

Brokered Subjects

*Sex, Trafficking, and the
Politics of Freedom*

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Tracing the “Traffic in Women”

It was just after midnight at the Can Do Bar in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the mood was light and festive. On a dimly lit street not far from the city’s main nightlife district, the bar that served as the local headquarters of Empower, the most prominent sex worker’s rights organization in the country, was the only storefront still brimming with activity. As was typical for early August, the evening was hot and humid, and many of the women had taken to the outdoor patio while they awaited our arrival, drinking beers and chatting casually. Eager to hear the stories of our recent excursion with an organized “human trafficking tour” of the region, they welcomed us with keen interest, ice-cold drinks, and extra chairs. Within a few minutes, Elena and I were transported worlds away from the increasingly surreal travel experience that had occupied us during the previous seven days, a trip that had been co-organized by a coalition of evangelical Christian and secular NGOs from the United States. Exhausted by our hectic circuit through Bangkok, Chiang Rai, and Chiang Mai—as well as by the emotional strain of traveling with a “delegation” far removed from the needs of the populations that it claimed to represent—we felt relieved to have left the other North American tourists behind and to be there.¹

Although the trip had been marketed to us as offering a stark glimpse into the realities of human trafficking, the main difficulties we faced were not due to the heartbreaking encounters with former sex slaves that the tour promised,

but instead ensued from the frenetic pace of our travels, the poor coordination of our daily itineraries, a lack of clear communication on the part of the organizers, and the vague yet persistent feeling among many of us that, despite the humanitarian pedigree of the tour's two sponsoring NGOs, we were somehow being defrauded. Not only were we not introduced to any survivors of trafficking who could offer firsthand testimony of their experiences; many of the meetings with governmental officials and local NGOs that had been promised to us had been abbreviated, rescheduled for odd hours (when the most knowledgeable representatives could apparently not be present), or canceled. Even the "three star" hotels and meals that the NGOs advertised fell short, as we found ourselves crammed into the lowest level of accommodations in each of the cities we visited, and were frequently encouraged to participate in mass tourist staples like elephant rides and visits to handicraft markets in lieu of canceled meetings. When a few members of the group tried to find someone to complain to in order to remedy the situation, we soon discovered that it was impossible to clearly discern upon whom we should pin responsibility, as the sponsoring organizations had in fact subcontracted out the tour to a series of intermediaries—various layers of "consultants" who in fact knew little about the issue and were rarely in our company, as well as one amiable man from the hill tribes of the Northern region of the country who was placed in charge of all logistical considerations, and, we soon discovered, paid a pittance for his time and for actually organizing the tour.²

After hearing some of the stories from our difficult week of travel, Liz, a longtime Empower member, came over to join me and Elena, then a graduate student conducting research for her PhD who was my companion on this journey.³ Liz turned toward me with a poker face and somberly declared, "In our work with women trafficked into the sex sector, we have encountered exactly three cases of women being trafficked that really concerned us in the last few years: yours, Elena's and one other woman who recently contacted us."⁴ After pausing for dramatic effect, she redirected her gaze toward the half dozen or so other women who had gathered around our table to listen to the exchange, who collectively burst into laughter.

The phenomenon of "sex trafficking" is not typically the subject of joking revelry, but Liz's remark captured the fraughtness of the term from the perspective of many sex worker-activists, as well as their perception of visitors from the Global North who flood places like Thailand with the ambition to help. Elena and I had signed up for this trip in order to learn more about the nature of secular rights-based and evangelical Christian

anti-trafficking collaborations, about the increasing commodification of humanitarian sentiment and social justice advocacy, and, most crucially, about the implications of both of these trends for the global politics of sex and gender. "You've been trafficked!" the women in the bar exclaimed when we told them the details of our journey, then set about calculating the proceeds that had likely been taken in by the NGOs that had sponsored our excursion, exploiting not only the local recipient communities but also the helping sensibilities of well-intentioned tourists.⁵

In fact, both Elena and I had already spent several years observing the diverse "helping projects" for sex workers that had sprung up around the globe, tracing the on-the-ground effects of contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns and their affiliated organizations. While I had been studying secular feminist and evangelical Christian activists' surprisingly close collaborations with the criminal justice system, Elena had been in Bangkok conducting research amid a group of students, expatriates, and full-time missionaries affiliated with an advocacy organization in Los Angeles, shadowing them as they did outreach at go-go bars in one of the city's principal entertainment districts.⁶

While enjoying the semblance of an evening breeze, Elena recounted to us how during these bar visits, anti-trafficking activists would offer the dancers alternative employment through their socially entrepreneurial business venture producing and selling jewelry made by "formerly trafficked women." Nearly all of the "victims" who accepted the offer were slightly older women (in their thirties and forties) who had previously chosen sex work as their highest-paying option but who, after accumulating some savings and finding themselves aging out of the prime markets in sex work, elected jewelry making instead. After accepting their new positions, the women soon discovered that their lives would be governed by some unwelcome regulations: they were officially prohibited from visiting their former colleagues in the red-light district, and their pay would be docked for being minutes late to their shifts, for missing daily prayer sessions, or for minor behavioral infractions. Many also complained about the uniforms that they were required to wear to work: shapeless black polo shirts with the organizational emblem embroidered on the chest, and the Thai word for "freedom" stitched boldly across the right arm.⁷

The women at the Can Do Bar listened with great interest as we told them these and other stories from our research, and were further intrigued when we showed them our pictures from the tour. Although many of our photographs provoked reactions of bemusement or dismay, it was the last

photo we circulated that especially caught their attention. It was a night-time shot of the anti-trafficking tour participants walking through the Chiang Mai red-light district with knitted brows and worried faces, being led by a young, evangelical woman from the United States who ran a local NGO for sex-trafficked youth (one of a mere handful of anti-trafficking NGOs that our tour group was actually able to meet with). The sex workers' astonishment reached a pinnacle when they noticed that our photo had also captured a murky image of their friend Nong in the background, who had been standing in front of one of the massage parlors when the anti-trafficking advocates filed past. From the tourists' troubled expressions of pity and concern, it was clear that they regarded the sex worker who stood in front of them as the very epitome of the "sex trafficking victim" whom they had come so far to help. "But that's Nong—she is a worker, a mother, not a victim!" the women in the Can Do Bar exclaimed. What's more, they noted that Nong was an active Empower member who herself had been at the Can Do Bar earlier that evening. Just the week before, she had accompanied them to the annual sex workers' conference in Kolkata, India, where thousands of women, men, and transgender people from over forty countries and representing some five hundred different organizations had joined together to advocate on behalf of sex workers' rights.⁸ A committed activist, Nong was hardly the pitiable victim whom the tourists or their young American colleague had imagined.

The apprehension exhibited by Empower's sex workers in their collision with current campaigns to combat "sex trafficking" provides the starting point for some of my central concerns in this book. Although the women we met with that evening had not had an easy time working in the sex trade (or, for that matter, in their lives preceding their employment in this sector), they resisted the increasingly prevalent terminology of "trafficking" as an apt description of their experiences.⁹ Propelled by social circumstance rather than by brute force or organized crime, they were in many ways similar to the sex workers in other regions of the world whom I had worked closely with over the course of several decades. Even those who had begun sex work at young ages, or who had incurred debts to labor brokers, or who had experienced violence at the hands of customers or their employers overwhelmingly rejected this rubric and the implications of its associated lexicon of terms. Indeed, as both the anecdote here and an accumulating corpus of social scientific research have shown, the framework of "trafficking" (along with its attendant notions of sexual victimization and exploitation) has been far better suited to the goals of aid organizations and governments than it has been to the

needs of sex workers. It is precisely the efficacy of this discourse for these and other constituencies that the subsequent chapters of the book seek to address.

