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The 'Rescue Industry': The blurred line between help and hindrance

Laura Connelly

Touted by some as '*the* human rights issue of the twenty-first century' (Lee and Lewis, 2003: 170) and 'the world's fastest growing global crime' (Stop the Traffik, 2015), human trafficking has climbed the political agenda at an unprecedented rate to become a global priority. Of all the types of human trafficking, none have quite commanded the same levels of moral outrage as sex trafficking. It is no longer confined to the concerns of a small number of feminist activists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) but rather, an ever increasing miscellany of actors have taken it upon themselves to adopt an anti-trafficking role, sharing in common a desire to improve the lives of 'victims of trafficking'. These actors combine to form what Agustín (2007) terms a 'rescue industry', one in which 'social helpers' aspire to save womyn from 'sex slavery,' but in so doing, limit migrant womyn to the role of passive victim. Through the construction of the passive victim, the rescue industry's intervention into the lives of migrant womyn can be justified; the migrant female body can be controlled.

By examining the blurred line they tread between care and control, this short think-piece problematizes the complex functions of anti-trafficking NGOs in the UK. This piece is informed by research I undertook as part of my Ph.D exploring the governance of sex trafficking in the UK, and in which I conducted interviews with anti-trafficking NGOs and the police. Throughout this research, my interest lay in how the independent interests, priorities and politics of anti-trafficking actors are negotiated and coordinated through the support provided to womyn constructed as 'victims of trafficking'. In this paper, I argue that while NGOs have taken on the important – and at times, commendable – task of plugging gaps in support provisions exposed by the retreating welfare state, they may simultaneously act as



handmaidens to the neoliberal, neocolonial state apparatus. Through the provision of (oftentimes conditional) support for those labelled 'victims of trafficking', NGOs impose Western values about how non-Western womyn *ought* to live upon those they deem less 'civilised'. I pose the question then, are these self-appointed saviours acting entirely altruistically or rather, are their actions self-interested, geared towards maintaining the socio-political power of 'the West' over 'the Rest'?

At first glance, it appears that the work of anti-trafficking NGOs in the UK is characterised by benevolence – a well-meaning aspiration to improve the lives of 'victims of trafficking'. One CEO explained to me that her involvement in anti-trafficking work arose from having a '*heart for justice; a heart for people*'. Many are stimulated to act by the horror stories they have heard, the visceral images they have seen, and the astounding statistics that pervade the rescue industry ('27 million slaves alive today'¹ Bales et al., 2009: viii). This manifests, more often than not, in a desire to save womyn involved in the sex industry, rescuing them from the perceived terrors they endure at the hands of their 'trafficker(s)'. This saviour mentality appears, however, to be founded upon essentialist assumptions about the sex industry. It embodies the abolitionist ideological standpoint, extensively critiqued elsewhere (see for example, Kempadoo, 2005; O'Connell-Davidson, 2006; Sanders, 2005), that prostitution is morally wrong and that womyn involved in the sex industry are victims of 'sexual slavery'. Through this lens, it is assumed these womyn both require and desire rescue. Indeed, in my interviews, NGOs oftentimes emphasised the importance of 'welfare visits', some recounting experiences of working alongside the police to gain entry to known indoor sex venues in order to 'save' 'victims of trafficking'. While the purpose of these visits were masked in the language of welfare, my interviewees rarely described an act distinguishable from the traditional police brothel raids so heavily criticised by the English Collective of Prostitutes (2014) and others. Much like the traditional police brothel raid, these visits appear to result in the forced removal of migrant womyn from the sex venue and sometimes, from the UK. Thus, it seems that the rescue industry too-often fails to consider the possibility that these womyn may not see themselves as victims in need of saving.

