set in quotes here (as well as in the title) in an effort to remark on the difficulties and arguments surrounding the word “abolition” or in referring to an anti-slavery or anti-trafficking advocate as an “abolitionist” in and of themselves. This critical analysis will be provided in more depth at a future point in this paper, but will not be shown in quotes throughout the rest of the text, and should instead be inferred.


⁶ Ibid.
figuratively, the sweat of slaves, as well as their lice, germs, and pus,” graphic language associated the more grotesque aspects of slavery with what Britons were actually drinking and digesting.

Prior the boycott, a children’s book called *Little Truths better than great Fables*, “included a description of slaves in a ship ‘pressed together like herrings in a barrel, which caused an intolerable heat and stench.” While it’s doubtful anyone would argue that conditions on slave ships were, in fact, awful, the sensationalized piece here exists in the analogy between how the slaves were situated and their resemblance to “herrings in a barrel;” fish, sardines, packed together in unimaginable ways.

Similar animalistic impressions were created with “one of the most widely reproduced political graphics of all time,” a diagram of the slave ship *Brookes*, in which it was illustrated how closely the slaves on board were kept. The image, as Hochschild noted, “carried additional force because it seemed a sinister echo of a scene familiar to all: detailed drawings of the animals in Noah’s Ark.” Creators of the illustration were intent on making the depiction accurate; no exaggeration was sought in producing the piece. Yet, the unspoken message of slaves as animals is significant nonetheless. Throughout the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, slaves were thought by many to be anything from cargo, to property, to uncivilized barbarians. Even this illustration, then, wasn’t intended to cast slaves as equals; it merely sought to call attention to the horrific conditions the slaves themselves were facing. While it might have asked the common man to reconsider whether slaves should be facing these conditions, it was not ultimately striving to say that Africans were, indeed, deserving of the same rights as Britons (or at least British men). The idea, then, remained the same: slaves are not like us.

**Current Methods: A Perpetuation of Distancing and Othering Issues**

*Creation of Binaries*

Often, sensationalist rhetoric casts topics within trafficking into two extremist categories, where gray and more accurate language and images are avoided in an effort to shock people into attention—simultaneously providing false comfort and inciting disgust. Beyond accomplishing increased numbers of activists or advocates, this more often aids in removing people further and further from the problem, where individuals either fail to realize trafficking can happen just as easily to them, or fail to realize their complicity in the problem altogether. The following binaries are categories commonly created in the process of discussing or calling attention to human trafficking. While many binaries exist, they generally tend to be some form or derivative of these more prominent classifications.

“Us v. Them”

As the classic case of Othering, “Us versus Them” fastens two disparate parties in distant places, where neither ultimately influences nor affects the other. Social identity and stigma play a large role here, where members of one group have certain ideas and perceptions about the other. In their evaluation, “‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ and AIDS Stigma,” Devine, Plant and Harrison, noted

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
past research claiming that, “Categorization of people into groups simplifies the complexity of the social world,” and that this “categorization of people into ingroups and outgroups leads social perceivers to differentiate between ingroup and outgroup members in ways that most often favor the ingroup.” Additionally, they contend that “language, especially when combined with ingroup members’ motivations to distance themselves from outgroups, can manufacture group boundaries to perpetuate and exaggerate the perceptions of difference.”

These differences, of course, are extremely important when trafficking situations are continually dramatized. This is not to say that not all cases of trafficking involve some level of traumatization that would preferably be avoided; it’s merely to note that when all cases are cast in such dramatic light, threatening to ravage the lives of anyone involved, it becomes all the more critical for members of society to be in the group sitting outside of the problem. In the case of human trafficking, the ingroup then would represent those not currently involved or in any way associated with trafficking, while the outgroup would be those victimized by the crime. As these social boundaries continue to be reinforced and identified with, the farther mainstream society removes itself from danger. Theoretically, then, this comfort essentially becomes not only the end goal, but the means by which sensationalism accomplishes this goal.

“Monster versus Innocent”
Closely paralleling the three-fold paradigm outlined in Makau Mutua’s work, Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor for Human Rights, both the anti-trafficking movement, and its treatment within the media, typically establish three distinct roles inherent in the issue: victim, perpetrator and rescuer. In these roles, rescuer receives praise, victim receives help, and perpetrator becomes the worst type of criminal, particularly in cases where children are involved. In fact, Mutua espouses that, “In human rights literature, the victim is usually presented as a helpless innocent who has been abused directly by the state, its agents, or pursuant to an offensive cultural or political practice.” This character creation is further explained by Julia O’Connell Davidson in Children in the Global Sex Trade, where

…we can believe we are all party to an implicit covenant to care about children, and not to use them for our own private ends, especially not to use them for ends that conflict with the dominant vision of childhood as a state of innocence, dependency and Otherness. The ‘paedophile’ visibly and dramatically breaks this covenant by using children for the purposes of sexual gratification. By condemning paedophiles as unnatural, monstrous, inhuman, Others, we reassure ourselves that the rest of us are restrained by the covenant.

Similar thoughts exist within other comparable social problems. Rapists, sexual abusers, and inflictors of domestic violence are rarely defined in any sort of “gray” terms. In this sense, perpetrators can never be ‘the friend next door.” They must lurk in dark shadows, dirty and foaming at the mouth, ready to ravage their prey. “Heaven forbid” they be wealthy, educated, Caucasian, or female; they’re either completely “bad” or nothing at all. Those involved in prostitution are either “sluts” or “whores,” or they’re “unwitting victims of crime.” As Ronald

13 Ibid, 228.
Weitzer states in *The Social Construction of Sex Trafficking: Ideology and Institutionalization of a Moral Crusade*, “Research on customers cautions against sweeping characterizations and generalizations. Customers vary in their background characteristics, motivations, and behavior, and they buy sex for different reasons…the crusade’s claims about customers, as well as traffickers, are caricatures.”

