

Chapter 2

Sexual Slavery

White Slavery is not just a figment of the imagination of pornographic writers; it has gained considerable impetus in recent years.... The girls are recruited from all over Europe and their destinations are the ports and capitals of the world, some going to private clients of one race or another before being passed on to brothels.¹

For over a hundred years, such images have had a tenacious grip on the public psyche for reasons which have not always been conscious or articulate. This depiction of commercial sex as a form of slavery, and prostitutes as women "trafficked" into the trade against their will, has endured in part because it resonates well with long-standing assumptions about women's sexual vulnerability and the proper relationship of women to sex, commerce, and travel.

"Beautiful White Girls Sold Into Ruin"

Organized movements against what was once known as "White Slavery" formed in the late nineteenth century in both Western Europe and the United States. One of the first widely read exposes of sexual trafficking appeared in 1885 when a British journalist, W. T. Stead, described his purchase of a young London girl from her mother, purportedly for use in Parisian prostitution. Public response was overwhelming, and included a demonstration of more than 200,000 people in London demanding, among other things, legislation to raise the age of sexual consent for girls.² Stead's story, and others like it, created the impression that prostitution was little more than the sexual enslavement of young girls. Historical records, however, suggest that most British prostitutes were not children sold into the trade but rather young women who consciously engaged in prostitution for economic reasons.³

Still, it was the image of the sexual slave that captured both the headlines and the public imagination, a phenomenon which might partially be explained by the effective mix of moral outrage and sexual

sensationalism in the reporting. One tract, for example, promised readers: "Beautiful White Girls Sold Into Ruin.... Illustrated with a Large Number of Startling Pictures."⁴

Despite meager evidence of a widespread phenomenon of involuntary prostitution, anti-trafficking campaigns quickly spread beyond Britain. In the United States, federal investigators attempting to uncover evidence of white slavery reported with frustration that few of the women they interviewed pointed to slave trafficking as their means of entry into the trade. A more typical explanation, they found, was economic need. One former domestic explained to U.S. investigators: "[I was] tired of drudgery as a servant ... I'd rather do this than be kicked around like a dog in a kitchen by some woman who calls herself a lady."⁵ Nonetheless, in the U.S. as in Britain, it was easier for both investigators and the public to believe in "a vast underground traffic in women than to accept that working-class women might choose sex either for money or the excitement it brought."⁶

The belief in a pervasive sexual slave trade in the absence of widespread evidence suggests that the notion of white slavery was not dependent on large numbers of documented cases. Instead, it was fueled by more general anxieties about changing gender, sex, class, and race relations at the turn of the century. The idea of a "white slave" unconsciously spoke not only to the experience of the white working class laboring under harsh conditions of early industrial capitalism, but also to the racial fears of an increasingly ethnically diverse population.

In the first sixty years of U.S. history, from Independence through 1840, total immigration was only three-quarters of a million people. But in the next forty, between 1840 and 1880, over eight million Europeans, mostly from northwestern Europe, emigrated to the U.S. And from 1880 to 1930, during the height of the White Slavery campaigns, more than twenty-three million immigrants came to the United States, this time primarily from eastern and southern Europe, including Italians, Poles, Russian Jews, and Slavs. This represented the largest population movement recorded in history.⁷ Such massive trafficking across borders produced fears of cultural contamination and moral pollution. Not surprisingly, these foreigners became the

target of nativist rhetoric and provided a focus for early anti-traffic-
ing legislation. A 1901 U.S. Senate report, for example, asserted that
“the vilest practices are brought here from continental Europe ... the
most bestial refinements of depravity.”⁸ Investigators especially warned
against Jews “engaged in importation ... prey[ing] upon young girls
whom they find on the streets, in dance halls and similar places.”⁹

Adding to racial anxieties in the U.S. was the recent emancipation
of African American slaves, which was perceived as a threat to both
sexual and racial purity. As Lynne Segal notes:

the emancipation of Black slaves in the southern states of
America had been followed by the immediate violent
upsurge of lynchings of Black men, at least one every
three days between 1885 and 1890 ... the justification
given referred to the protection of white womanhood
from bestial Black men.¹⁰

