

# Sex trafficking in mass media: gender, power and personal economies

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## Overview

Trafficking for sexual exploitation is an activity that reduces humans to commodities. It has been characterised as a 'modern form of slavery that is one of the fastest growing forms of crime throughout the world' (Wilson, Walsh and Kleaker, 2008, p.145). Trafficking for sexual exploitation involves the sale of one person to another, but it is more than an economic exchange. Trafficking also is a massive indicator of inequities—inequities between women and men and inequities among women, whose status and empowerment can be differently affected by education, income, race, age and geography.

## Trafficking: Definitions and scope of problem

Trafficking for sexual exploitation is brutal enterprise but 'massively profitable and (a) constantly expanding international industry' (Jeffreys, 2008, para.1). It is the third largest source of profits for organised crime, following the sale of drugs and guns (United Nations, n.d.), and remains a particularly attractive enterprise because 'it is low in risk and high in payoffs' (Stoecker, 2005, p.14).

Human trafficking has two additional advantages over drugs and weapons trafficking. One is that there is an almost limitless supply of the 'product'; sadly, it is unlikely that there will be a shortage of impoverished and desperate people in the world in the foreseeable future (Holmes, 2010, p.10).

Human trafficking involves deception, coercion, movement and exploitation of people across national borders (Ebbe, 2008; Haque, 2006). Although the scope of human trafficking is difficult to quantify because victims are physically confined and afraid to report the crime, and also because it is difficult to verify statistical information that has been gathered (Kempadoo, Sanghera and Pattanaik, 2005), non-governmental agencies speculate millions of people are trafficked each year into '3-D' jobs—work that is dirty, dangerous and difficult (Ebbe, 2008). The majority of people trafficked for sexual exploitation are women, and although boys and young men also may be trafficked to work in prostitution, they are more likely to work at hard labour or in the military (Repetskaia, 2005).

The United Nations defines trafficking as the 'acquisition of people by improper means such as force, fraud, and deception, with the aim of exploiting them' (UN, 2011) and further characterises trafficking as an exchange 'in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person is induced to perform such an act under the age of 18 years' (UN, n.d.). A more expansive definition of trafficking is offered in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. The Palermo Protocol, adopted in 2000 and implemented in 2003 as part of a comprehensive global effort to crack down on organised crime and help women who have been trafficked, acknowledged that trafficking is, indeed, a mechanism for sexual exploitation. However, the document also noted it is the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation' (Protocol, 2000). Consent, the Protocol says, is irrelevant in exploitive circumstances, and implicit in this document is the reality of gender disadvantage.

Feminist scholars and women's advocates argue that the circumstances that make possible the sale of one human being by another have their roots in cultural, political and economic systems that privilege male power and pleasure. Lack of legal rights and legal protections diminish women's security and increase their economic vulnerability, as do sociocultural norms that limit women's roles in their communities (Limoncelli, 2010; Kangaspunta, Clark, Dixon and Dottridge, 2008). 'Women are vulnerable to trafficking because they are frequently excluded from mainstream economic and social systems, such as employment, higher education, and legal as well as political parity' (Kangaspunta, Clark, Dixon and Dottridge, 2008, p.72). Women can be 'pushed' into trafficking by poverty, lack of education or sexual

abuse or 'pulled' from their homes by the promise of higher wages, secure jobs and a better quality of life (Othman, 2006). Some are sold by relatives or kidnapped (De mir and Finckenauer, 2010; Omorodion, 2009; Seol, 2004), while others are made vulnerable by war and displacement (Simié, 2010).

## Prostitution: helpful or harmful to women?

While trafficking for sexual exploitation has been condemned widely because of the force and duplicity involved, feminist scholars and women's advocates differ on the activity central to trafficking for sexual exploitation: prostitution.

Some scholars (Zheng, 2010; Agustin, 2007) distinguish between sex trafficking and prostitution, observing that trafficking involves forced movement of women across borders for sexual exploitation but suggesting that some women choose, without coercion, to migrate, and sex work may or may not be part of their work once they leave their home country. These advocates and scholars suggest the sale of sex is primarily an economic transaction—the exchange of money for time, an exchange that ultimately can prove physically and emotionally empowering to women (Andrijasevic, 2010; Ditmore, Levy and Willman, 2010; Zheng, 2010). To define prostitution as sexual exploitation positions women solely as powerless victims manipulated by others, they suggest.