Conversely, victims of trafficking “must” be all “good,” all “innocent,” or society’s conscience is entirely offended. Push and pull factors are ignored, where any reason for perpetrators to be involved must normally be those on the absolute ends of society, those who are innately horrible creatures—unlike ourselves—never someone starving to eat, threatened to join a gang, caught in financial crisis. And, if this is true, society doesn’t know how to handle a victim-turned-victimizer, a child who enjoys sex, someone who returns to their captor, or a child who would sell his or her own body by choice. In an effort to put boundaries on this last difficulty, cultures define “adults” as those able to make sound decisions and deemed capable of holding agency. However, age is arbitrary. In some countries, females are married and having children by the age of 13 and 14, while in others, a man who marries and sleeps with a “girl” under the age of 18 commits a criminal act. William McDonald, in addressing many aspects of the “clandestine” nature of trafficking, discusses that, in fact, a large majority of women specifically don’t fall within the typical boundaries of the “innocent” that has been created. Drawing upon previous studies, he contends, “there are enough reports to support the conclusion that the sanitized official view of the problem fails to convey the seamier, more morally (and hence politically) troublesome dimension of the phenomenon.”

To be sure, these topics are highly controversial on a number of levels. The intention of this research is not to make light of the problems involved here, or to mock moral, social or political practices. However, these complications are pointed out so that there’s at least an acknowledgement of how potentially damaging sensationalism can be. People are involved here, and people are deeply complex. More on the ways in which these classifications are damaging will be made soon, but sensitivities are essential to shed light on, again to tackle problems that continue to persist and to open up dialogue—if only for those traumatized not just by their perpetrators, but also by the system and society as a whole through incorrect language, and therefore, incorrect perceptions.

“Captivity versus Freedom”

Claiming someone “captive” while in the sex trade or as they’re being trafficked in any form, while claiming them “free” once “removed” from a trafficking situation ignores any form of self-identification or agency by the victims or survivors themselves. Is an individual, once removed from a trafficked situation and placed into something such as a safe home, where they’re, once again, denied freedom of movement or the ability to dictate their own lives, in fact experiencing “freedom?” Or, instead, is this simply another form of captivity? Gretchen Soderlund, Assistant Professor of English and Women’s Studies at Virginia Commonwealth

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15 Or any number of factors listed out in O’Connell Davidson’s book, *Children in the Global Sex Trade*, page 46.
University, claims that anti-prostitution social reform movements closely tied to Evangelical political maneuvers repeatedly used these terms:

Central to such rhetoric is the construction of captivity and freedom as diametrically opposed states of existence. Yet in current sites and practices of abolitionist intervention the line between rescuers and captors has become increasingly blurry. While the stories abolitionists tell about their interventions tend to focus on the moment of the raid and the successful delivery of the rescued slaves to safe houses, events that occur in the aftermath of raids often belie the claim that all of the rescued women are sex slaves held captive against their will in brothels.\(^\text{17}\)

If, by scenario, a woman held against her will to provide labor or services, likely watched over by a majority of men whom are relative strangers, has since been “freed” by equally strange and unknown men and kept in confinement in order to “heal,” these terms fail to question whether she is actually “free.” Rather, has she simply been transferred to another oppressive system, and claimed as “once captive, now free?” As Soderlund concludes, “It appears that while some women use brothel raids and closures as an opportunity to leave the sex industry, others perceive the rehabilitation process itself as a punitive form of imprisonment thereby complicating the captivity/freedom binary asserted by abolitionists.”\(^\text{18}\)

Furthermore, within religious movements or rhetoric, captivity’s most common derivative descriptor, “captive,” is typically applied to a victim, where images of imprisonment are played upon and often misused. This binary lends itself to connections within the Old Testament (much like the case of the Brookes’ illustration), specifically in passages such as Isaiah 61, where Evangelical Christians identify with its claim, “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness the prisoners.”\(^\text{19}\) This, of course, draws similar analogies to Mutua’s “savior” and “savage” categories referred to above, removing meaning behind “Christ alone as Savior.” Additionally, “captive” is a term often used within Evangelical Christianity to define one’s relationship to sin; as in, one is “captive” to any number of addictions ranging from substance abuse to sexual obsession. This highly sexualized use of the word “captive” also leads to an overabundance of focus on sex trafficking, seen as the highest “offense” (especially if connected with a child), and often abandons any references to the less flashy forms of trafficking. Since the use (and perhaps abuse) of these terms finds them out of context with their original meanings, this—by definition—is sensationalism.

Shock Tactics
Dramatic Language

Below is a list of terms often used to sensationalize the issue of trafficking. While in some instances the use of one or more of these terms isn’t altogether detrimental, all are still mentioned here as a means to critically examine how their use can be damaging and to question why they’re used in the first place. Rather than taking these expressions at face value, this


\(^\text{18}\) Ibid, 66.

\(^\text{19}\) Bible quote
research suggests that analyzing their connotations and possible harmful effects is important. As in the rest of this research, none of these terms should be viewed as independent of any of the others. Many of the terms laid out here directly tie into the distancing and Othering cases discussed before, reinforcing sensationalist concepts and fixing identities in the minds of the uncritical consumer of anti-trafficking rhetoric. Additionally, this is not an exhaustive list. These terms were chosen specifically because they’re seen to lead to the larger systemic problems discussed further on in this paper, outlining specifically why sensationalism is so detrimental to the anti-human trafficking movement.