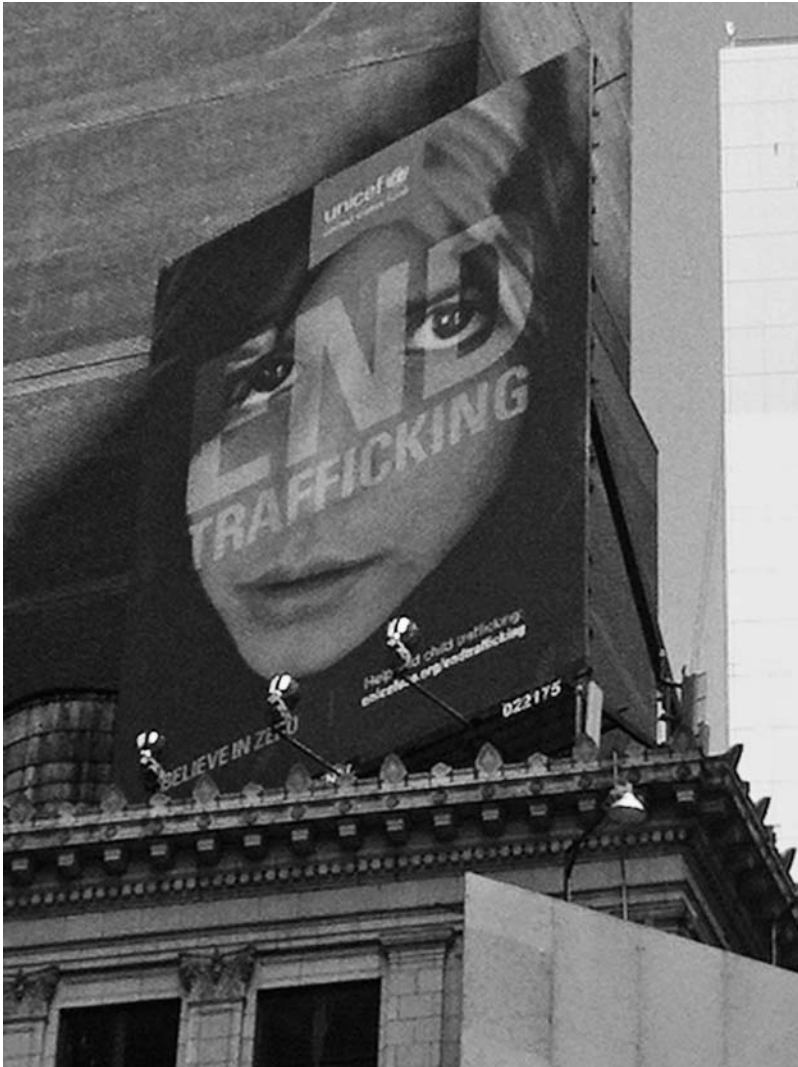
Only recently have journalists provided the burgeoning "trafficking industrial complex" with a modicum of critical scrutiny, following revelations of falsified public accounts by one of the most high profile and celebrated of anti-trafficking activists, Cambodian "survivor-activist" Somaly Mam. A May 21, 2014 *Newsweek* cover story drew on years of research for the *Cambodia Daily* by investigative journalist Simon Marks and featured interviews with family members, neighbors, teachers, and hospital officials.¹⁰ Marks not only called into question Mam's own backstory of sexual servitude (one she had carefully recounted in her best-selling autobiography¹¹) but also debunked one of her foundation's most circulated stories of victim salvation. Among Mam's chief fund-raising vehicles was the story of Long Pross, presented as a young trafficking victim who had lost her eye to a brutal attack from the brothel owner. The *Newsweek* story revealed that the young girl had in fact suffered the injury after the surgical removal of a tumor, and that she had been placed at Mam's foundation at her parents' request because they were too poor to provide for her. After the release of the *Newsweek* exposé, not only was Mam herself forced to resign from her post as the Foundation's head, but her defenders were briefly spurred to consider the broader implications of her fictions.¹²

Over the past few years, there has also been a growing body of academic writing on particular communities of sex workers and the gaps and disjunctures between their experiences and those that have been asserted by the official trafficking discourse. In her study of migrant Filipina sex workers working in South Korea, for example, the anthropologist Sealing Cheng has found that their experiences "defy the binaries . . . of innocent Third World women vs. powerful First World men; well-intentioned nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) vs. evil-intentioned employers; the protection and shelter of rescuers vs. the danger of the clubs; and the risks of migration vs. the safety of home."¹³ Taking issue with prevailing abolitionist accounts of the relations of force and coercion inherent in brothel-based prostitution in India, Svati Shah has likewise demonstrated through her careful ethnographic study of prostitution in Mumbai that sexual commerce "is not a totalizing context for everyone who sells sexual services," but rather one form of economic survival among many for rural migrants in the informal sector.¹⁴ Writing about the situation of sex workers from the former Soviet states who have come to Norway, Christine Jacobsen and May-Len Skilbrei draw

on extensive interview-based data to provide a sharp contrast between the women's own self-representations and the accounts of victimhood that prevail in international trafficking discourse. In particular, they note that prostitution, for their interviewees, is forced on them neither by cruel men nor by situations of dire economic hardship, but rather provides much coveted access to "consumption and leading lifestyles associated with 'modernity' and 'the West.'"¹⁵

Although the disparities between sex workers' experiences and the presumptions of contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns have been critically noted by various commentators, the significance of this disjuncture has yet to be adequately described. Why did narratives of sex trafficking suddenly reemerge after almost a century of slumber, resuscitating long-dormant accounts of the horrors of the "white slave" trade? How was the idea of a global "traffic in women" resurrected out of the framework of prostitution as a victimless crime, which prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s, and the gathering movement for sex workers' rights, which gained prominence over the following two decades? And what is it, precisely, that has enabled "trafficking" to travel so well—across secular and religious divides, across geographic borders, and across wildly variant activist constituencies? In law and policy and the mass media, on college campuses, in church pews and in corporate social responsibility campaigns, the "sex-trafficking victim" has become an iconic figure of our era, capacious enough to serve as the emblem for quite disparate imaginations of social suffering. In recent years, she has become a nearly ubiquitous symbol of gender inequality and exploited labor, of open borders and unbridled commodification, and of myriad forms of sexual violence.¹⁶ While she has periodically shared the spotlight with a range of other iconic figures of sexual exploitation—from the burkha-clad Muslim woman to the presumptively white victims of sexual assault on college campuses and in elite workspaces—the image of the trafficking victim has been durable as well as malleable.¹⁷ An initial aim of this book is thus to interrogate this image and to understand the work it does in the diverse sites of anti-trafficking activity that it has come to inhabit, even as it often fails to adequately capture what it purports to describe.

Like the various phenomena that are signaled by the term "trafficking" itself, the individuals and institutions that make up its associated "rescue industry" circulate through multiple layers of symbolic and material intermediaries.¹⁸ As I describe in the pages that follow, these include local, state, and transnational governing institutions, secular feminist and faith-based activist campaigns, and a bevy of nonprofit as well as for-profit ventures that have recently emerged to "end sex trafficking" and



1.1 UNICEF anti-trafficking promotional campaign poster, on display in Midtown Manhattan. Photo: Elena Shih, 2013.

to help victims. As in other forms of neoliberal governance, these “brokers and translators” are rarely questioned in terms of the beneficence of their motives or the effects of their interventions.¹⁹ Given the complex chains of brokerage and connectivity that characterize much of contemporary political and economic life, a second aim of this book is to

consider how and why certain kinds of social relations get singled out for moral and political redress, and the role that sex and gender play in forging these distinctions.

The final question that this study considers is suggested by both the opening anecdote of this chapter and the subtitle of this book. Like the sex workers in the Can Do Bar who listened in astonishment to our stories of activists' efforts on their behalf, we need to more closely interrogate the political implications of Western helping campaigns that are organized around women's carceral control, intimate refashioning, and purportedly redemptive labor. Looking beyond the specific contours of the case study at hand, this investigation should spur us to reexamine not only the kinds of social relations that are considered most exploitative—that is, those that, in prevailing versions of the anti-trafficking discourse, are deemed “tantamount to slavery”—but also to critically interrogate current imaginations of gendered progress and freedom.²⁰ At stake is the vision that is shared by contemporary activist campaigns to combat “sex trafficking,” as well as an emergent and expanding set of mechanisms of global governance (often proceeding under the banners of “women's rights” and “empowerment”) more generally.