Victimhood is not then, an objective experience. One does not simply *acquire* victim status by virtue of the interaction that takes place between them and the offender. Rather, victimhood is something that is conferred upon particular people

by others and as such, being labelled a 'victim of trafficking' involves a political judgement (Anderson, 2013). My research suggests that the application of the 'victim of trafficking' label is influenced by judgments about social class, nationality, and race, amongst other things. Indeed, NGOs appear to more readily apply victim status to those of lower socio-economic status, thus equating choice to engage in the sex industry with wealth. Similarly, while British sex workers (particularly those working indoors) are allowed to operate with less interference, migrant sex workers are confined to the identity of 'victim'. Thus the Western woman is more readily regarded as sexually liberated: The non-Western woman remains 'oppressed'. To this extent, the rescue industry is characterised by paternalistic attitudes, in which the non-Western 'Other' requires the righteous Western saviour to intervene for 'her own protection'. One of the consequences of this is that 'the Other' is amenable to Western imposed-intervention, their 'rescue', and potential deportation, justified. At the same time, taking it upon themselves to emancipate 'sex slaves' and in so doing following in the footsteps of 'celebrated' early abolitionists such as Wilberforce, NGOs in the UK – often led by male CEOs – can reaffirm and reassert white masculinity. The victim label thus becomes a tool through which to control subaltern women, that is, those that are socio-economically, politically and geographically marginal from, and oppressed by, the hegemonic neocolonial power structure.

The application of trafficking victim status, it would seem, has contradictory effects for the woman involved. On a positive note, it can act as a route to support that may not otherwise be available. One interviewee told me that her organisation employs a '*broad definition of trafficking*', one that essentially conflates trafficking and prostitution, in order to secure funding for vulnerable British sex workers. She explained that by applying the '*internal* victim of trafficking' label to vulnerable British-national sex workers, they could attract donor funding for a group that would otherwise, because of the pervasive stigma surrounding voluntary prostitution, have been overlooked. Officially labelled 'victims of trafficking' are entitled to 45 days of Ministry of Justice-funded support, provided by the Salvation Army and its sub-contractors. In order to acquire *official* victim status, the woman has first to be referred into the UK National Referral Mechanism (NRM)² and second, there has to be 'reasonable grounds' to believe that she is a 'potential victim of trafficking' in the eyes of either the *UK Human Trafficking Centre* or

the *Home Office Immigration and Visas*. Those who receive a negative 'reasonable grounds' decision or do not wish to enter the NRM at all, are still often granted victim status by the rescue industry and able to access support through the NGOs not bound by the Ministry of Justice contract. As such, it is incontrovertible that through the application of 'victim of trafficking' status, valuable support can be provided to disadvantaged womyn.

Simultaneously, the 'victim of trafficking' label brings with it some negative effects for womyn. First, the application of the victim label makes it not only easier for the state to exert social control but also, serves to justify that control. Indeed too few question, and fewer still challenge, the notion that 'victims of trafficking' ought to be returned to their country of origin. As such, with the victim label attached, voluntary migrant sex workers can be justifiably deported under the façade of noble action. In so doing, their agency is denied, their movement largely restricted to the non-Western world, and their bodies policed. While many anti-trafficking NGOs do in fact offer guidance to migrant womyn on their claims for asylum, this is provided within a political system that promotes xenophobic, anti-immigration sentiments. As such, it does little to challenge the presumed right held by Western states to restrict the movement of subaltern people. The guidance provided by NGOs does not demand radical changes to a system that is designed to maintain Western domination. It does not subvert the hegemonic social order. Second, in and of itself, the Ministry of Justice contract enables the state to extend its influence over the provision of victim support and steer the ideological politics and related goals of NGOs. To this extent, the Salvation Army and its sub-contracted NGOs have been, or are at least susceptible to being, co-opted by the state. Again, their work serves to maintain the neoliberal status-quo. Finally, by labelling migrant sex workers 'victims of trafficking', the state diverts attention away from the part it plays in maintaining the conditions under which migrant womyn are vulnerable to exploitation in the sex industry. The UK Government can thus obscure its role in the creation and the perpetuation of global inequalities between; men and womyn, white and non-white, rich and poor, and the state and the individual (Bravo, 2007). Instead, the victim label reinforces the perception that trafficking ought to be viewed through the lens of criminality and as such, the 'trafficker' offers a convenient scapegoat for blame. As Sharma (2015, unpag.) astutely observes, the womyn labelled 'victims of trafficking' are in many cases exploited

more by the 'border control practices and ideologies of racism, sexism and nationalism' legitimised by the UK Government than they are by their 'trafficker'.