**Abolition**

As we perceive “abolition” in modern rhetoric, it’s assumed that this represents an unabridged liberation. Historically, however, this was not always the case. In the early anti-slavery movement in Britain, the men fighting for the abolition of the slave trade were clear that the emancipation of slaves was not their goal. Aside from Granville Sharp, the rest of the men involved solely fought to abolish the trade itself, deciding to call the committee, “The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade.”\(^{20}\) They understood that the language used was extraordinarily important. Not only did the majority of their members not believe in full emancipation, they also knew that—as asking for the abolition of slave trade seemed daunting enough—convincing the public to call for the complete release of slaves might prove impossible. Furthermore, when discussing the end of slavery within the context of American history, even once the practice of slavery was officially “abolished,” holding slaves as property was far from over.

From the early movement until now, the word “abolition” has carried an incredible emotional weight. More recently, the problematic nature with the word “abolition” is its association with a political stance. Particularly during the Bush administration, abolitionists were called such because of their position in the anti-prostitution, anti-pornography debate.\(^{21}\) Rather than regulate or legalize prostitution, “abolitionists” sought to criminalize prostitution altogether. For current members of the anti-trafficking movement, this association is incredibly problematic. Organizations, and even individuals within the same organization, can highly differ on their opinions of the abolition or regulation of prostitution. In his work on *The Social Construction of Sex Trafficking: Ideology and Institutionalization of a Moral Crusade*, Ronald Weitzer remarks that, “Because [some organizations] reject abolitionism, they have been increasingly marginalized and dismissed as the ‘pro-prostitution’ lobby’ in the discourse of the preeminent anti-trafficking forces. These groups, like American sex workers’ rights groups more generally, have virtually no access to state elites.”\(^{22}\) The use of the label then, can often mean the difference between support and disapproval, whether through membership or funding.

However, if one is involved in the modern-day movement to end trafficking, there’s no alternative to describe exactly what they hope to accomplish. If one is not an “abolitionist,” then only the terms “advocate” or “activist” exist, with arguably equally vague and problematic

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histories. Nonetheless, while the term isn’t necessarily sensationalist and while its use by anti-trafficking advocates is understood at times, since it does carry historically sensational sentiments that largely reflect moral positions, within the framework of this paper it is suggested that it be used with caution, if at all.

“Slave” and “Slavery”

In an effort to legitimize the crime of trafficking as worthy of legal, moral and social attention, many anti-trafficking advocates have begun referring to the crime itself as “slavery” and to those “victimized” by the crime as “slaves.” The assumed intention is that, if it’s possible to get people to realize that trafficking is similar in many ways to historical slavery, it could potentially cause enough outrage that something might be done. After all, individuals are still bought and sold, they are often treated similarly in that they’re either physically or emotionally brutalized by their captors (although, much less than is often purported), and they either go without pay or are underpaid. Socially and legally, there is significance in using this term. As Nina Tavakoli, an Associate Legal Officer at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, argues, “trafficking should be reclassified as an international crime,” believing that, “The most effective way to do this would be to resurrect the link between trafficking and slavery.”

Additionally, it’s assumed, especially in current American culture, that no one would advocate on behalf of slavery, while some might still claim that the use of underpaid and overworked individuals are necessary to the current economy (which, of course, is debatable on several levels). In a similar claim, Tavakoli states that, “A reclassification of slavery would also arguably affect the impetus of states to combat it as no state would wish to be associated with such a universally condemned practice.”

Her rationalization provides possibly the best justification for using the term, as they show how directly connected to policy the use of the term truly is, and the author would agree that a switch from merely a “transnational” to an “international” crime would be significant. However, the sensationalist uses of these terms also deserve equal critical examination, and are disputed here as possibly damaging or inaccurate rhetoric for two main reasons: first, that trafficking in persons is currently an illegal crime, and slavery was not illegal during the trans-Atlantic slave trade or before the institution of the 13th Amendment, when slavery was officially (at least legally) abolished. Secondly, it’s possible that labeling modern human trafficking could delegitimize the lived experience of both slaves and current trafficking victims. Current victims and survivors share very little experience outside of the fact that, as Tavakoli maintains, their autonomy is or was completely compromised. Before the early abolition of slavery, the overwhelming majority of slaves were Black. Currently, the ethnicity of victims and survivors of trafficking run the gamut and traffickers hold no ethnic prejudice.

In line with this last point, adherents to Critical Race Theory (CRT) would argue that it’s untrue that states and individuals would categorically condemn the practice of slavery, claiming that “racism is ordinary, not aberrational—‘normal science,’ the usual way that society does

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23 Large portions of the discussion within this section were informed by a discussion between the author and Sabrina Sameshima, Outreach and Legal Assistant and part of the Anti-Human Trafficking Project at the Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network (RMIAN).
25 Ibid, 95.
business, the common everyday experience of most people of color in this country.” Moreover, CRT claims that, “Because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class people (physically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it.” This, in large part, fits directly with the reasoning behind Othering and the social construction of both “victims” and “deviants” (or “monsters” discussed earlier in this text). And, As Gretchen Soderlund questions in her research,

Is it intellectually and ethically responsible to call every instance of a practice “slavery” when many women involved demonstratively reject the process of protection and rehabilitation, and when they escape from supposed rescuers who aim to force them out of a life of prostitution (“captivity”) and into a life of factory work or employment in the low-paying service sector (“freedom”)?

Therefore, the use of the terms “slave” or “slavery” should be cautioned, if not within legal frameworks, at least within organizational practice, given their troublesome nature and—as it is believed within this research—are sensationalistic and perpetuate the systemic problems that maintain power and privilege dynamics and potentially continue trafficking rather than combat it.