A Genealogy of “Sex Trafficking”

I came to these queries via a particular ethnographic circuitry, one that, over the course of the past decades, had led me from the sociological study of sex work toward the study of the growing cadre of humanitarian projects that have emerged to reclassify all or certain forms of sexual labor as “trafficking” or “slavery,” to press for laws that punish the individuals who are deemed responsible for this captivity, and to vigorously pursue sex workers' rescue. Before assuming this current research focus, I spent more than a decade investigating the highly diverse motives and experiences of women, men, and transgender people who engage in sexual labor in postindustrial cities. I had also spent many years as a participant-observer of sex workers' own organizing efforts to address some of the manifold injustices that affect sex workers locally and globally, including violence at the hands of police officers and customers, the absence of labor regulations in illicit as well as legal commercial sex sectors, and the threat of police apprehension and deportation that looms large over undocumented workers.²¹

While in the early and mid-1990s such struggles were increasingly pursued under the culturally and politically ascendant banner of “sex

workers' rights," in more recent years this framework has been powerfully challenged by a bevy of anti-trafficking laws and policies that equate all prostitution with the crime of human trafficking and that rhetorically capture both of these activities under the new rubric of "modern slavery."²² These laws have been pushed forward by a remarkably diverse array of social activists and policy makers—a coalition spanning from left to right and comprising secular feminists, evangelical Christians, human rights activists of diverse stripes, and a cadre of prominent celebrities and corporate officials. Despite renowned disagreements around the politics of sex and gender, these groups have come together to advocate for harsher criminal and economic penalties against traffickers, prostitutes' customers, and nations deemed to be taking insufficient steps to stem the flow of trafficked women.²³

Many commentators have already noted the similarities between gathering attention to sex trafficking as "modern slavery" in the current moment and the infamous "white slavery" scare of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁴ While this earlier wave of concern engaged a similar coalition of "new abolitionist" feminists and evangelical Christians, prior to the Progressive Era the goal of eradicating prostitution had not seemed particularly urgent to either group (Christian leaders had previously been far more inclined to worry about adultery and fornication than about prostitution, whereas feminists had focused primarily on obtaining the vote).²⁵ By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, as tensions mounted over migration, urbanization, and the social changes being wrought by industrial capitalism, narratives of the traffic in women and girls for sexual slavery abounded. Such narratives drew upon the nation's legacy of race-based, chattel slavery as well as a resonance with biblical notions of "slavery to sin," conjuring scenarios of irrefutable moral horror: the widespread abduction of innocent women and girls who, en route to earn respectable livelihoods in metropolitan centers, were seduced, deceived, or forced into prostitution, typically by foreign-born men. Although empirical investigations would eventually reveal the white slavery narrative to be largely without factual basis—the evidence suggested that large numbers of women were not in fact forced into prostitution, other than by economic conditions—anti-white slave crusaders were nevertheless successful in spurring the passage of a series of "red-light abatement" acts, as well as the federal Mann-Elkins White Slave Traffic Act, which brought the nation's first era of wide-scale, commercialized prostitution to a close.²⁶

At the international level, anti-trafficking committees worked together to incorporate anti-trafficking platforms into the League of Nations and

then the United Nations by way of a succession of multinational anti-trafficking accords. Beginning in 1904, these accords sought to more stringently contain prostitution, both migrant and domestic, with each successive iteration. The 1904, 1910, and 1921 League of Nations accords would eventually give way to the 1940 United Nations Convention, which, without distinction between domestic and international trafficking, transformed brothel keeping and all procurement for prostitution into punishable offenses, regardless of the age or consent of the victims. As the historical sociologist Stephanie Limoncelli has observed, trafficking was in fact the first women's issue taken up in international accords, "well before other issues that were being advocated during the same period, including suffrage, education, and married women's citizenship."²⁷

From the 2000s to today, the term "trafficking" has again been made synonymous in policy circles with not only forced but also voluntary prostitution, while an earlier wave of political struggles for both sex workers' and migrants' rights have been eclipsed.²⁸ According to observers both laudatory and critical, this displacement has been facilitated by the embrace of human rights discourses by abolitionist feminists, who have effectively neutralized domains of political struggle around questions of labor, migration, and sexual freedom via the reductionist tropes of "prostitution as gender violence" and "sexual slavery." Indeed, as one progressive human rights advocate who witnessed the early stages of the feminist trafficking debates has noted, by the time of the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, "trafficking as a labor issue had been successfully transformed into a sexual violence and a slavery issue."²⁹ In her much-heralded Beijing declaration that "human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights," then First Lady Hillary Clinton made explicit reference to the political urgency of sex trafficking, declaring it "a violation of human rights when women and girls are sold into the slavery of prostitution for human greed." She went on to argue that "the kinds of reasons that are used to justify this practice should no longer be tolerated."³⁰ Indeed, from the perspective of abolitionist feminist anti-trafficking organizations, the shift to the human rights field was crucial to relocating a set of internecine political debates among feminists about the meaning of prostitution and pornography—the so-called "sex wars" of the 1980s and 1990s—to a humanitarian terrain in which the abolitionist constituency was more likely to prevail.³¹ By reframing the harms of prostitution and trafficking as politically neutral questions of humanitarian concern about third-world women, rather than as issues that directly impacted the lives of Western

feminists, anti-prostitution feminists were able to wage the same sexual battles virtually unopposed.

A simultaneous and similarly profound shift occurred during the same years within the US evangelical movement. If in the early 1990s most evangelicals had little to do with the human rights field, by the latter part of the decade a greater reliance upon NGOs by the United Nations, coupled with an awareness of the increasingly global spread of evangelical Christianity, would encourage many newly formed evangelical NGOs to enter the international political fray. Political scientists Doris Buss and Didi Herman have hailed 1994 as the year that evangelical Christians began to establish a more permanent presence at the United Nations.³² They attribute this in part to the proliferation of UN-hosted conferences in the 1990s, which facilitated the expansion and further institutionalization of NGO involvement in international law and policy making. In combination with US evangelicals' growing interest in and organization around the issues of international religious freedom and Christian persecution, this would serve to propel new sets of religious actors into the trafficking debates and to become more prominent voices in the human rights field.³³

Evangelical advocacy around human trafficking received another burst of energy during the administration of George W. Bush, who, in a noted embrace of evangelical framings of the issue, declared in a 2003 address to the UN General Assembly: "There's a special evil in the abuse and exploitation of the most innocent and vulnerable. The victims of the sex trade see little of life before they see the very worst of life—an underground of brutality and lonely fear. Those who create these victims and profit from their suffering must be severely punished. Those who patronize this industry debase themselves and deepen the misery of others, and governments that tolerate this trade are tolerating a form of slavery."³⁴ Significantly, Bush also expanded upon President Clinton's earlier Charitable Choice initiative to allow avowedly faith-based organizations to become eligible for federal funding. Since 2001, the year that President Bush established the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, evangelical Christian groups have secured a growing proportion of federal monies for both international and domestic anti-trafficking work, as well as funds for the prevention of HIV/AIDS.³⁵ The rise of Christian NGOs on the global stage was thus enabled by the political ability of evangelical organizations to ensure their own funding alongside previously established secular groups. This was particularly important given a context of reliance on NGOs for the provision of social services, services for which the neoliberal state had itself relinquished responsibility.

The new focus on human trafficking featured historically old framings that linked “sexual slavery” together with voluntary prostitution, both migrant and domestic. For example, during his tenure in the US State Department’s Office to Combat Trafficking in Persons from 2003 to 2006, the inaugural ambassador John Miller argued that the ongoing use of the term “sex worker” by certain NGOs, activists, and troublesome feminist academics served “to justify modern-day slavery, [and] to dignify the perpetrators and the industries who enslave.”³⁶ In accordance with Miller’s declaration, a spate of US anti-trafficking laws emerged to create an enforcement apparatus for Miller’s view that all forms of sex work both within and beyond US borders should be regarded as the moral equivalent of slavery: stepping up criminal penalties for pimps and sexual clients, imposing financial sanctions on nations deemed to be taking insufficient steps to stem prostitution, and stipulating that NGOs that did not explicitly denounce prostitution as a violation of women’s human rights were to be disqualified from federal funding. Miller’s agenda not only remapped the field of fundable NGOs but also provided more general political support for the rapid proliferation of sexually and carceraly focused strands of anti-trafficking activism, both secular feminist and evangelical Christian in orientation.³⁷ Since 2001, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has spent nearly \$250 million on anti-trafficking programming internationally.³⁸

A critical accompaniment and co-agent in state- and activist-led campaigns against sex trafficking has been the steady proliferation of media accounts, which have rehearsed similar stories of the abduction and sexual enslavement of women and girls whose poverty and desperation render them amenable to easy victimization in both first- and third-world cities. From critically acclaimed films like *The Whistleblower* to the box-office hit *Taken* to the Lifetime network’s *Human Trafficking* television miniseries, a steady stream of old and new media—including movies, popular fiction, television shows, newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, websites, and online games and apps—has emerged to reinforce ideas of prostitution as sexual slavery, and ideas of heightened policing and low-wage labor as appropriate remedies.³⁹ Among the most influential in disseminating this point of view has been Nicholas Kristof, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for the *New York Times*, whose weekly columns since 2004, best-selling book *Half the Sky* (which later became a two-part television special), and innovative online game have kept sex trafficking in the spotlight.⁴⁰ Most recently, a growing number of celebrity activists, including Angelina Jolie, Demi Moore, Ashton Kutcher, Mira Sorvino, and Jada Pinkett Smith, have also highlighted this issue through their allocation of financial re-

sources, public service announcements, and testimony before US Congress and the United Nations.⁴¹