Even without the effective scapegoating of Blacks, Jews, and immi-
grants, fears of white slavery resonated with the prevailing gendered
belief that travel, commerce, and sex were all properly the province of
men. A woman found operating in such foreign territory—especial-
ly a White woman—was not only out of place, but highly suspect.
Cynthia Enloe notes:

feminist geographers and ethnographers have been
amassing evidence revealing that a principal difference
between women and men in countless societies has been
the license to travel away from a place thought of as
“home.” A woman who travels ... without the protec-
tion of an acceptable male escort is likely to be tarred with
the brush of “unrespectability.” She risks losing her
honor ...¹¹

In the late nineteenth century, only a handful of women had
assumed the public identity of “lady traveler.” Their class status as
“ladies” offered some protection from public condemnation as did
their willingness to package themselves as handmaids to coloniza-
tion. Nonetheless, as Enloe reports, they were still “viewed with sus-
picion because they dared to travel such long distances with so little
proper male protection.”¹² It was assumed that few women above
reproach would willingly travel far from home; it was easier to conclude

that she had been trafficked there against her will and better judgment.

While far more women were "trafficked" out of the home by the forces of industrial capitalism than sexual slave traders, prostitution served as a convenient symbol for anxiety over women's entry into industry.¹³ Prostitutes, who traveled not only across physical distance but also through symbolic space, served as an effective trope for traffic across identity: sexual innocent to world-weary woman, sheltered daughter to working girl, madonna to whore. Anti-trafficking campaigns thus gave expression to popular concern for—as well as about—a new generation of working girls laboring and socializing outside the home. Public life was understood to be dangerously seductive. Places of urban commerce and recreation were described as dangerous recruiting grounds for traffickers and, more generally, as "the breeding ground of vice."¹⁴ The danger, then, was not only forced prostitution but also the lure of casual or recreational sex engaged in by so-called "charity girls." Women who engaged in sex outside of marriage—whether for pay, trade, or pleasure—challenged notions of proper womanhood, especially White womanhood.

Despite the use of the generic term "women" in anti-trafficking rhetoric, not all women were seen as equally positioned to fall from grace. The presence of White women in a world of carnality and commerce demanded an explanation which "trafficking" provided. Black women's involvement in the sex trade was considered less remarkable, merely confirming their exclusion from the status of "true womanhood." Patricia Hill Collins notes that "according to the cult of true womanhood, 'true' women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.... African American women encountered a different set of controlling images."¹⁵ According to Collins, the stereotypical image of the Black woman included the sexualized Jezebel: "Jezebel's function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women."¹⁶

Until the abolition of trade in and possession of African slaves in the British territories in 1833 and in the United States in 1863, the

sexual abuse of enslaved African women was not only commonplace but considered to be a right of ownership. As Sander Gillman points out, both Black women and those prostitutes unable or unwilling to claim the identity of trafficked innocents were believed to possess inherent biological "abnormalities" that set them apart.¹⁷ The idea that Black women were congenitally inclined to whorish behavior was matched by a comparable belief that Black men were highly sexed and dangerously out of control. The stereotypes produced and justified racist violence. As Patricia Hill Collins concludes, "lynching and rape, two race/gender specific forms of sexual violence, merged with their ideological justifications of the rapist and prostitute in order to provide an effective system of social control over African Americans."¹⁸

The unfortunate term "white slavery" was also a mystifying misnomer for the sexual exploitation of Asian women in the United States during the late nineteenth century. In the 1870s, several hundred women were purchased in China to be resold into either domestic labor or prostitution in California.¹⁹ Popular reports of Chinese "sex slaves" trafficked to California melded sexual titillation and racism. Sucheta Mazumdar argues that the publicity about these "debauched" Chinese prostitutes fueled fears and hostility among many Americans toward the 'inassimilable Chinese.'²⁰ Despite the fact that the numbers of women imported from China to California for prostitution were never large, the presence of even limited numbers of Chinese prostitutes was seen as a serious threat to the moral order.²¹ In 1876, one observer argued that there were enough Chinese prostitutes "to disgrace the city and greatly facilitate the spreading of ... immorality and vice among the youth of all classes."²²