“Victim”

Posed as the most important asset in human rights practice, Makau Mutua claims that, “The metaphor of the victim is the giant engine that drives the human rights movement. Without the victim there is no savage or savior, and the entire human rights enterprise collapses.” Using this framework, although human rights advocates might be well intentioned, it still brings into question how those involved in the anti-human trafficking movement perceive their beneficiaries, and therefore, how they receive treatment. Since “actors are cast into superior and subordinate positions,” Mutua contends, “the human rights movement’s basic claim universality is undermined.” Rather than picturing those who have been trafficked as possessing any form of self-determination or agency, they become pitiful creatures in need of sympathy. Vulnerable populations are those most often susceptible to trafficking, but “vulnerability” should not be equated with “helplessness,” which is the image most readily fixed upon someone labeled “victim.” Additionally, as Mutua continues, “A basic characteristic of the victim is powerlessness, an inability for self-defense against the state or the culture in question. The usual human rights narrative generally describes victims as hordes of nameless, despairing, and dispirited masses.”

Within the anti-trafficking movement, outside of the obvious negative connotations from the word, several issues arise when referring to an individual as a “victim.” One of the main problems emerges when it comes to “self-identification.” If an individual does not, of their own accord, call themselves a “victim,” labeling them as such can be at least confusing, if not entirely

29 Ibid, 205.
30 Ibid, 229.
harmful psychologically. For this reason, social workers never directly call an individual assigned to a case a “victim” (or are at least heavily advised against it). Someone might, very well, have chosen to immigrate for hopes of a better job, received a job—albeit through fraud or coercion—and never recognize him or herself as being victimized. Similarly, within sex work, while many anti-prostitution or anti-pornography advocates might disagree, some workers would consider themselves anything but “victims,” choosing to enter into the work of their own free will. However, if someone involved in prostitution isn’t labeled as a “victim,” they’re criminalized more often than not. This is evidenced in the overwhelming abundance of “prostitutes” being arrested rather than those involved in either selling or buying of sex.

More recent anti-trafficking advocates, though, have come to battle with this terminology by posing “survivor” as a more accurate term. Even so, while this euphemism is certainly more empowering, it also leaves a gap in defining an individual still being trafficked, which opens it up for scrutiny, as well. Of course, every case is different by nature, but the arbitrary labeling of someone as “victim” is problematic nonetheless, and due to its clear connections to negative perceptions and use as a tool by many to cast pity upon individuals, is considered sensationalist rhetoric within this research and as yet another means of distancing and Othering between parties.

“Rescue”

The use of the word “rescue” by rights organizations has become a rampant problem as of late, and unquestionably paints a picture of privilege. Mimicking the “Savior” role, advocates are taught to figuratively don capes and fly in to a situation to save the “poor,” whether it’s physically, spiritually, or emotionally. Those less fortunate souls in need of “rescuing,” are then consistently seen as “below” or “under.” As Soderlund further explains the captivity and freedom scenario used by many,

“If prisons are physical structures meant to keep evil away from good, then melodramatic sex trafficking narratives that equate brothels with prisons invert this symbolic order by representing good locked away in an evil world. Such narratives necessitate the introduction of a third party that not only witnesses but takes decisive action to end the sex slave’s suffering and restore moral order to the world.”

More importantly, it implies an overall lack of agency. If one must be rescued, one is unable to rescue themselves. This way, even once “rescued” or taken out of their current plight, the “rescuer” still refuses to see the survivor as fully capable of living on their own, or as an equal party not only to their own life, but also to life as a whole. Rather than being active participants, they are passive parties. This clearly necessitates the need for the rescuer to remain in constant contact or supervision over the rescued life. Safe homes, police protection and paternal-like control then become means of keeping “watch,” perpetuating the disempowerment of those involved.

Inflating Numbers

The fact that numbers in regards to human trafficking are hard to come by, completely inaccurate, or methodologically inept isn’t news. True, accurate numbers don’t exist. Most members of the anti-trafficking movement concede this as an open claim before offering up vague estimates. Habitually, those involved in the movement use this to their advantage, saying things such as “It could be as high as…!” These inflated numbers, however, have spread rapidly not only throughout the movement itself, but through the political arena (and therefore often
through legislation), and within the media. Accordingly, these numbers are often reported to the public, who continue to spread inaccurate and shocking information. Often, members from any of these parties concede that this constant communication of ill-defined numbers is intentional. They sensationalize the problem in an effort to simply win attention that the issue even exists. In *Traffic Counts, Symbols and Agendas* by William McDonald, he comments on this phenomenon, saying, “Some estimators openly admit their purpose is ideological, not accuracy.”

Simultaneously, they also realize how important these numbers can be when it comes to securing funding. Numbers often drive a cause; they enlighten both the public and the policy makers about how substantial a problem is, and therefore, indicate how much must be done—and sometimes, how quickly. Weitzer points out in his research that, “In the social constructionist perspective, social conditions become ‘problems’ only as a result of claims-making by interested parties,” and later, “The shock value of such claims is perhaps best reflected in the frequent assertion that trafficking has reached an ‘epidemic’ level.” Bolstering numbers, then, is beneficial to organizations in many ways. In spite of this, inflating numbers is still a sensationalist tactic with dangerous effects, and yet another aspect of the problem that must be analyzed in examining methods that hurt the anti-human trafficking cause more than they help.

**Shocking Imagery**

Anti-trafficking organizations have capitalized on an increasingly visual world, using image as a powerful tool to move the public. The full picture of trafficking, however, is rarely used. The images most frequently displayed to tell the tale of trafficking are not only inaccurate in terms of who they’re portraying, but what types of trafficking exist. Images are almost always women, almost always the most brutally treated and visibly damaged, physically dirty, almost always involved in sex trafficking, and without fail, non-White. Rarely is an image (or video) used that displays men or boys, domestic servants, agricultural workers, older in age, affluent, or Western. And even if the images used are of ethnically “white” individuals, they’re generally women from Eastern Europe. As McDonald testifies,

> From its beginning, the campaign against the trafficking of human beings has used and benefitted from one of the most powerful symbols in the pantheon of Western imagery, the innocent, young girl dragged off against her will to distant lands to satisfy the insatiable sexual cravings of wanton men…The image of women being sold into slavery in a foreign land arouses one of those primal fears with electrifying and hence potentially distorting effects.

