

Are Conservative Evangelicals Hampering Anti-Trafficking Efforts?

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Human trafficking is an issue so entirely abhorrent, it seems that it would be impossible to inappropriately address it. And yet a forthcoming paper (to be published in by Dr. Hebah Farrag, Richard Flory and Brie Loskota) argues that often religious organizations fail to get the job done right.

Over the past ten years, Christian groups, most notably Evangelical Christians, especially social conservatives, have rallied to raise money and form organizations to address human trafficking. Many have teamed up with some feminists of the Dworkin camp in opposing all forms of prostitution and pornography as “exploitative,” fracturing both Christians and feminists. There are four intertwined areas of conflict in the sex trafficking debate.

The first problem is that trafficking often does not involve sexual exploitation. Dr. Richard Flory, Director of the Center for Religion & Civic Culture at the University of Southern California, writes that trafficking for sex is, “the least common instance of human trafficking when compared to sweatshop labor, agricultural work or even corporate crime.” Many evangelicals decry sex trafficking and prostitution while arguing that sweatshops are entirely acceptable; saying that the “alternative” (read: prostitution) is worse. Dr. Yvonne Zimmerman, author of *Other Dreams of Freedom*, argues that this amounts to a form of colonialism, since often the people Christians try to “free” may well prefer prostitution to starvation. Dr. Catherine Mackinnon of Harvard University disagrees. She writes to me,

“Most trafficking of human beings is for the sex industry. Prostitution is its impetus and its destination. It is also false that ‘all the money and attention’ goes to sex as opposed to labor trafficking. This view is promoted by people who live off money and attention and also trivialize sex trafficking, mainly by insinuating that prostitution is either a form of freedom or that it is not so bad as an occupation for ‘some women.’ Those who work against sex trafficking never minimize the issues or horror of labor trafficking or suggest that the people who are so trafficked are doing just fine.”

But Dr. Rhacel Parrenas, University of Southern California points out that the International Labor Organization report for 2012 finds that there are 21 million victims of forced labor globally and 4.5 million victims of forced sexual labor. That doesn’t even include exploitive manufacturing, domestic work and backbreaking agriculture. The dangers of exploited labor were recently revealed in Bangladesh.

A second hitch, which flows from the labor and sex debate, is the issue of prostitution. Some organizations, especially feminist and Christian organizations oppose all prostitution, regardless of the age of the woman involved. Other organizations distinguish between “trafficking in women” or “forced prostitution” and “voluntary prostitution.” Dr. Catherine Mackinnon of Harvard argues that,

“Prostitution is based on inequality—economic, sex, race, age. The Swedish Model

addresses it at its origin, which is the demand for sex by people who do not share these inequalities—i.e. relatively rich white older men. Anything that addresses women's inequality gets at the root causes."

This question has cleaved the feminist movement and strikes at the core of the issue. Elizabeth Bernstein of Barnard University notes in *The Sexual Politics of the "New Abolitionism,"* "prostitution, something previously of concern only to local law enforcement and to relatively small numbers of committed feminists and sex-worker activists, has come to occupy the center of an ever spiraling array of faith-based and secular activist agendas, human rights initiatives, and legal instruments."

But it is far from clear whether prostitution is inherently slavery or deserving of particular attention. Laura Agustín writes that, "Instead, it is clear that the lines between commercial and non-commercial sex have always been blurry, and that middle-class marriage is itself an example." She argues that adding inequality to the equation does not produce a clear-cut moral distinction, writing that,

"For some critics, the possession of money by clients gives them absolute power over workers and therefore means that equality is impossible. This attitude toward money is odd, given that we live in times when it is acceptable to pay for child and elderly care, for rape, alcohol and suicide counseling and for many other forms of consolation and caring."

Instead, she concludes, "we cannot assume there is a fundamental difference between commercial and non-commercial sex." Just as some men work in coal mines and others find it abhorrent, some women are willing to have intercourse for money while others are not. The idea of "rescuing" men from coal mining strikes us as paternalistic and yet many Christians and feminists see no problem "rescuing" women from a job they have freely chosen. These feminists label those opposed to prostitution colonizers, because they impose their values on those whom they seek to "free."