The issue of forced prostitution became a justification for racist immigration legislation, culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The Exclusion Act, the first such law directed against a specific nationality, entirely suspended Chinese immigration into the United States including, rather incidentally, that by Chinese prostitutes. Even the far more compassionate "rescue work" undertaken by White missionary women in San Francisco shared some of the

racism fueling the exclusionary laws. For the missionaries, Chinese prostitutes were victims not only of sexual slave trading but also of a heathen culture. Rehabilitation centrally required both religious conversion and commitment to Christian marriage. "Success" was measured by the adoption of White, middle-class, American standards of feminine behavior. Those Chinese prostitutes unwilling to conform to this model were offered little assistance. Mission Home files suggest that many young prostitutes found the terms of their "liberation" unattractive enough to reject the offer of rescue "with scorn and derision."²³

Anti-Trafficking in the Contemporary Period

Echoes of racism and ethnocentrism have remained in the rhetoric of some abolitionist organizations well into the late twentieth century.²⁴ In general, however, contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns have distanced themselves from the defense of White womanhood by explicitly reframing the problem as one that confronts women of all races. One of the most important texts that helped to transform and update the concept of sexual slavery in the late twentieth century was written by American feminist Kathleen Barry. Barry's 1979 work, *Female Sexual Slavery*, redefined the problem of trafficking in the broadest possible terms:

All kinds of women are vulnerable to slave procurers. The assumption that only women of a particular class, race, or age group are potential victims [is wrong] ... sexual slavery lurks at the corners of every woman's life.²⁵

Barry argued not only that sexual slavery was a general threat to all women, but also greatly expanded its meaning beyond forced prostitution. Sexual slavery, according to Barry, is

the business that merchandises women's bodies to brothels and harems around the world ... [as well as that which is] practiced individually without an organizational network, it is supported by pimps ... [and] by husbands and fathers who use battery and sexual abuse as a personal measure of their power over their wives and daughters.²⁶

By defining sexual slavery so broadly, Barry generally avoided the racist reduction of sexual violence to that which is enacted on the White female body by the ethnic Other.²⁷ Barry also challenged the belief that abuses in the commercial sex trade are of an entirely different order than that which might occur within more respectable institutions such as marriage or the family. But Barry's goal was more ambitious than simply to draw complex connections between related phenomena across race and class lines. Barry wished to argue that there was in fact no significant difference between such practices as sex work, sexual slavery, incest, and rape: "Female sexual slavery is present in *all* situations where women and girls ... are subject to sexual violence and exploitation."²⁸ Thus, victims of sexual slavery might equally be "a prostitute, battered wife, incestuously assaulted child, veiled woman, purchased bride."²⁹ This collapse of all forms of sexual violence into a broadly defined category of "sexual slavery" effectively sidestepped debates about how widespread coercion might be within the specific practice of prostitution. Arguing against the need for a careful accounting of the actual numbers of those forced into prostitution, Barry claimed only that sexual slavery was "pervasive throughout patriarchal society."³⁰ Indeed, the author argued that an attempt to be more precise would be both irrelevant and impossible:

Amassing one hundred, one thousand, or many thousands of sex slavery cases will not prove the existence of the practice to those who have a vested interest in keeping it invisible.... There is no way to estimate what proportion of prostitution results from cases like the ones presented [in *Female Sexual Slavery*].³¹

Barry's claim, however, is a reflection of an ideological and not a methodological problem. Scholars and activists less committed to the abolitionist equation of prostitution with slavery have found far fewer difficulties in estimating the prevalence of deception and coercion as "recruiting" devices in the commercial sex trades. In one study of prostitution in South East Asia, for example, author Wendy Lee reports that "about ten percent of prostitutes in Thailand are deceived or forced into the profession. But more commonly families act as agents of recruitment."³² Lee, who is highly critical of prostitution and presumably has no "vested interest" in discounting the

role of trafficking in the trade, suggests that for the vast majority of Thai prostitutes working in Europe, entry is facilitated not by "traffickers" but by family members, "aunts, sisters, or cousins already in the trade."³³ Licia Brussa, director of the migrant prostitutes' AIDS prevention project in the Netherlands, concurs:

If you look at the way women really get into the trade here, it's mostly in the hands of other women through chain migration. They bring their sisters and cousins over to work, partly out of a desire to help, partly because it provides a feeling of solidarity to have family and friends here. But sometimes it's also simple exploitation: you can earn a lot of money by taking care of the travel arrangements and getting someone else settled into the business. Besides it's safer than bringing over strangers; you aren't as likely to turn in your aunt.³⁴

A similar conclusion is reached by the Dutch Foundation Against Trafficking in Women (STV) who estimate that no more than twenty percent of foreign prostitutes in the Netherlands have entered the trade through coercion or deception.³⁵

Kathleen Barry refuses to quantify the problem of sexual slavery. Instead she insists that, for anyone really concerned about violence against women, one case is evidence enough. A file cabinet full of documentation won't make the problem any more compelling to those who just don't care. I bristle at the suggestion that to ask "how many? what percentage? how widespread?" suggests I have a stake in denying that such abuse might actually exist. But I also appreciate her reluctance to play the numbers game. Numbers are not simply neutral "data"; their meaning is always political. As a lesbian, I have watched the "Christian" Right celebrate studies purporting to show that gays comprise less than the proverbial ten percent of the population. No mention is made of how difficult it might be to accurately count the members of a despised minority. No questions are asked about why human rights should be dependent on numerical status. During the 1993 March on Washington for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Civil Rights, about a dozen anti-gay protesters held signs declaring "Only 1%" and "Two Gay Rights: AIDS and Death." It was comforting to me that there were only twelve of them and close to a million of us.

While numbers can never tell the whole story, they are not unimportant. It is useful to know that more than half of the women working behind the windows in Amsterdam's Red Light district are foreigners. It is also useful to know that the great majority of them are not there against their will. I honor the efforts of feminists committed to rescuing those coerced into the trade, and I tolerate the attempts by the Christian Right to rehabilitate homosexuals "recruited" into a life they wish to leave. But in both instances it is disingenuous at best to portray a stigmatized sexual practice as inevitably coercive, and insist that all counterclaims are irrelevant. That's just another twist in the numbers game.

The seriousness of forced prostitution is in no way diminished by evidence that trafficking is not the most common form of "recruitment" into the sex trade. Even using low estimates, the reality remains that many thousands of women and children are involved in commercial sex against their will. Many more have "chosen" prostitution from a desperately limited range of options, and most prostitutes work under exploitative labor conditions. This, however, is a different set of claims than the argument that commercial sex is inevitably a form of slavery.

It is not only those, as Barry suggests, with a stake in denying the existence of abuse who have an interest in knowing the extent of trafficking within the trade. Activists committed to effectively combating sexual violence, too, are well served by the knowledge that deception and coercion do not account for all, or even most, prostitution. If prostitutes have not been simply trafficked into the trade as slaves, rescue work may be a less productive strategy than labor organizing. But many anti-prostitution activists' commitment to abolition causes them to view strategies of reform as not only inappropriate but dangerously counterproductive. Reforms are seen only to "normalize" a practice they insist is invariably abusive. As Cecilie Hoigard and Liv Finstad suggest, without a commitment to abolition, it becomes easy to

to oppose some types of prostitution without having to take a stand on the fundamental and threatening question of 'voluntary' adult prostitution. 'Fight prostitution

controlled by pushers and pimps, fight prostitution which exploits incest-victims or children. But leave 'voluntary' prostitution alone.³⁶

This is a suggestion they vehemently reject; the practice in all of its forms must be abolished.