Although the story of prostitution's moral and political transformation from a "necessary evil" into "the Social Evil" of the late nineteenth century has been amply recounted by numerous scholars, the recent reinvigoration of this discourse has yet to be sufficiently explored. This book examines the constellation of factors that led to the (re)discovery of the "traffic in women" in the late 1990s, considering the ways in which burgeoning markets in sexual commerce have become intertwined with evolving feminist, evangelical, and political-economic interests. Beyond demonstrating the deleterious effects of this discourse on workers and migrants, this discussion provides an important window onto broader transformations of sexual politics, new paradigms of humanitarian intervention, and the subjective meanings and political techniques of late capitalism. One of my primary aims in this book is thus to demonstrate how the alliances that have been brokered among quite disparate sets of social actors have facilitated the global circulation and entrenchment of the trafficking discourse across a wide swath of cultural and political terrain.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that recent campaigns against the "traffic in women" have been spurred not simply by diffuse social anxieties around globalization, immigration, and the liberalization of sexual mores (as previous commentators have offered); they also are indicative of something more: a new politics of sex and gender that is directly brokered by the neoliberal state, is entrenched in right- as well as left-wing cultural spaces, and is expressed in both secular and religious idioms. It is for this reason, I suggest, that the explanatory trope of trafficking as but the latest in a series of recurrent "sex panics" is similarly inadequate for capturing the sociological and historical specificity of current discursive regimes. To the contrary, I argue that gathering attention to human trafficking demonstrates the extent to which questions of sexual politics have been vital to the ascendance of specifically neoliberal forms of governmentality—including phenomena as varied as carceral control, humanitarian endeavor, and new affective economies—even if these social technologies have not typically been imagined in these terms.

Definitional and Calculative Flux

Many sex workers' rights organizations have objected to the prevailing rubric of "sex trafficking," arguing that the term analytically separates

trafficking for prostitution from circumstances of “human trafficking” more broadly, isolating sexuality as a special case. Yet as we will see in the chapters that follow, definitions of the latter are also ambiguous, and the term’s patterns of usage remain no less ideologically driven, with matters of force, exploitation, and transport across borders often presumed but never specified. In his ethnography of anti-trafficking activism and the sex trade in Southeast Asia, the anthropologist Sverre Molland observes that the term “human trafficking” first appeared in the *New York Times* in 1976, in an article about the trafficking of persons out of East Germany. It resurfaced on two occasions some twenty years later, in reference to discussions preceding the 2000 UN Protocol on Trafficking in Persons, the policy instrument that has proved most influential in disseminating the trafficking discourse on a global scale. Usage of the term has increased steadily each year since that time, with the number of mentions in the newspaper reaching a total of 284 by 2012, and 1,972 as of December 2017.⁴² Amid this rapid proliferation, the ambiguity of “human trafficking” as a signifier has been marked by both older vestiges of the term (in which residues of the nineteenth-century “white slave traffic” are ever present) and by successive political struggles at key institutional junctures (including the United Nations and the US State Department of State). Given that the very definitions of both “sex trafficking” and “human trafficking” have eluded clear consensus, efforts to try to quantify their prevalence, or to calculate numbers of victims, remain tenuous at best. What cannot be clearly defined or specified cannot be meaningfully counted.

For example, while the 2000 UN Protocol, the most frequently cited document on these matters, carefully enumerates the activities that constitute “trafficking” and “exploitation,” it never precisely defines the term. According to article 3 of the UN Protocol:

“Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of 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. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

What exactly is to be understood by the force, fraud, vulnerability, and exploitation that constitute the key elements of the crime of “trafficking”

remains unclear. Most notably, the meaning of "the exploitation of the prostitution of others" is never stipulated, a phrase left deliberately ambiguous because of intractable arguments among activists about the nature of prostitution at the time the protocol was negotiated.⁴³ The awkward phrasing that resulted from these struggles allows for easy vacillation between understandings of exploitation as direct physical coercion and exploitation in the Marxist sense of mere economic benefit.

The US Trafficking Victims' Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 is similarly vague in its definitions, and usage of the term has fluctuated across the TVPA's subsequent reauthorizations. According to section 103 of the original act, "sex trafficking" is defined as "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act" (here, the presence or absence of force is left unspecified), and "severe forms of trafficking in persons" are commercial sex acts that include an element of "force, fraud, or coercion," or those in which those who perform sexual labor are younger than eighteen years of age. Severe forms of trafficking in persons are also said to include "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery." Although "trafficking" is explicitly equated with all forms of sexual commerce, the act later specifies that only "severe forms of trafficking" are subject to official state sanction. In successive renditions of the law, underage prostitution occurring within US borders (in which questions of consent are considered irrelevant) and certain nonsexual forms of labor have increasingly been marked as critical targets for state intervention, but the law's central definitional contradictions have never been resolved.⁴⁴

Critical observers have also noted the dramatic ebbs, flows, and layers of imprecision that occur in official, activist, and media estimates of the prevalence of sex trafficking, both in the United States and transnationally. Writing as early as 2003, the sociologist and feminist scholar Wendy Chapkis observed that the US Trafficking Victims' Protection Act relied upon "slippery statistics and sliding definitions." She noted, in particular, the CIA's estimate that between forty-five thousand and fifty thousand women and children were trafficked into the United States each year, an estimate that was formulated using a broad and unspecified definition of trafficking to bolster the magnitude of the problem.⁴⁵ Although the United States' official estimate of the prevalence of transborder victims of trafficking has since been downgraded (to between fourteen thousand and seventeen thousand people per year), the CIA's initial

figure is particularly noteworthy given that “50,000 trafficked women” was also the number that was circulated during turn-of-the-century debates around white slavery.⁴⁶ It is also remarkable given that, since 2000, the initial year of the law’s passage, there have only been 6,384 T visas issued, 1,461 cases filed with the Department of Justice, and 896 convictions—for sex and labor trafficking combined.⁴⁷ In the city of New York, purportedly one of the central hubs of sex trafficking in the United States, since 2008 there have been only sixty-two convictions for the crime.⁴⁸

Within the global arena, the circulation of numbers that highlight the prevalence of sex trafficking has been marked by similar degrees of imprecision. To take but a few examples: the anthropologists Thaddeus Gregory Blanchette and Ana Paula da Silva have shown that all currently circulating numerical estimates regarding the extent of sex trafficking in Brazil are based on a single and methodologically spurious report. They argue, in fact, that the report in question “has thus not so much *revealed* human trafficking in Brazil as actively *created* it.”⁴⁹ Blanchette and da Silva raise various concerns about the study, ranging from the credentials of the research team that carried it out to the researchers’ use of news stories as data to the inconsistent definitions of “trafficking in persons” that guide it (the authors use a definition that contradicts that of the UN Protocol, in which aiding the migration of prostitutes is taken to be analogous to trafficking even when the migration is voluntary and involves no human rights violations). Evidently, studies that consider all forms of migrant labor in the sex industry to be incidences of trafficking will produce much higher numbers than those that do not.