Women exercise agency even in opting to migrate on someone else's terms in hopes of improving their own lives, because they are in situations that offer them few, if any options, given their lack of education, their debt, and/or their inability to financially support their children. (Dewey, 2010, p.113)

Indeed, some research suggests that sex work itself is not traumatizing when it is chosen labour (Romans, Potter, Martin and Herbison, 2001). One study found that Iranian women knew they were moving abroad to work in the sex industry and spoke of their migration as a way to gain monetary independence (Shahrokhi, 2010), while another study found that women who migrated to Cyprus did so voluntarily, anticipating they would work as prostitutes (Güven-Lisaniler, Rodríguez and Ugural, 2005). Women who left Thailand for marriage in Denmark said they did so to support their families, to attain personal freedom and to fulfil dreams of love and motherhood (Plumbech, 2010).

Conversely, other women's advocates and scholars suggest any distinction between forced and unforced sex is arbitrary and ignores the larger inequality of gendered socioeconomic systems and repressive cultural norms that makes women's bodies sites of profit. In this argument, the issue is not whether women choose to enter prostitution or whether they are forced into trafficking; the issue is the injustice of institutional and individual viewpoints that normalise men's control of women's bodies. Ditmore (2005) argued that trafficking and prostitution are essentially the same—that consent is irrelevant when women have few opportunities for economic and personal security. Koken (2010) questioned whether the exchange of sex for money can ever be considered a free choice in a patriarchal system where women have few rights and few opportunities. This perspective suggests that prostitution is far from empowering and is a choice out of no choice (Bindel, 2006), made by women who find themselves caught between starvation and survival. Prostitution is not 'like other work' (Jeffreys, 2008, para.1) since few other jobs carry such high risks of rape, beatings and disease. 'Given the fact that prostitution reduces women to bought objects, there can be no distinction between "forced" and "free choice" prostitution since it will always and necessarily be degrading and damaging to women' (Andrijasevic, 2010, pp.14-15). Characterization of prostitution as work 'may serve sex entrepreneurs' quest to gain legitimacy, but it does nothing to ameliorate the economic vulnerability that draws, then traps, women in a cycle of prostitution' (Sullivan, 2005, p.7). Farley (2009) furthers states that:

Trafficking expands and markets women's sexual exploitation and their subordination to men... Theoretical distinctions between prostitution and trafficking simply do not exist in the real world. Men's demand for trafficked women cannot be distinguished from the demand for prostitution (pp.311,314).

Bindel (2006) has suggested debates about prostitution create a hierarchy of 'good' prostitutes who do not choose to work in the sex industry and 'bad' prostitutes who choose sex work. Aradau (2008) observed that 'trafficked women are to be protected at the expense of 'dirty whores' who are to be policed and punished' (Aradau, 2008, p.31).

## Media images of trafficking

These images of good and bad prostitutes are evident in mass media stories about sex trafficking.

Trafficking for exploitation has been a topic of Western journalism for more than a century, yet, in spite of this long history of reportage, contemporary media accounts present trafficking as though it was 'sensational and new' (Saunders and Soderlund, 2003, para.32). Scholars have suggested that contemporary media accounts of trafficking parallel press accounts of 'white slavery' published in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in which magazines in England and the United States published investigative stories on the kidnapping and sale of young white women by mysterious criminals, typically 'foreigners' from developing nations (Saunders and Soderlund, 2003). Such accounts supported racist and sexist notions about white privilege and women's proper domestic 'place' in society (Doezema, 2000).