Abolitionist ideology actually stands in the way of attempts such as those made by Kathleen Barry to reposition prostitution within a broader range of practices including marriage ("battered wife" or "purchased bride"), family life ("incest child" and mandatory motherhood), and gendered appearance ("veiled woman" and, by extension, other less exotic forms of compulsory female self-presentation). Despite clear evidence that state-sanctioned heterosexual marriage and family life is often violent, coercive, and abusive, there is no comparable argument that these institutions must be prohibited in all of their varied forms including those which participants claim to be consensual.³⁷ Campaigns against wife abuse and child abuse typically challenge the idea of women and children as property of husbands, propose reforms intended to increase structural equality between participants, promote legal changes to increase protection for victims and facilitate prosecution of those who commit abuses. Rarely is abolition suggested as the most appropriate tactic, nor are claims made that research into the prevalence of sexualized violence within marriage or the family is a methodological impossibility, that those who choose marriage (or defend another's right to do so) are "pseudo-feminists," or that an adequate understanding of these institutions can be attained by studying only those who have "escaped" them. All these are claims freely made about prostitution, however.³⁸ In short, despite attempts in the 1970s by anti-trafficking activists to expand the meaning of "sexual slavery" beyond the institution of commercial sex, prostitution remains a "special case," uniquely suited to abolition.

The contradictory impulse to consider prostitution as only one among many sites of sexual abuse and to simultaneously position it as a case apart was reinforced in the early 1990s when the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women issued a statement redefining sexual slavery as "sexual exploitation." "Sexual exploitation" was defined as

“sexual harassment, rape, incest abuse, wife abuse, pornography and prostitution.”³⁹ In other words, the *abuse* of a wife or a child, the *harassment* of a worker, and the practice of sexual *assault* (rape), were all to be considered instances of “sexual exploitation,” whereas consensual participation in marriage, family life, and heterosexuality were not. “Consent” and “choice” were meaningful in all areas except commercial sex. From the perspective of abolitionists, prostitution and pornography alone required no modifiers to signal abuse because, there, no meaningful distinction could be made between “forced” and “free.” Indeed, for abolitionists, prostitution can no more be a “chosen” or consensual activity than rape. Thus, Hoigard and Finstad conclude that “it is not mere rhetoric to counter the absurdity of the demand for legalization of prostitution with ‘Legalize rape and incest. Recognize these as normal activities.’”⁴⁰

But defining prostitution as exactly the same, whether consensually enacted or forced, poses a serious problem for sex workers. If prostitution is a form of sexual violence exactly like rape and incest, then the rape of a prostitute becomes predictable, indeed redundant.⁴¹ If a prostitute always already has been violated, rape is unremarkable, no more than a sign of excess. And if a prostitute can never consent, then she can never be said to refuse consent, an assertion challenged by a Melbourne street prostitute raped in 1991: “Sure I’m a working girl, but that doesn’t mean I have to put up with such violent behavior. The fact that I sell sex for a living in no way invalidates my right to say no. I don’t consent to violent attacks on my body.”⁴²

One of the justifications for insisting that prostitution, unlike marriage, is necessarily abusive is the belief that no one could ever really choose to participate in such an activity. Coercion, therefore, must be responsible. Hoigard and Finstad insist that “No one ‘wants’ to rent out her vagina as a garbage can for hordes of anonymous men’s ejaculations.”⁴³ Sex worker Carol Queen calls this a “politics of ‘ick’”:

The assumption is that because I find something icky no one else could ever consent to doing it. The question I always ask is whether “oh ick!” is really the basis for a politics. For a lot of years, heterosexual people said “oh, I could never have sex with people of the same sex, so

therefore it must be sick, it must be immoral, it must be criminalized." Well, some of us really can do this.⁴⁴

To argue that there is an important difference to be made between consensual and forced prostitution, is not, however, the same as arguing that all consensual prostitution is necessarily "free." As Hoigard and Finstad point out:

voluntary choice assumes that there exists good, realistic alternatives to choose among.... Both material and cultural processes leave some women feeling pushed into a corner where prostitution emerges as the best alternative.⁴⁵

Prostitutes' rights activist Jo Doezema agrees that the concept of "free choice" is less than useful in discussing prostitution:

There is no way to combat the anti-prostitution position that all prostitution is forced by using their language and insisting that what I do is "freely chosen." If I say "I choose to do it because I need the money," well, that's economic coercion. For every "free choice" you can think up, they just point out how it wasn't entirely free. The idea that there are two distinct poles of "forced" and "free" is a false dichotomy. I mean who really freely chooses to work at any kind of job? I want to get the whole choice argument off the prostitutes' political agenda. We'll never win it and it's useless as a political strategy. And ultimately it's not important if you're fighting for things like workers' rights, or fighting to challenge the stigma around being a prostitute. It doesn't matter if you were forced to be a prostitute or so-called chose to be one; you're dealing with the same stigma and you'd be benefitted by better working conditions.⁴⁶