Similarly, as the researcher Thomas M. Steinfatt has demonstrated, the widely circulated data on sex trafficking in Cambodia—an alleged eighty thousand to one hundred thousand victims in the past decade—cannot be taken at face value. As with the case of Brazil, most of these numbers are in fact derived from one or two sources, with Steinfatt noting that none of the NGOs that issued these numerical estimates “studied or even sponsored an empirical study of the problem.” Of the two primary sources that are most frequently cited, one does not even mention the figure of eighty thousand to one hundred thousand, and the second posits the same figure in reference to the total number of sex workers in Cambodia—not trafficked women and children. When Steinfatt and his own research team conducted ethnographic fieldwork to assess the actual extent of sex trafficking in the country, they estimated only 1,058 trafficked sex workers.⁵⁰

Inflated estimations of the extent of sex trafficking have also flourished, in particular, around sporting events, as a careful investigation by the Global

Alliance against Traffic in Women (GAATW), a network of liberal-leaning, multisectoral anti-trafficking organizations, has revealed.⁵¹ In their assessment, GAATW compared the numbers of anticipated sex trafficking cases at international sporting events to the actual numbers of sex-trafficking incidents that were reported, focusing on the 2006 and 2010 World Cup tournaments and the 2004 and 2010 Olympic Games. While forty thousand foreign women were expected to be trafficked to Germany for the 2006 World Cup and forty thousand to South Africa for the 2010 tournament, only five cases of sex trafficking were ultimately found to be linked to the former, and no cases of trafficking were linked to the latter.⁵² Similarly, no instances of sex trafficking were identified at the 2004 or 2010 Olympics, and first-person reports suggest that business in fact declined for sex workers during the 2010 games. The authors of the report surmise that such consistent disparities reveal governments' symbolic, rather than substantive, commitments to eradicating sex trafficking.⁵³

Finally, the symbolic efficacy of inflated statistical claims around sex trafficking has also been observed by the sociologist William McDonald, who has sought to "triangulate" official government estimates with the significantly lower numbers of prosecutions for trafficking crimes. He considers various explanations for the vast gulf between these two sets of figures, such as the difficulty of prosecuting cases, the obstacles to making connections with victims, a lack of police incentive to do so, and specifically in the United States, "the fragmentation of jurisdiction among local and federal law enforcement, immigration, and labor agencies." Yet even accounting for all of these factors, McDonald argues that the difference between the two sets of figures—and between empirical realities and political perception—is so vast that it can be understood only via its connection to "the potent image that continues to be used to frame the problem": the image of "the innocent, naïve decent girl seeking respectable work, who is deceived or forced into prostitution or sexual slavery."⁵⁴

Panics and Politics

Among critical scholars of sex and gender, the most frequent explanation for the recent surge in attention to sex trafficking despite meager empirical evidence has been provided by the theory of "sex panics" (and its analytic predecessor, "moral panics"). In this view, the moral combustibility of sex inclines "panics" to arise periodically, often culminating in draconian and irrational criminalized regimes.⁵⁵ Arguing in this vein, many commentators have noted the similarities between the moral panic

around sex trafficking in the current moment and that which surrounded white slavery in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which engaged a similar coalition of feminist activists and conservative Christians (a resonance I explore in greater detail in the following chapters). The central presence of evangelical Christians in both coalitions has led many secular observers to a kind of “aha!” moment in which any presumed complexity of the issue can henceforth be easily dismissed. On this reading, “puritanical” and sex-negative feminist activists have been duped into forging an alliance with sex-panicked Christians, who rally around trafficking as they have around other proxy issues (like abortion and gay marriage) in order to reassert a traditionalist sexual politics.⁵⁶

The pivotal role played by evangelical Christians in fomenting and perpetuating the current anti-trafficking movement—in the United States and beyond—has certainly been well documented.⁵⁷ The heightened presence of evangelical Christians in disseminating particular visions of sexual freedom and human rights on a global scale, through transnational institutions like the United Nations, has also been aptly observed.⁵⁸ And it is incontrovertible that the United States has been dominated by a political coalition in which evangelical Protestants have played a major role since at least 1980, one that has led to a staunch conservatism in US policy on issues of both gender and sexuality. The most frequently cited examples of this conservatism include the US deployment of worldwide restrictions on women’s reproductive freedoms, promotion of the male-headed nuclear family as the optimal model for social life, and the dismantling of government offices and programs that had been dedicated to ending gender discrimination in economic sectors.⁵⁹ As a result, it is easy to think that the pronounced presence of religious actors in the trafficking debates is in and of itself sufficient to account for the fierce antipathy to commercial sex that has shaped current political frameworks around the issue.⁶⁰

Yet the case of trafficking simultaneously reveals that evangelical engagement with anti-trafficking politics has not diverged from the proclivity displayed by all significant political constituencies—including secular liberals, human rights activists, and bipartisan political officials—to remain tightly wedded to the imperatives of neoliberal globalization in forging effective policy remedies. While a focus on “sex panics” suggests a cycle of moral combustion that is destined to be endlessly repeated, this book argues that present-day attention to trafficking has emerged at the juncture of cultural and political formations that are not only entrenched and self-replicating, but also quite new. Significantly, contem-

porary evangelical anti-trafficking activists reveal a set of political commitments that both encompasses and transcends prior depictions of conservative Christians' sexual worldviews. The alliance that they have forged with secular feminists has occurred not only around a particular relational configuration of gender and sexuality (i.e., a commitment to an ideal of amatively coupled heterosexuality, one that cannot imagine a place for prostitution outside the scope of women's exploitation) but also by a shared commitment to neoliberal economic and cultural agendas. The pursuit of "women's human rights," in this shared vision, is imagined in terms of women's (legitimate) reinsertion into market economies and their protection by state apparatuses of criminal justice.

In the succinct words of one evangelical anti-trafficking activist who described to me her organization's successful transformation of Cambodia's Svay Pak (a district formerly known for child prostitution) into "a nice tourist town," "Our real goal is to bring people out of slavery into the free market." As described earlier, this view is also manifest via the practices that Elena Shih observed in both secular and evangelical Christian "rescue" projects in Thailand, as well as in the growing number of Christian humanitarian organizations globally that orient former prostitutes toward entry-level jobs in the service economy, teaching women to bake muffins for Starbucks or to prepare Western-style drinks and food. Evangelical as well as secular human rights groups have increasingly committed themselves to this approach, no longer framing the problem of human trafficking in terms of broader dynamics of globalization, gendered labor, and migration (the prevailing framework among many secular anti-trafficking NGOs in the 1990s), but rather as a humanitarian issue that the criminal justice system and global capitalists, working in tandem, can help combat.⁶¹

During her 2008 presentation at Columbia University, Somaly Mam, the aforementioned activist and self-declared trafficking survivor from Cambodia, was notably joined by a representative from the legal technology firm LexisNexis, who discussed the virtues of public-private partnerships as well as his company's aims to retrain former trafficking victims in hairstyling, seamstress work, and entry-level positions in manufacturing. In this regard, the company followed the lead of Nicholas Kristof, who as early as 2004 was avidly endorsing the construction of what he openly termed "sweatshops" in the developing world as an antidote to sex trafficking.⁶² Before publication of the *Newsweek* exposé and her subsequent resignation, Mam had been heralded for her activism by a bevy of celebrities (ranging from Oprah Winfrey to Lauren Bush, as well as

by CNN, *Time*, *Glamour*, and *Fortune* magazines), but harshly critiqued by sex workers' rights groups for coercing former prostitutes into "rehabilitation" programs in which they were retrained for assembly-line work, sewing, and weaving.⁶³ Whereas an earlier wave of anti-globalization activists had argued that the daily practices of capitalism created sweatshop conditions of labor that were unacceptable, "new internationalist" evangelicals, along with their secular champions, have come to identify such practices with the very definition of "freedom."

Sexual Politics and Neoliberal Freedoms

Of late, "neoliberalism" has become a rather fraught term within contemporary social analysis—not because of its sparseness as a signifier but because of its capacity to designate so many distinct processes and entities. For neo-Marxists, it is an agenda of upward economic redistribution, one that is characterized by structural adjustment policies and the relocation of industrial production to "developing" Global South markets. For Foucauldians, neoliberalism has been imagined as a cultural project, premised on marketized governmentalities that produce self-regulating good subjects. And for political sociologists, neoliberalism has often been conjured as a new mode of statecraft, with privatization, the shift from the welfare state to the carceral state, and the attendant rise of new governing institutions (including NGOs, churches, and corporate entities) as core features.⁶⁴

Significantly, scholars of gender and sexuality have often sought to suture these divisions by emphasizing what Lisa Duggan has described as "the dense interrelations" among neoliberalism's economic and (gendered) cultural projects.⁶⁵ Writing about the World Bank in Ecuador in the 1990s, for example, Kate Bedford has suggested that the promotion of complementary love within sharing couples was a central part of the bank's push to embed markets in more sustainable ways.⁶⁶ In her ethnographic study of the Grameen Bank's heralded microcredit program in Bangladesh, Lamia Karim has similarly demonstrated how microlending programs relied on, and ultimately came to reinforce, preexisting gender inequities.⁶⁷ In a similar vein, various feminist and queer scholars have examined the intertwined economic, gendered, and sexual interests that coalesce in corporate campaigns around seemingly progressive causes such as LGBT rights and the fight against breast cancer, or in the neoliberal state's appropriation of formerly liberationist discourses

(of feminism and queerness) in fomenting sexual nationalisms, carceral politics, and securitized borders.⁶⁸

Contributing to this emerging body of scholarship, the analysis that follows further specifies the mechanisms by which contemporary sexual politics and neoliberal formations intersect. To this end, I trace points of intersection among anti-trafficking activists and policy makers on several key political fronts (engagements I have variously termed carceral feminism, militarized humanitarianism, and redemptive capitalism) and the distinctive social visions that undergird each of these modes of intervention. Together, these formations meld new techniques of governance with particular imaginations of gendered freedom while traversing traditionally understood distinctions between the progressive and the conservative, as well as between the civil, the economic, and the political. We shall also see that in each instance, sexual politics have a crucial role to play in conjoining affective commitments to liberation with contemporary techniques of power, and in dissolving the principles of division that previously separated these realms.