One aspect of this "moralistic" approach (which is not confined only to religious people, but rather those who take a moral, rather than socio-economic view of the issue) is the "rescue model." Dr. Flory worries that Evangelical groups rely far too much on the "rescue model": busting in, saving some women and then leaving. Too often, the women end up right back in the hands of the captors. Dr. Mackinnon tells me, "Myself, I don't agree with the moral approach, although rescue, with follow-through, can help the people it helps, which is that many more than were helped before." She argues though, that the ultimate solution will be ending demand.

The failure of the rescue model strikes at the perennial question, "what happens the day after?" Dr. Zimmerman, in collaboration with Dr. Claude d'Estree have outlined a code of conduct for religious organizations that includes, "Pastoral counseling, religious based therapies, and spiritual direction are not a substitute for standard therapeutic models and should only be offered at the request of the trafficking survivors." She tells me that her work at a rape crisis center taught her that no victim is the same, and no victim needs the same care.

Alicia Peters, a professor at the University of New England, offers a hopeful example of such a model. In New York City she says,

“I’ve seen a very successful collaboration between a rights-based service providing agency and a shelter run by a group of sisters. The service organization would never place clients in a shelter that focused on ‘rehabilitating women’ and restricted their mobility, but in this case both organizations were committed to recognizing the women’s agency and assisting them to make their own choices about moving forward post-trafficking.”

The problem with raids is that they implicitly assume that anyone working in the commercial sex sector are necessarily trafficked or “enslaved.” Such raids, she tells me, are particularly popular among Evangelical groups, even those that are more established in the mainstream like the International Justice Mission.

The raid and rescue model flows into the final cleave, whether anti-trafficking efforts should strike at the supply or demand for prostitution. Flory told me, “because Evangelicals tend to frame [human trafficking] as a moral issue, they focus on the supply side, not demand.” Mackinnon agrees about the importance of fighting trafficking on the demand side, a model she writes in her article, “Trafficking, Prostitution, and Inequality,” published in the *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* that has best been developed and executed in Sweden.

Flory tells me that there is often misunderstanding and “a stunning lack of ability to actually talk to each other.” He tells me he is an optimist, but in order for cooperation to occur, religious groups must look beyond the moral side. I talked to Sara Pomeroy of the Richmond Justice Institute about cooperation between secular and religious organization. She tells me that the International Justice Mission often works with secular organizations, noting a recent collaboration with Polaris Project. Religious organizations, she tells me, often help rescued women with job retraining, work with local police and lobby for laws. Furthermore, she claims they are concerned with labor trafficking.

But some feminists think that this new “bipartisan consensus” is just as destructive as the “bipartisan consensus” that rallied behind the Comstockery of the 1980s. These feminists, including Drs. Zimmerman, Bernstein and Agustin don’t agree on everything, but they find much wrong with the current paradigm. The idea of imposing freedom is hardly as salvific as the broad consensus makes it out to be. Further, the question of trafficking is not as black and white as these groups portray it. There is not always an “exploiter” and an “exploited”; often underlying socio-economic conditions are much more important. Dr. Zimmerman tells me, “Often the groups that do the most to combat human trafficking aren’t ‘human trafficking’ groups; they are groups that put women in apartments, that offer medical care, food and legal aid. If a woman has access to affordable food and housing she has more options.”

We know what works when it comes to combating trafficking. The issue must be treated a socio-economic issue, like sweatshop labor, and not as a moral one. To treat the issue with moralistic language devalues the women involved and hampers progress. Groups, whether religious or secular that are willing to approach this issue in this manner, should be encouraged. The question is whether Evangelicals will leave the moral approach. They have encouragement from within. A prominent Evangelical pastor, Brian McLaren, has challenged his church, saying, “It’s disturbing that nonprofits can raise money to fight sex trafficking in Cambodia but it’s much harder to raise awareness about bad trade policies in the U.S. that keep Cambodia poor so that it needs sex trafficking.”

Sean McElwee’s articles have appeared on TheModerateVoice.com, WashingtonMonthly.com,

Alternet.org, Reason.com, Antiwar.com, and Salon. His most recent pieces can be found at his blog: seanamcelwee.com.