Additionally, the pictures of traffickers themselves actually fit almost entirely the same descriptions, except that they’re almost always men.

These images, then, continue to reinforce power and privilege structures in much the same way as the dramatic language and binaries outlined above, and images have a particular ability to arouse emotion in ways that language cannot. They’re able transform beliefs into

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33 Ibid, 455.
“reality,” visually affixing images into the mind of the uncritical consumer who never questions dominant visual narrative or asks about the images they might not be seeing. According to Hochschild, “Iconic images have power because they allow us to see what previously we could barely imagine.”

**WHY IT’S A PROBLEM**

Beyond the problems outlined in the research above, the following are seen as key issues created from the use of sensationalism in the context of the anti-human trafficking movement, and therefore seen as perpetuators of the problem as a whole. It should be noted, again, that very little research exists that connect sensationalism within the movement directly (especially in regard to the damage done to victims themselves) to these larger issues, and therefore, this section will only touch briefly on each of the points, relying primarily on the author’s own experience and general knowledge within the movement. For that reason, only a couple of the actual sub-issues are highlighted, as they’re viewed as more readily apparent outcomes of the use of sensationalism, and it should be understood that many more issues fall under each category.

Quite simply, these topics are served little justice by a few brief paragraphs, but they must at least be given cursory attention, so as to illustrate why sensationalism is a problem at all. It also needs to be noted that situations within trafficking are so nuanced that topics such as re-traumatization and gender issues cannot be fully fleshed out within the scope of this paper. Moreover, since sex trafficking is often the more sensationalized—scandalized, glamorized—version of trafficking, the majority of these issues will highlight the problems involved therein. It should be assumed then, that where labor trafficking and domestic servitude are left out, many of these complicated problems carry over in similar ways.

Additionally, many of these issues flow into and out of each of the others. No one concern stands alone, and is often both driven by and driving the other themes. This should be no surprise, considering that more systemic problems are multi-faceted and involve several factors, where solutions take vast amounts of time and energy to cause any legitimate change.

**For Organizations**

*Misinformation and Missing Other Forms of Trafficking*

In the early abolitionist movement, pamphlets were a main source of information spreading throughout Britain. Like many of today’s campaigns to spread awareness about human trafficking, these pamphlets often contained sensationalist material, misinforming and misleading the public about the issue. As Adam Hochschild noted, “The exploited cane cutters described or pictured in such pamphlets, incidentally, were almost always male. Even abolitionists seemed unaware that the majority of Caribbean field laborers were women.” As highlighted in the discussion on the use of shocking imagery above, current anti-trafficking campaigns frequently picture the opposite: males are rarely displayed as victims of the crime. This habitually one-sided representation of the issue (including all of the other non-represented victims and misrepresented traffickers) creates an equally one-sided response, both from organizations and from the public.

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36 Ibid.
The formation of organizations that begin to work to combat trafficking becomes clearly asymmetrical, where more institutions exist that focus solely on sex trafficking, rather than the whole scope of human trafficking. McDonald also emphasizes this phenomenon in claiming that, “It is not about one long, continuous campaign, but a sequence of initiatives by various groups with somewhat differing agendas, yet a common concern about protecting women from sexual exploitation.”

It could be argued that the movement must “start somewhere,” but it’s believed in drawing conclusions from this research that the choosing of sex trafficking as the initial focus is due in large part to the misrepresentation and sensationalism of the subject. If labor exploitation were the more “flashy” side of trafficking, one would guess that more organizations would exist to work exclusively to end the abuse of labor. Consistent with the unbalanced focus of organizations, individuals seeking to get involved in the campaign also begin to focus on the more sensationalized subjects of trafficking. It could be deduced, then, that this eventually leads to a lack of services geared toward those involved in varying forms of human trafficking and that organizations who are actually working to end these disparate forms of trafficking have a more difficult time garnering support (both through funding and through “manpower”).

Moral Crusades and Moral Entrepreneurship

According to Ronald Weitzer,

Moral crusades advance claims about both the gravity and incidence of a particular problem. They typically rely on horror stories and ‘atrocity tales’ about victims in which the most shocking exemplars of victimization are described and typified. Casting the problem in highly dramatic terms by recounting the plight of highly traumatized victims is intended to alarm the public and policy makers and justify draconian solutions.

In his research, he found that human trafficking campaigns generally adhered to several major claims, which include the belief that: “violence is omnipresent in prostitution and sex trafficking,” “customers and traffickers are the personification of evil,” “prostitution and sex trafficking are inextricably linked,” and “the magnitude of both prostitution and sex trafficking is high and has greatly increased in recent years.”

These major themes are clear evidence that these anti-trafficking “moral crusades” do, in fact, use sensationalist tactics to advance their causes. In the study, he shows how these claims then become institutionalized within both U.S. government policy and practice. But while Weitzer’s research only draws direct ties to government policy, this research believes the historical framing of the anti-trafficking campaign as a moral crusade reflects poorly on organizations involved as a whole.

The anti-trafficking campaign also includes some level moral entrepreneurship, where individuals working to combat trafficking are, in many cases, acting in their own self-interests to either create and maintain jobs or gain notoriety and praise. However, anti-trafficking is not the only human rights or social justice cause where activists are often moral entrepreneurs. It’s likely, especially in the context of Mutua’s work mentioned earlier where the role of “victim” is the hinge upon which human rights causes function, that almost any cause could be said to operate under the premise of moral entrepreneurship. And if sensationalism does, in fact, lead to the perpetuation of larger systemic issues that continue to drive human trafficking rather than combat it, the question then becomes, “is sensationalism therefore in the best interest of those

enacting the campaign?” The answer to this question is one that all anti-trafficking advocates and organizations must intentionally consider when choosing how to frame the subject of trafficking, educating themselves on the outcomes of sensationalism and how this dramatization of information eventually reflects back on their operation.