In sketching a genealogy of carceral feminism, I demonstrate the ways in which contemporary feminism—especially in its hegemonic, institutionalized guise—has increasingly served to facilitate, rather than to counter, the carceral controlling arm of the neoliberal state. I use the term carceral feminism to designate a cultural and political formation in which previous generations' struggles for gender justice and sexual liberation are recast in terms of criminal justice (often via social actors and institutions that do not necessarily identify as feminist but have explicitly declared their allegiance to the empowerment of women and girls). From intimate partner violence to campus sexual assault, from sex trafficking to hate crimes to sexual harassment and rape, the carceral feminist agenda has increasingly supplanted other forms of feminist engagement in domestic and global policy circles.

The discussion of carceral feminism that I present is in no way intended to suggest that all existing feminisms—much less, feminists—are committed to a carceral agenda. Even within the mainstream of contemporary US feminism, for example, a liberationist vision still prevails around issues such as reproductive rights, the flagship issue of the liberal-left end of the political spectrum.⁶⁹ Around questions of sexual violence, however, including, but not limited to, the issue of human trafficking, a carceral agenda has indisputably prevailed. Through successive encodings of issues such as rape, sexual harassment, pornography, sexual violence, prostitution, and trafficking into federal and international criminal law,

I show how the goals of second-wave feminism have provided crucial ideological support for ushering in contemporary carceral transitions.⁷⁰ The burgeoning discourse of “women’s human rights” has also served to recircuit feminist attention from the domestic spheres of home and nation to an expanding international stage, thereby asserting carceral versions of feminism on a global scale.

This intricate interweaving of feminism with punitive political agendas has, I argue, found a counterpart in the militarized humanitarian interventions (also frequently conducted under the banner of advocacy for “women’s interests”) that a growing number of state and nonstate actors have employed. While theorists such as Inderpal Grewal have previously used the term “military humanitarianism” to describe the state policy of using women’s human rights to justify US military interventions in Afghanistan and elsewhere,⁷¹ I suggest that the term “militarized humanitarianism” might also be applied in a more expansive sense, one that includes not only state-sanctioned military interventions in foreign nation-states but also nongovernmental actors’ own application of carceral oriented humanitarian strategies to the global stage.

If the encapsulation of social justice within criminal justice is one aspect of neoliberalism that has transformed the contemporary landscape of sexual politics, the ascendance of market-based agendas for gender freedoms through practices of social entrepreneurship, consumer humanitarianism, and “global corporate citizenship” is another.⁷² Although US ambassador John Miller, the flamboyant Bush-era figure with ties to the religious right, is the public official most frequently associated with elevating the issue of human trafficking to a position of national prominence,⁷³ it was in fact his more subdued successor, Mark Lagon, who quietly and effectively sustained attention to it by brokering public-private partnerships among multinational corporations, NGOs, and the US Department of State. While many analysts of transnational feminism have trained their eye on the United Nations as the principle sphere of global feminist engagement,⁷⁴ the surge in advocacy of socially entrepreneurial actors around questions of women’s human rights and new corporate commitments to “empowering women and girls” may prove to be equally consequential.

Accordingly, multinational corporations such as Google, the Body Shop, and Manpower Incorporated have come to play an increasingly prominent role as advocates within—rather than the targets of—anti-trafficking campaigns by providing funding, framing, and policy solutions to the perceived problems of sex trafficking. As these economic actors have

assumed a more prominent role in reshaping the moral field, political articulations of sexual freedom and gender justice have been similarly transformed. Alongside emergent state-market hybrids like Humanity United and the Clinton Global Initiative ("dedicated to using market-based solutions to empower girls and women"), market-driven social justice movements have focused on issues such as women's leadership, women's role in corporate supply chains, and the trafficking and slavery of women and girls.⁷⁵

The flourishing of this approach in the context of contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns is particularly interesting to consider given that in earlier stages of grassroots advocacy around this issue, multinational capital and corporations were imagined by many activists to be the enemies of gender justice, rather than its enablers. Within the contemporary anti-trafficking movement, as in other political arenas (including microfinance and development), the shift to market-based visions of freedom and justice has occurred among secular and faith-based constituencies alike. The faith-based counterpart to the rise of "global corporate citizenship" is the practice that evangelicals call "business as mission," in which the extension of the free enterprise system is figured as a gender-progressive quest. Deeply resonant with both socially liberal and conservative worldviews, I suggest that we might best term this new configuration *redemptive capitalism*—a capitalism that is understood by its proponents to be transforming not only of self but also of world, and, indeed, of capitalism itself in a postsocialist, post-welfare-state era.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first century's "traffic in women" has been accompanied by a global traffic in feminism, and by a circulation of newly emergent forms of sex and gender politics. Situated at the nexus of sex, religion, humanitarianism, and political economy, contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns provide a useful lens into the ongoing social transformations that are reshaping each of these domains. The politics surrounding trafficking also reveal the extent to which the neoliberal state has itself been reconfigured through a direct reliance upon corporations and NGOs, fostering new social actors and remapping activist terrains. Despite frequent progressive urgings to forge a "better" anti-trafficking policy (by shifting the focus of political attention from sex trafficking to labor trafficking, for example, or by enhancing the availability of social services for sex workers⁷⁶), such proclamations do little to address a deeper set of issues that are also urgently at stake: the sexed and gendered contours of "freedom" and "justice," notions of citizenship and belonging, and the contemporary scope and limits of emancipatory discourses.

An Ethnography of a Discourse

Although there has been a steady stream of melodramatic and sensationalistic texts on sex trafficking by journalists and activists, and a number of more critical accounts of the contemporary trafficking discourse by scholars working within the tradition of cultural studies, this book aims instead to examine the discursive construction of “trafficking” ethnographically.⁷⁷ While existing critical treatments of the trafficking frame have primarily served to demonstrate its deficits, my project here is not only a critical but also an explanatory one, arguing empirically for the reasons behind the frame’s (re)emergence, demonstrating the motives of the actors who have propelled it forward, and documenting broadly its embodied effects (both for those who work in the sex industry and for contemporary sex and gender politics more generally). The various academic volumes that have examined “sex trafficking” ethnographically have made crucial scholarly contributions—and in the pages that follow, I draw extensively on many of these case studies—but these investigations of specific communities of migrant sex workers make more narrowly delimited empirical and theoretical claims than this volume intends.⁷⁸ The pages that follow weave together multisited ethnography with multilayered social analysis, exploring the complex intersections of sexual commerce, neoliberal governance, and prevailing social practices of moral and political intervention. While my approach to this material is guided by prevailing theoretical and political questions around sex, gender, and political economy, it is given heft, depth, and specificity by my engagement with the empirical material that I have gathered.⁷⁹

Taking as a departure point my previous ethnographic research with migrant and domestic sex workers and the social actors who aim to regulate their movements, I trace the ambitions of the diverse coalition of feminist activists, evangelical Christians, and corporate and state officials who have recently produced policy transformations on a scale unparalleled since the white slavery scare of the twentieth century. Drawing on in-depth interviews with anti-trafficking activists and political leaders as well as ethnographic research at policy meetings, in courthouses, and at “rescue projects” for women who have been designated victims of sex trafficking, I explore how contemporary campaigns against human trafficking have mobilized constituencies with divergent backgrounds and agendas, and the overlapping moral and political visions around which the alliance between these groups has been forged. Although my chief empirical focus concerns anti-trafficking campaigns originating in

the United States during the years of the Bush and Obama presidencies (with the United States serving as a key engine of neo-imperial humanitarian intervention on this as well as other issues), I engage a wide array of secondary materials to trace their global extensions.⁸⁰ Because "trafficking" continues to proliferate and transform, there are no doubt many more empirical cases—emerging activist groups, laws and policies, media campaigns, and corporate initiatives—that could potentially serve to enhance the analysis presented here, but I believe that the range of cases considered is sufficient to build an argument which can be broadly construed. In the book's conclusion and afterword, I provide a brief examination of the continued twists and turns that anti-trafficking politics have taken since the time that the bulk of my empirical research was completed.