Very few women's lives are models of "free choice." Most women's "choices" are severely limited by their disadvantaged position within hierarchical structures of sex, race, and class. Gender inequality, coupled with extreme differences of wealth within and among nations, creates tremendous pressure on women to engage in any available form of employment, including sex work. Indeed, there is good evidence that participation in prostitution increases in times of economic crisis and diminished options. At the Second European Meeting on

Migratory Prostitution held in 1994, for instance, a huge increase in the number of East European women working illegally in Istanbul's sex trade was reported. Women, primarily from Rumania, were fleeing "extreme economic hardship. The majority had had either no personal income or had earned less than \$13 a month" prior to emigration.⁴⁷ In this study of about three hundred women, only six percent reported having been trafficked to Turkey against their will. Yet it clearly would be a misrepresentation to suggest that the other ninety-four percent had "freely chosen" migratory prostitution from among a range of occupational opportunities. In a similar study of two hundred prostitutes in contemporary Bulgaria, investigators found that economic hardship motivated most to enter the trade. Women were "often unemployed before becoming a prostitute ... [Once working in the sex trade] their income per day was often higher than that of their parents' monthly salary." The study further notes that "many had plans to go abroad as migratory prostitutes."⁴⁸ These women are neither classic "victims of trafficking" nor are they fully empowered free agents. The complexity of their situation has led to a deep rift within the contemporary anti-trafficking movement dividing those who insist on abolitionist strategies from those who defend migrant prostitutes' right to "self-determination."

A Movement Divided: Abolitionism and Self-Determination

While the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women has been strikingly successful over the past two decades in promoting the prostitution-as-slavery perspective within influential international bodies such as the United Nations, anti-trafficking activism is no longer synonymous with abolitionism. Increasingly, voices supporting reform over prohibition are surfacing from within the anti-trafficking movement itself. The Dutch Foundation Against Trafficking in Women (STV) is one of those organizations challenging the abolitionist imperative. Almost since its inception in 1985, the STV has explicitly targeted coercion and abuse, rather than the practice of prostitution as such. This perspective may be a reflection of the largely

decriminalized status of the sex trade in that country. Unlike in the United States, where policies of prohibition have produced clandestine prostitution and created problems of access for those attempting to assist women trafficked into the trade, decriminalization in the Netherlands has created a highly visible, partially organized, and relatively accessible population of sex workers.

Prostitutes in the Netherlands have long resisted easy definition as victims of sexual commerce, and instead have demanded rights and respect as workers. This has produced an unusually collaborative effort between the Dutch prostitutes' rights movement and anti-trafficking activists, with both advocating the importance of increased worker control and "self-determination." Lisa Hofman, director of the Dutch Foundation Against Trafficking in Women explains that her organization quickly concluded that

the best place to start is to improve the circumstances under which [prostitution] takes place.... Of course we are here to help those trying to leave, but we also recognize the importance of working with those who decide to stay to improve conditions in the trade.⁴⁹

This pragmatic perspective is increasingly characteristic of anti-trafficking activity in Western Europe. In 1991, European anti-trafficking groups held an international conference attended by ninety participants from women's, migrant's, and prostitute's rights organizations from fourteen different countries. The meeting produced a series of recommendations submitted to the United Nations Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, part of the UN Commission on Human Rights, to "initiate steps to formulate a new international convention for the suppression of the traffic in persons."⁵⁰ The existing UN Convention dates from 1949 and is explicitly abolitionist in objective. Under its current wording, signatories commit to "punish any person who, to gratify the passions of another ... exploits the prostitution of another person, *even with the consent of that person*."⁵¹ The European conference proposed a revision of this agreement "based on the principle of the right of self-determination of women which would differentiate between prostitution as work and forced prostitution."⁵² Furthermore, the group advised that an updated