For Policy

Influencing Funding & Ignoring Other Issues/Laws

In addition to the influence of policy listed previously, sensationalistic organizations have been those allocated the most funding. Further, when they’re candidly non-sensationalistic, they’ve actually been outright denied funding in the past. During the Bush administration, when organizations did not openly profess to be anti-prostitution, they were strictly prohibited from receiving funding. Organizations whose “primary concern is the empowerment of workers and harm reduction via provision of condoms, counseling, and other support services…[who] reject abolitionism, have been increasingly marginalized and dismissed as the ‘pro-prostitution lobby’ in the discourse of the preeminent anti-trafficking forces.”

Moreover, as the topic of human trafficking is sensationalized, especially in regard to sex trafficking and as problems surrounding labor trafficking fail to be addressed, other policy issues are ignored. Immigration laws receive less and less attention, where questions regarding the safe movement of people go unchallenged (e.g.—if people were allowed to move freely across state, national or international borders, would individuals be vulnerable to trafficking at all?)

For Victims

Re-Traumatization

Information Gathering

Personal narrative and anecdotal evidence are often used to generate more data and information from trafficked individuals—those on the “inside” of the crime. This occurs on any number of levels, most notably from law enforcement speaking to a suspected “victim,” court interviews, case management through social workers, legal services, health agencies, nonprofit and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working on anti-trafficking efforts, or reporters seeking a story. When sensationalized language is used without regard to potential “triggers,” in an effort to gather these first-hand accounts, there’s increased potential that the victim or survivor will be re-traumatized. A lack of sensitivity to personal experience may lead to further physical, emotional, or psychological damage. This can happen through image or language, reminding the victim or survivor of past exploitation, ignoring cultural differences, or merely ignorance regarding trauma. Trafficked individuals (especially within sex trafficking), more often than not, face severe symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), where a range of things might ignite an episode, typically accompanied by fear and panic.

The graphic language and imagery often used in the media to either recount these stories or to interview those courageous enough to tell within the public domain can do much more harm than good, continuing to cast survivors in similar “victimized” ways as perpetrators and traffickers do themselves. This can be seen repeatedly through interviews with victims of rape, domestic violence, and virtually any form of sexual abuse, where survivors are abrasively

referred to through the lenses of much of the dramatic language listed above, or cast in one of the roles within common binaries. These, of course, also lead to many of the identity and stigma issues that victims and survivors face, where they must continually battle not only what they’ve been taught about themselves by their exploiters, but also by the media, society, culture, and— due to sensationalist tactics used by organizations—the very systems set up to help them.

Commodification

When individuals are bought and sold in order to be used for someone else’s needs and desires, their bodies and the services they provide become products. Sensationalist rhetoric only continues this process further, both while a victim is being trafficked and after a survivor has been removed from a trafficked situation. The public becomes a consumer of scandalized stories filled with graphic depictions of an “awful” crime, a crime that “offends the conscience.” As noted earlier, newsworthy stories often revolve around conflict and human interest. Those sitting outside of the issue become voyeurs, gazing at objects that feed their desire for emotional arousal in a world seeking instant gratification and entertainment.

Interestingly enough, this “person as product” identity construction falls closely in line with the common view during the early abolitionist movement of those they were hoping to “free.” As mentioned earlier, in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, slaves were cargo on ships, purchased from one place to be used in another. Their purchasers and owners frequently claimed them as property, where their wills even outlined who the slave might be transferred to in the event that they passed away.

Modern trafficking, however, is a clandestine business. The trade of people is illegal, forcing “owners” and purchasers underground, where they hold no legal documents claiming their “property.” It’s a vast black market and difficult to track. However, through sensationalism, victims and survivors are mentally and emotionally kept in a role as product. In this situation, it’s anything but black market. Victims and survivors are considered “free,” yet simultaneously trapped in a world that continues to openly use them for personal benefit, used and re-used by the system that claims to be insuring their release or aiding their recovery.

For Society

Re-enforcing Gender Norms

Feminizing and Emasculation of Victims

As language and imagery have been shown to feminize the trafficking issue, there are several inherent problems that will continue until this practice changes. Given that women are believed to be the majority of victims, it’s likely that men will see trafficking as an issue of little interest to them. Historically, “feminist” issues rally limited amounts of males to the cause. This is not to say that many men aren’t at the forefront of the anti-trafficking issue. In fact, the majority of leaders, both governmentally and organizationally, are males. However, this scenario is believed to be a part of the paternalistic nature of this cause, discussed below. The problem of gendering is positioned here as a “woman’s cause” in order to posit that a shift in societal paradigms is unlikely to happen if the common man is continually told that only women are affected by trafficking. Historically, policy change follows quite the same pattern. When an issue is feminized, as is trafficking, policy transforms at a similarly slow pace.

40 Taken directly from Nina Tavakoli’s article, “A Crime that Offends the Conscience of Humanity: A Proposal to Reclassify Trafficking in Women as an International Crime.”
Moreover, as the issue continues to be feminized, males are simultaneously emasculated in several ways. Since men are constantly posed as the dominant forces in (at least Western) society, the ones responsible for protecting and taking care of women, what must it say to a man when he cannot protect himself and is instead exploited and abused by traffickers?