A theoretically driven *ethnography of a discourse*, my analysis is deliberately mobile and multisited, traveling with its empirical object across varied political and cultural domains. By "discourse," I mean to signal a constellation of words, materialities, and practices as they coalesce in historically and culturally situated ways, constructing the empirical object under consideration and the social locations in which it is manifest.⁸¹ As the sociologist Mariana Valverde has written, "discourse," in this (non-idealist) sense refers not to language as separate from the "real world" but to organized sets of signifying practices that cross the boundary between "reality" and "language." Or, to paraphrase Judith Butler, it captures the inseparability of regulatory ideals and their worldly materializations.⁸²

Discourse, on this reading, is neither totalizing nor uniform—it is, rather, "a domain of constraints."⁸³ While some commentators have cautioned against the "mechanistic and monolithic overtones" of the term and its presumed inability to capture the "micro-techniques through which specific interventions have been imposed, opposed, and fought over," my own case study highlights the extent to which contestation and fragmentation can be integral features.⁸⁴ For example (and as I elaborate upon in the coming chapters), although states, NGOs, faith-based constituencies, and some secular feminist activists have come to actively embrace the discourse of trafficking, its various deployments have been shifting and malleable, with the term variously signaling all forms of sexual labor or situations of violence and coercion only, as well as multiple and conflicting definitions of forced labor, child labor, and slavery in other industrial sectors. At the same time, Empower's sex workers, like sex workers from similar organizations around the globe, have organized to reject the discourse on both symbolic and practical grounds.⁸⁵ Despite this refusal and the discourse's failure to adequately "subjectify" most sex

workers, their exposure to it on a daily basis via NGOs and police officers has rendered engagement with its terms to be obligatory.⁸⁶ One could say that the best evidence that a discourse has become politically and culturally hegemonic—as “sex trafficking” certainly has—resides in the compulsory repetitions and citations that it entails.⁸⁷

What does it mean to study a discourse ethnographically? Unlike conventional ethnographies, I take the subject of this study to be socially constructed rather than naturally occurring, and cast the process of social construction itself as my chief object of inquiry.⁸⁸ As such, this volume represents a theoretical and methodological departure from the tradition of global and multisited ethnographies that denaturalize the presumed unity of cultures or the integrity of self-contained field sites but do not place the presumed self-evidence of the empirical phenomenon at hand under similar scrutiny.⁸⁹ Given the epistemological presuppositions I have outlined, my chosen field sites were, to the extent possible, generated by the institutional turns and swerves taken by the trafficking discourse itself over the years that I was engaged in this project, rather than being preselected at the outset of the research process (a “shadowing” of the discourse, so to speak).⁹⁰

Between 2005 and 2012, I attended over a hundred anti-trafficking events (meetings, conferences, prayer gatherings, rallies, film screenings, and focus groups) with an ideologically diverse sample of secular rights-based and evangelical Christian anti-trafficking activists from the grassroots, governmental, and corporate sectors. The majority of these were held in metropolitan Washington, DC, or New York, but I also conducted interviews and attended events in Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, Denver, Philadelphia, and in other global cities, including London, Berlin, Copenhagen, Bergen, Barcelona, Hong Kong, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires. In addition to this, I conducted forty-eight in-depth, face-to-face interviews with prominent movement participants—politicians, members of activist groups, heads of NGOs, and corporate leaders. In the summers of 2007 and 2012, I made two brief research visits to Thailand to meet with local UN officials, anti-trafficking NGOs, and sex worker activists (the latter, as described above, in coordination with Elena Shih, who had been conducting doctoral research in Bangkok). I chose Thailand as a supplementary field site because of its role as an enduring focal point for global anti-trafficking interventions, because it could effectively supplement my prior research in the United States and Western Europe, and because of my existing field contacts in the region.

To the extent possible, I have sought to include the actual names of people, places, and organizations to preserve the historical and social

specificity of my account. As Alexandra Murphy and Colin Jerolmack argue in a recent forum on the common practice of masking identities in ethnographic writing, "decisions about what and how to mask," though often deemed inconsequential, "are inherently theoretical choices" that may result in the omission of significant sociological data. They further note that many ethnographers report that interviewees themselves often request inclusion of their real names in published texts, which was also the case for many of the people I spoke with, as was their hope for a book in which recognizable place-names and organizations were included.⁹¹ Despite my inclination to preserve as much specificity as possible, whenever research participants requested anonymity or if their preferences could not be established, I omitted or changed their names as well as any details that might identify them to other readers.

My ambition to provide an ethnography of a discourse may strike some sociologists as a bold and perhaps even heretical endeavor, but this approach is hardly unprecedented in recent ethnographic writing. For example, Shore and Wright's 1997 edited collection *Anthropology of Policy* considers questions such as how "policies construct their subjects as objects of power" and how "shifts in discourse are made authoritative." For Shore and Wright, this approach "offers a radical reconceptualization of 'the field'; not as a discrete local community or bounded geographical area, but as a social and political space articulated through relations of power and systems of governance."⁹² Annelise Riles's ethnography of "the network," a fascinating, interdisciplinary study of women's non-governmental organizations in Fiji, casts its object of analysis as "a set of informational practices," including attendance at meetings and conferences and the preparation of documents.⁹³ In her important study of global microfinance organizations, geographer Ananya Roy similarly makes the swerve from studying those living under conditions of poverty to "the poverty experts who produce knowledge about poverty and who set the agenda of poverty alleviation."⁹⁴ A classic exemplar of the discursive approach from within the field of anthropology is James Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine*, which argues that "development" is best understood as the dominant interpretive grid "through which the impoverished regions of the world are known to us." In his study of development in Lesotho, Ferguson takes as his primary object of investigation not the people to be "developed" but the apparatus that does the developing.⁹⁵

In like manner, in this book I am far more interested in the question of how "trafficking" is politically and culturally enacted than in recounting particular stories of trafficked women.⁹⁶ Although this chapter begins

with the perspectives of sex workers in Chiang Mai (and in the chapters that follow, I return to some of the varied circumstances of people who engage in the performance and brokerage of sexual labor), my focus in these discussions is primarily around their encounters with the trafficking discourse and its alternately awkward and manipulable fit. By taking the discourse of trafficking, rather than the experience of “trafficking” itself, as my analytic object, I by no means wish to suggest that the violence that can occur within sexual labor is unimportant or that it is never a feature of sex workers’ experiences. My point is rather that the political and cultural framework of trafficking highlights particular elements of the experience while deemphasizing others, and that it names and focuses our attention in particular ways—for example, through the lens of crime or gendered human rights abuses, as opposed to, say, structural violence.⁹⁷ As the opening anecdote of this introduction suggests, I will also argue that it pushes forward political remedies that are often a detriment to those it claims to help. It is for these reasons that it is crucial to understand the ways that the trafficking discourse functions as well as its genesis.

Finally, my methodological ambition to provide an ethnography of a discourse takes much inspiration from David Valentine’s highly innovative “ethnography of a category.” In his book *Imagining Transgender: the Ethnography of a Category*, Valentine describes this as the “critical ethnographic exploration of the origins, meanings, and consequences of the emergence and institutionalization” of distinct types of social categorization.⁹⁸ “Despite the collectivity and inclusivity implied by the term ‘transgender,’” Valentine argues, “its employment in institutionalized contexts cannot account for the experiences of the most socially vulnerable gender-variant people.”⁹⁹ Valentine’s aim is not simply to document the inadequacies of “transgender” as empirical description; he is equally interested in tracing the production of the category’s effects, “the complex social and political process” that he refers to as “imagining transgender.”

What is common to all of these approaches, as well as to my own, is an insistence that there is no “thing in itself” beyond its discursive construction, because the discourse produces the issue under consideration in the first place—shaping how the problem is defined, how it can be perceived, and the possible moral and political responses that can emerge. For example, is the “problem” of trafficking one of sex, of migration, of criminal networks, or of global social inequalities? Or, alternatively, is “the issue” one of gender, ethno-racial, and class exploitation within the context of sexual labor? This book seeks to explain how particular dis-

ursive formations arise and the kinds of solutions that get embraced, as well as the reasons that other possible interventions have often been foreclosed. In doing so, I aim not only to reconstrue the problem of "sex trafficking" as it is currently defined but also to better understand the politically complex laws, policies, and social actors that have together endeavored to stop it.