convention on trafficking "avoid the moral rejection of prostitution."⁵³

Two years after the first European anti-trafficking meetings, a second international gathering was held to further discuss proposed revisions to the UN Convention. The resulting recommendations were submitted to the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna by the Dutch National Council of Churches, the STV, the Asian Women's Human Rights Council of the Philippines, and the Thai Foundation for Women. These recommendations were endorsed by fifty-three organizations from Europe, Africa, and Asia, including the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Physicians for Human Rights, and Sisters in Islam. The proposed revisions strongly emphasize the role of violence and coercion in determining instances of trafficking, and encourage an expanded definition of trafficking to include "modern manifestations like malafide marriage bureaus or employment agencies."⁵⁴ The groups argued that the existing convention does not "cover contemporary practices ... in which people are traded and end up in slavery or slavery-like conditions."⁵⁵

These efforts to revise anti-trafficking agreements on the basis of a distinction between consensual labor and slavery (whether sexual or otherwise) were almost immediately denounced by the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women. Positioning itself in direct opposition to such efforts, the Coalition declared: "Trade in sex is a moral transgression ... Prostitution exploits women. The erroneous distinction between 'free' and 'forced' ignores that reality."⁵⁶ While the Coalition agrees that the existing convention requires revision, the direction of their proposed changes is diametrically opposed to proposals made by those emphasizing prostitutes' rights to self-determination. From the Coalition's perspective, the existing agreement is not severe enough in its rejection of the significance of consent. The Convention as written, the Coalition notes, is "directed specifically at prohibiting pimping, procuring, and brothels because they constitute coercion. Therefore, the 1949 Convention implies a distinction between coerced and 'voluntary' prostitution."⁵⁷ Because the Convention admits the possibility of consent even while dismissing

its relevance in determining instances of trafficking, neo-abolitionists believe the agreement to have "only limited value in protecting women's human rights because ... it reduces the victimization of women to only the most extreme examples of torture and slavery, thus obscuring how prostitution violates human rights...."⁵⁸

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women thus reiterates the abolitionist view that *all* instances of prostitution are abusive, not only those that are most obviously nonconsensual. Indeed, it is not the issue of coercion that interests the Coalition, but rather the problem of sex. Thus, while the European Working Group proposes expanding the definition of "trafficking" to emphasize the common features of "deception, coercion, violence and financial exploitation," the Coalition argues instead that the pertinent commonality is "the abuse of a person's sexuality." It is sexual commerce, not sexual coercion, that is identified as a threat to human rights. For this reason, the Coalition proposes rewriting the agreement to replace the notion of "trafficking" with that of "sexual exploitation" including:

casual, brothel, military, pornographic prostitution, and sex tourism, mail order bride markets, and trafficking in women ... [which] violates the rights of anyone, female or male, adult or child, Western or Third World.... Therefore this definition rejects the use of any of these distinctions to determine exploitation as artificial and serving to legitimize prostitution.⁵⁹

The Coalition's proposals have met with serious criticism from European anti-trafficking activists. One member of the Dutch National Council of Churches has argued that the Coalition's proposal to revise existing UN conventions on trafficking "denies the right of self-determination of adult women.... The whole draft convention breathes a patronizing air...."⁶⁰ Similarly, in a document signed by "women's, children's and development groups in Thailand" (including EMPOWER, Friends of Women Migrant Workers in Asia, Terre des Hommes, and the YMCA), the Coalition's proposed changes are criticized for

not allowing the differences between forced prostitution and prostitution chosen by women in both industrialized

and developing nations ... [in the Coalition's document] prostitution is prohibited without exception, absolutely. This is not in accordance with the present reality, and more regressive than the basic principle stated in the 1949 Convention.⁶¹

For activists who resist the abolitionist imperative—including those involved in anti-trafficking work—the context and conditions of sexual labor become a paramount concern. Those who are enslaved must be made free either to leave the trade or to join those who are “merely” exploited in demanding better wages, safer working conditions, and greater control over the labor process. Such a perspective allows prostitution to be examined critically as a form of service work, with attention focused on factors enhancing or limiting a worker's power relative to clients, employers, and colleagues. When erotic labor is viewed as work, it is transformed from a simple act of affirmation of man's command over woman, and instead is revealed to be an arena of struggle, where the meaning and terms of the sexual exchange are vulnerable to cultural and political contestation.