Kamat's (2013: ix) claim that NGOs are in many ways 'handmaidens of imperialism' is apt, it would seem, since they inherently operate to disguise the limits of neoliberalism. Through their very existence, (anti-trafficking) NGOs in the UK serve to absolve the Government of providing services: they 'dole out as aid or benevolence what people ought to have by right' (Roy, 2004, unpag.) A complex dynamic is thus at play, whereby anti-trafficking NGOs provide important support to those labelled as 'victims of trafficking' – support they may not otherwise receive from the Government – yet simultaneously, they play a role in maintaining a repressive neoliberal system. There are of course some exceptions. Indeed, some of the NGOs I spoke to were indeed critical of the UK Government, nuanced in their understanding of the lived realities of the sex industry, and aware of the limits of neoliberalism. One of my interviewees, for example, made the observation that he feared many anti-trafficking NGOs are primarily concerned '*about the perpetuation of their entity*', compelled to find a steady stream of 'victims of trafficking' in order to justify their organisations' continued existence. Yet even the actions of these critically-minded NGOs, in effect, serve to undermine efforts for revolutionary social change. The incremental steps they make are made *within* the neoliberal system, promoting little more than an illusion of social change. Indeed, most anti-trafficking NGOs in the UK appear to be doing little to challenge the socio-structural causes of trafficking. Rather than mobilising a comprehensive and sustained campaign against restrictive border policies which function to push womyn into pursuing more 'risky' routes of migration, the practices of NGOs in fact serve to justify anti-immigration agendas. While it may be European states that first commissioned 'Fortress Europe', it seems that some anti-trafficking actors are helping to build it.

Few of the NGO actors I interviewed seemed to question the sense of entitlement they exhibit to intervene in the lives of migrant womyn. While their actions may be well intentioned, a fine line exists between help and hindrance. To this extent, Agustín's (2012) claim that the rescue industry engages in a soft form of imperialism is a persuasive one. The actions of the rescue industry may indeed be infinitely more palatable than military action, but are arguably, no less obtrusive in the affairs of other countries. Indeed, while offering valuable support to some

womyn, anti-trafficking NGOs in the UK are to varying degrees guilty of imposing the values of 'the West' upon 'the Rest'. Anti-trafficking NGOs are vectors for Western values. My intention here is not, however, to encourage defeatist attitudes that NGOs cannot help migrant womyn involved both voluntarily and involuntarily in the sex industry. Rather, I seek to encourage greater scrutiny of the rescue industry, both from outside and from within. Although the actions of anti-trafficking NGOs may be based upon (perceived) good intentions, they can cause harm to migrant womyn, denying their agency and further marginalising an already-marginalised group. Such is the extent of this harm that at present, one must question (as some of my critically-minded interviewees did) if their actions are fundamentally any less harmful than those they are seeking to 'save' womyn from.

Endnotes

- ¹ Trafficking statistics used by the rescue industry in anti-trafficking campaigns, the media, and in some academic writings are oftentimes greatly exaggerated and almost always unverifiable. Weitzer (2013) provides a detailed critique of the use of inflated statistics, arguing that they form part of the 'mythology of trafficking'.
- ² The National Referral Mechanism is a framework for the identification of victims of trafficking and allocation of support provisions through the Ministry of Justice contract with the Salvation Army. For more information see: National Crime Agency (2015).

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