Paternalism

The sensationalistic tendency to create the binaries discussed previously, where a third party actor role is necessitated in order to “help,” is an incredibly paternalistic ideology. The social construction of protector is evidenced in the establishment of the “Three Ps” legislation framework, which includes the three foundations for creating policy: protection, prosecution, and prevention.\textsuperscript{41} The concept of protection assumes that someone is in need of protection to begin with, and infers that individuals being trafficked are, in total, self-identifying as persons in need of protecting. In Soderlund’s article, she recounts that when a member of the United Nations Project on Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia’s Mekong Region was asked, “what he thought of current rehabilitation strategies, he said he had ‘never seen an issue where there is less interest in hearing from those who are most affected by it’ (Jones, 2003, 1).”\textsuperscript{42}

The propensity of anti-trafficking advocates to frequently ignore the personal wishes and ideas from victims and survivors doesn’t fall far from the habits of abolitionists in Britain’s early anti-slavery movement. When a former slave, called “Equiano,” released his own autobiography, Hochschild claims that, “most Britons thought of Africans as heathen illiterates.” In all the years of addressing the British Parliament, abolitionists used essentially no personal accounts from slaves in an effort to advocate their freedom. As current anti-trafficking abolitionists perpetuate this problem, paternalistic tendencies will continue to impair the treatment of victims, and likely never address issues driving demand.

CONCLUSION

Final Notes, Suggestions for Future Research, and Remarks on the Inherent Faults of These Arguments

The major problem here, of course, is an overall insufficiency of research. Several other schools of thought, including the media, race and politics have somewhat vast amounts of previous data that speak to the affects of sensationalism on public perception and movement building. Little exists, however, in the way of sensationalism’s ties to human trafficking and the anti-human trafficking movement. In the future, then, it is suggested that both content and discourse analysis, involving several different types of methodologies, be conducted. As practical techniques and “everyday” problems are addressed, significance must also be given to the broader issues at hand, in an effort to avoid merely being reactionary to an ever-evolving issue, but to start to tackle the more systemic problems that create and generate need and demand in the first place. Sensationalism and the systemic problems it naturally includes are certainly


\textsuperscript{42} Gretchen Soderlund, "Running from the Rescuers: New U.S. Crusades Against Sex Trafficking and the Rhetoric of Abolition," \textit{NWSA Journal} 17, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 66.
part of that demand process. Therefore, education—within organizations and eventually within the public—is an essential element to combating the problem of rhetoric, as well.

Additionally, counterpoints to each of the claims mentioned can be argued—and argued well, for that matter. The point here is not to draw black and white boundaries, alleging that all sensationalist rhetoric is wrong all of the time; the point is to open up dialogue in an effort to critically examine the gray areas that exist here. It should be noted, in fact, that there is past and current evidence that value exists in some forms of sensationalism. First, the old adage that “any publicity is good publicity.” While this, of course, can always be disputed, it is true that many accounts of sensationalism have actually (as is the goal of sensationalizing in the first place) garnered more interest in the movement itself. As well, increased interest usually means increased donations and funding. If one sensationalized story gets one more individual curious enough to begin educating themselves on trafficking in general, there is value. If one sensationalized view of prostitution allows even one more officer to recognize the potential for trafficking, and therefore provides the opportunity for one more victim to be released, there is value there. In fact, it could also be contended that the anti-trafficking movement would be nowhere were it not for the views of the “radical Right,” paired with many “abolitionist feminist” groups, securing the attention of President Bush. Through their efforts and outcry, the issue began to receive increased recognition, and therefore enhanced policies. While some organizations disagree with how the administration handled the issue, still other organizations might not exist were it not for funding appropriated through this elevated recognition or additional legislation.

The point that this research is trying to bring to light is that these matters are complicated, difficult, and not every case is cut and dry. The point is to begin wrestling, to begin battling, to begin chewing over these subjects while admitting there are serious cultural, physical, spiritual, ethical dilemmas concerned. Just as no one survivors’ story should be treated the same as any other, no one case of sensationalism can be analyzed out of context. The issue, rather, is recognizing that there is intersectionality involved no matter what case or what issue is investigated. Just as identity should be appreciated as fluid, so should this movement. Where there is abuse and exploitation, there will inevitably be complications; but there must always be an understanding of the correlations, the connectivity involved. Moreover, as a movement, those involved must begin to give merit to the more overarching issues here. If any long-term change is to be expected, the perpetuation of age-old problems absolutely must be scrutinized. Gendering, Othering, consumerism, issues between the Global North and the Global South, politics, and myriad (likely innumerable) other problems must be addressed and used as critical lenses in searching for best practices as organizations and individuals work to end trafficking. Perfection isn’t to be expected; but haphazard treatment of the subject and vigilant action or a “by any means necessary” mindset, without concern or appreciation for all parties involved, is categorically unacceptable and quite often more detrimental than helpful. The anti-trafficking movement is “young” enough to merit more critical examination, but it’s also “old” enough at this point that accountability, if impossible to require, must now be demanded. If the organizations within this movement continue to battle themselves more than they battle the actual problem, then the movement will cease to make any actual progress.
Annotated Bibliography


O’Connell Davidson, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Nottingham, has focused her attention on issues surrounding prostitution since the mid 1990s, and began specifically looking at the demand side of trafficking in 2001, under commission of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the cited work, she critically examines power dynamics and binaries set up through social contracts and uses these to frame the debate surrounding prostitution, specifically in regards to children within the sex trade. These theoretical frameworks and social constructions speak directly to my research, in that normative cultural generalizations are often sensationalist in nature and provide breeding ground for systemic issues surrounding the issue of trafficking, as well as myriad other rights issues. Similarly to McDonald and Soderlund’s works, cited below, O’Connell Davidson feels that these extremist points of view are false narratives, rather than accurate depictions of the facts, and questions their use as foundations for theory and policy. Her views might be challenged as “extremist” in their own right, but merely because she devastates common rhetoric, digging extensively into gray areas, shattering paradigms so deeply-rooted in mainstream society. Tackling institutions like marriage and parenthood, as well as characters like the pedophile, O’Connell Davidson’s rare voice profoundly enlightens the debate surrounding any genre of dramatic terminology inside of sex work.