Stories about white slavery ultimately vanished, but in the 1980s journalists began to report more frequently on the phenomenon of trafficking and the metaphor of slavery appeared again. Modern stories were often sensationalised exposés rather than explanatory articles about the depth and causes of the trafficking (Soderlund, 2005), and today, as in previous centuries, 'narratives of risky, naïve and desperate females exploited by shadowy international criminal networks' (Harrington, 2010, p.185) dominate. Yet, while contemporary media stories on trafficking mirror the structure and tone of 19th and 20th century articles on white slavery, there is one significant difference: The site of vulnerability has changed. 'Modern accounts of "trafficking in women" vie with "white slavery" stories in their use of sensational descriptions and emotive language, though the "victims" are no longer white, Western European or American women, but women from the third-world or the former Eastern bloc' (Doezema, 2000, p.31). In contemporary discourse, the innocent white women of 19th and 20th century narratives in US and British magazines have been replaced by poor, uneducated women of the global South (Zheng, 2010). While women who are tricked or forced into trafficking can indeed be considered victims, some critics have argued that today's media reports on trafficked women serve to reinforce stereotypes of developing country residents as passive, manipulated and 'less-than' their Western counterparts. Some scholars also suggest that presenting women as victims borders on essentialism, an 'assumption of sameness' that ignores the 'material conditions and needs of non-Western, non-white, lesbian, and poor women around the globe' (Lazar, 2005, p.16), and positions white, Western, heterosexual women as the model to which all women aspire. Current media stories have tended to focus on deceived victims from developing nations and noble rescuers from industrialised countries (Doezema, 2000; Mohanty, 1991; Ricchiardi, 2003; Soderlund, 2005; Yea, 2010), but 'offer neither true analysis of the problem nor a discussion of the sources of the problem, its consequences, or the state's obligations' (Lasocik, 2010, p.31).

Studies of media suggest a superficial and limited coverage of trafficking. Arthurs (2006), in an examination of British documentaries, suggests that these films celebrate women's economic success and their ability to shake off repressive sexual rules, ignoring the dangers of prostitution. She also notes that economic pressures on media to produce profit have led to a decline in public affairs reporting that might actually shed light on trafficking. One study of Serbian media found that journalistic stories were dominated by sensational accounts of crimes, with no articles or editorials supporting the trafficked women themselves (Dekic, 2003), and a separate study found that media stories on trafficking were replete with traditional masculine and feminine stereotypes (Denton, 2010). Vijayarasa (2010, p.590) found in her study in Vietnam that government frames of prostitution 'negatively influenced attitudes toward sex workers and victims of trafficking for sex exploitation alike'. Barnett (2013) examined a decade of magazine coverage of trafficking and found that stories focused on the sale of sex, not the purchase of sex, thereby making women both villains and victims in trafficking and ignoring the larger systems of gender inequality that make trafficking profitable.

Yet media do more than report on trafficking; in some cases, they are complicit in creating and supporting trafficking, scholars contend. Media create a desire for consumer goods, by conveying 'an imagery of luxury and affluence to the people of the South, which beckons them sometimes with disastrous results, as those who encounter discrimination, racism, and exploitation frequently testify' (Skrobanek, Boonpakdee and Jantateero, 1997, p.13). Coy, Wakeling and Garner (2011) suggested that popular culture images have glamorised prostitution, making it seem a form of entertainment and leisure rather than abuse, while Holmes (2010) has argued that unsympathetic and incomplete media stories themselves may be a form of exploitation. 'Along with the dissemination of necessary information about the problem, mass media are also a powerful tool in spreading undesirable stereotypes of sexual exploitation and trafficking in persons, speculating on piquant details and the image of a woman as a sexual commodity' (Tiuriukanova, 2005, p.111). Crawford (2010, p.121) also has argued that trafficking has been the subject of media interest, in part, because of the 'titillation value' of stories that reference sexual activity. Arthurs' (2006, p.127) work supports this notion, and she suggests there is a 'docu-porn' mentality in presenting media images of trafficked women: 'Sensationalism is the product of a fascination with stories of sexual transgression, in which

the moral righteousness of exposing wrongdoing is entwined with an often unacknowledged pleasure of vicarious participation'.

## For future discussion

Of all the limitations on women's work, prostitution is one employment opportunity that women are not denied. Media reports have tended to focus on individuals' dramatic stories (both the rescued and the rescuers), have ignored gender inequities that make the sale of sex profitable and have failed to report on the historical, cultural and socioeconomic forces that encourage trafficking for sexual exploitation. Additionally, media have created categories of good prostitutes (those forced to have sex) and bad prostitutes (those who choose to have sex) without exploring the economic realities of women's lives. These categories are not helpful and detract from necessary discussions about how to provide educational and economic opportunities for women. Stories about trafficking should document the factors that push women into trafficking and pull them from their home countries, and journalists should consider whether any story that portrays prostitution as a form of sexual playfulness is indeed an accurate portrayal. Journalistic stories, which typically report on what is new and exclude any historical context, need to explore systems of colonisation that have produced inequalities in the global economic structures, which make trafficking not only possible but profitable. And, finally, media stories can explain trafficking as a consequence of globalisation, not a problem that impedes businesses' economic growth.

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