In this book, Anthony M. DeStefano details the history of policy within the United States regarding human trafficking. DeStefano, a reporter focusing on legal affairs and criminal justice, takes an in-depth look at how these policies were formed, those who helped form them, and both their strengths and weaknesses (especially in reference to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act). This information provided a consistent backdrop for my research, as it continued to draw theory back to practice, illuminating how language, religion and politics continually find their way into legislation. While only quoted a few times throughout this research, DeStefano’s work is considered by the author to give some of the most compelling evidence for cautioning the use of sensationalism, as it shows direct connections between rhetoric and law. More specifically, his commentary on “abolitionist feminist” agendas within the anti-prostitution debate complicate the use of “abolition” or “abolitionist” in modern anti-trafficking tactics, as well as informing much of the grounding for the problematic nature of sensationalism in terms of influencing funding.


Born in 1942, the author is a Professor at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California at Berkely where he teaches writing. Many of his publications have focused on issues surrounding Africa, Colonialism, and historical slavery. In this work, the author tells the compelling story of the first abolitionist movement set in the United Kingdom, from its beginnings in a press shop to the floor of British Parliament, from the island of St. Dominque to the streets of Paris. Hochschild displays the roller coaster that was abolishing the early slave trade, where, for the first time, a relatively small group of people endeavored to change the world. The book allowed for direct parallels to the current anti-trafficking movement and the common problems we share and continue to face, opening up space to question whether abolition has had anything other than temporary victories and whether it’s actually contributed to the perpetuation of the very thing it hopes to eradicate.


A Dean at the Buffalo Law School, Mutua received his education from the University of Nairobi, the University of Dar-es-Salaam, and Harvard Law School. An incredibly distinguished Professor, much of his work has focused on international law and human rights. In the cited work, he builds a case against the basic—although often unspoken—human rights backdrop. Here, three key players are set up as caricatures: savages, victims, and saviors. He calls attention to the vague terminology used within the tenants of human rights law, especially the U.N. Charter that fails to describe what a “fundamental right” actually is, and who is deserving of them. From there, he critically examines each of the caricatures and the master narratives that both create them and keep them going, drawing particular attention to Western and Euro-centric ideologies and how they’re cast most often upon non-White individuals and those in the “Third World.” This master narrative piece, and the roles of “savage,” “victim,” and “savior,” are essential in this research to frame the importance of rhetoric and perception, which challenge the roles each character plays and how they remain fixed within those roles, rarely seeing those demonized or victimized by the crime as equals.


William F. McDonald is currently a Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Georegetown University. Granted the Stephen Schafer Award of the National Organization of Victim Assistance in 1979, McDonald’s specializes in criminal justice on a number of subjects. In this article, he denounces several practices of organizations within the campaign against human trafficking, whom he claims are largely driven by only religious or political groups with hard-line agendas that ultimately compete with each other for attention, rather than coordinate efforts for a common cause. Within this argument, he details several methods used by organizations in order to shock the public or influence policy, noting that numbers are erroneous and images are radical. Since McDonald directly calls out the anti-trafficking movement as a “campaign,” where
symbolic and extremist methods are used (somewhat successfully), his research lead to much of the significance and weight behind the shock tactics discussed in this research. While speaking on two relatively different topics within the anti-trafficking movement, his article and the article by Soderlund below can largely be classified as drawing similar conclusions.


Soderlund, as an Assistant Professor of English and Women’s Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, has focused much of her research on “white slavery” and sex work. Referenced in DeStefano’s book, cited above, some of Soderlund’s former works provided commentary on the abuse of immigration workers through “victim” status granted by trafficking policies (DeStefano, 38). In this piece, she critiques moral and political agendas used through the anti-trafficking campaign, and as in many other sources cited in this paper, denounces these motives by labeling the movement a “crusade.” Specifically, this article was used to question “rescue,” “restoration,” and “captive versus free” concepts, where she particularly references Clinton and Bush politics. Her assessment of the use of the phrase “sex slave,” as used as a method she called “scandal generating,” helped form many of the opinions espoused in the author’s section on dramatic language and the use of the word “slave” to describe those “victimized” by trafficking.


Nina Tavakoli is an Associate Legal Officer at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and currently resides in Tanzania. She argues primarily that “trafficking” diminishes the crime, and should rather be referred to as “slavery,” believing that this change might shift acceptance, particularly in trafficking of women. While this article was only used to briefly discuss issues surrounding use of the term “slavery,” the author would consider it an incredibly important piece in the debate surrounding language and how influential this language is within the framework of law and policy. Even though the author’s statements might seem to disagree with Tavakoli’s opinions, it’s likely that this alone is why her article is considered so vital; it so clearly displays the difficult nature of grappling with the myriad issues that come into play within trafficking, and how the movement (and therefore policy makers and legislators) must be intentional in their use of labels.


As a Professor at The George Washington University, Weitzer specializes in the sex industry and American policies regarding prostitution and sex trafficking. In this article, he critiques the anti-trafficking movement as an institution and outlines all of the characteristics that make it akin to a moral crusade. Specifically, this paper highlights his points on the anti-trafficking movement’s tendency to inflate numbers, provide horror stories, and personify customers and traffickers as evil. Again, Weitzer’s work can be most closely associated with the works cited herein by Davidson O’Connell and Soderlund, as well McDonald (particularly due to his feeling that the movement is largely driven by religious and political motives, especially within the Bush administration and feminist groups). His views of the movement’s use of rhetoric are particularly interesting in that they move beyond common thought and into institutionalization, giving even more cause to examine the detrimental effects of sensationalism and providing ample backing to the argument that these techniques often lead to drachonian handling of issues.