Plan of the Book

The "brokering" of subjects to which the title of this book refers thus takes place at several distinct levels that operate simultaneously—at the level of the sexually laboring subjects whose migration patterns and work are mediated by third parties; at the level of the activist campaigns initiated by the "helping subjects" who seek to ameliorate gendered suffering by curtailing sex workers' labor and cross-border movements; and at the level of global sexual politics, in which new political and economic formations and prevailing moral campaigns around sex work have become mutually reinforcing. These distinct yet simultaneous forms of brokerage—of sexual, helping, and political subjects—are the basis of the chapters that follow, and they constitute the central thematic components of this book.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide the backdrop for the discursive explosion of "trafficking" at the turn of the twenty-first century, tracing its sociological and political prehistory both in terms of the changing dynamics of sexual labor and vis-à-vis shifting paradigms of sexual regulation. How and why have commercial sexual transactions increasingly come to be understood as the global human rights violation of "sex trafficking" and through the lens of its close cultural correlate, "modern slavery"? What are the effects of these discourses on those who have been hailed by them as "human traffickers," and on the brokered sexual subjects that this framework purports to help? How has the issue been taken up, negotiated, and recirculated by diverse contingents of policy makers, NGOs, media channels, and secular and faith-based humanitarian campaigns? These two chapters provide an ethnographic analysis of the initial constituencies who resurrected the issue—secular feminist activists and conservative Christians—the key groups who would also inspire its travels through subsequent institutional, political, and cultural terrains. Basing my discussion upon oral histories with activists, documents from United Nations and US State Department meetings, and critical histories of the emergence and transformation of "women's human rights," I draw on both primary and secondary materials

to provide a critical genealogy of the (re)ascendance of “trafficking.” Chapter 4 further serves to illuminate the aims of secular feminist and evangelical Christian activists as they go about their work in the United States and Southeast Asia. These chapters also serve to introduce my central theoretical concepts—carceral feminism, militarized humanitarianism, and redemptive capitalism—and the pivotal role that they have come to play in contemporary sex and gender politics.

In Chapter 2, I focus in particular on the ways in which feminism, and sex and gender more generally, have become intricately interwoven with punitive agendas in contemporary US and global politics. Melding existing theoretical discussions with insights drawn from my own multisited ethnographic research (including first-person interviews with prominent activists, observations at key conferences and meetings, and an autoethnographic account of my role as expert witness in a federal sex-trafficking case) I elaborate on the ways that neoliberalism and the politics of sex and gender have intertwined to produce a politics oriented around carceral visions of gender justice and militarized humanitarian interventions on the global stage. In contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns, these goals have found expression in laws and policies that seek to severely punish sex traffickers and to “end demand” for prostitution on a global scale. Enforcement-wise, this has resulted in heightened police control over poor people of color who are involved in the peripheral corners of the global sexual economy, including pimps, clients, and sex workers alike.

For many secular critics of current anti-trafficking campaigns, the ideological commitments of evangelical Christian activists are usually presumed to be self-evident, and their political investment in this issue is assumed to be one and the same with the anti-pornography, anti-abortion, and anti-gay rights activism of decades past. In chapter 3, “Seek Justice™,” I argue that although some avowedly Christian Right groups have indeed been active in the contemporary anti-trafficking crusade, they do not represent the majority of grassroots activity. Instead, a new group of young, highly educated, and relatively affluent evangelicals who often describe themselves as pertaining to the “justice generation” have pursued some of the most active and passionate campaigning around sexual slavery. In contrast to their Christian Right predecessors, the young evangelicals who have pioneered Christian interest in this issue not only embrace the languages of women’s rights and social justice but have also taken deliberate steps to distinguish their work from the sexual politics of other conservative Christians. Ultimately, however, new evangelical efforts to “seek justice” (per one organization’s patented slogan) remain beholden to an

underlying carceral politics that serves to link them not just to those sectors of the contemporary feminist movement that have themselves veered rightward in recent decades but also to an entire right-wing spectrum of social and economic conservatives.

Chapter 4, "The Travels of Trafficking," draws on collaborative ethnographic research in Bangkok and Chang Mai (within the Bangkok and Chiang Mai red-light districts, at secular and faith-based "rescue projects," and as part of an anti-trafficking "reality tour" of Thailand jointly sponsored by US secular and faith-based organizations) to explore the surge in practices of social entrepreneurship, business as mission, and consumer humanitarianism that have arisen around "sex trafficking" in Southeast Asia. As a focus of current anti-trafficking activism and attention, and as a site where global campaigns against trafficking first emerged in the 1990s, Thailand is a key location for exploring how the discourse of trafficking has traveled globally between the Global South and the Global North, in multiple circuits and directions.¹⁰⁰ It is notable in this regard that international anti-trafficking campaigns peaked in Thailand at the same time that actual cases of human trafficking declined, and despite local activists' own assessment that the region had become so saturated with anti-trafficking NGOs that there were more organizations, both secular and faith-based, than there were trafficking victims.¹⁰¹

While secular and faith-based NGOs have increasingly relied on models of social entrepreneurship and business as mission to address sex trafficking, the issue has also become a key component of a growing number of corporate social responsibility campaigns, in which multinational corporations have furthered the pursuit of "market-based solutions" to contemporary social problems.¹⁰² What are the implications of the rise of "global corporate citizenship" for transnational feminist advocacy and for social justice politics? How have neoliberalized and reconfigured institutions of global governance served to alter the terrain of sexual commerce and of the politics of sex and gender? Chapter 5 draws on in-depth interviews with and ethnographic observations of corporate actors from Google and Manpower Inc. to describe a brave new landscape of sexual politics that feminist social theorists have barely begun to consider.¹⁰³

Ideological descendants of "compassionate conservatism," these interventions situate the morality of market exchange not in the supplementary private spheres of family, church, and charity but in the economic transaction itself as a key site of feeling and belonging. Via a suturing of the traditional gendered divides between public and private, paid and

unpaid labor, and the family and the market, I demonstrate how women and sex are brought into this model of redemptive capitalism not as literal commodities for sale but as consumers and symbols, sources of affect, and key fonts of moral conviction. While resurgent alliances between feminists and evangelicals have been an ongoing preoccupation of critical scholarship on sex trafficking, equally pertinent to consider is both groups' current robust partnership with the economic agendas of a neoliberalized state apparatus. Could it be that the truly "strange bedfellows" alliance around sex trafficking is not the one between feminists and Christians that has preoccupied journalists and social researchers but rather that which binds together people of all religious varieties who have historically held very different ideas about the beneficence of markets, criminal justice, and the role of the state?

By way of a conclusion, chapter 6 places the example of "sex trafficking" in the context of other sexual-political issues to provide a more general assessment of the contemporary landscape of sex and gender politics. Although my analysis in this book focuses on recent mobilizations around the traffic in women, this issue is of course not alone in revealing the complex intertwining of gender and sexuality with state and metastate interests. The so-called headscarf debates in Western Europe as well as a succession of recent controversies around questions of sex, culture, and religion have also occurred squarely at this intersection, as have less publicized discussions around "gender mainstreaming" and the (hetero)sexual politics of development.¹⁰⁴ Situating the case of sex trafficking within a broader field of sexual and social politics allows us to further consider the power relations that undergird consensus-building humanitarian frames, frames that simultaneously produce visions of rightness, goodness, and justice, as well as criminal prohibitions.

Although the contemporary rubric of "fighting trafficking" has done little to protect most sex workers or others laboring under exploitative conditions, it has been highly effective as an ideological constellation that can travel widely and well, brokering alliances among otherwise disparate social groups—not despite but rather because of its ultimate incoherence as a discourse of social suffering. Given the efficacy and breadth of the travels of "trafficking," the more salient question may not be why and how such discursive regimes succeed but if and when they ever falter. I thus conclude this book by coming back full circle to where I started, with the alternative models of advocacy that are being embraced by sex workers at the Can Do Bar and its counterparts around the globe. Because history suggests that existing discursive formations of power can quickly unravel and reconfigure, I end by considering the

potential for a different vision of sexual justice to emerge in what some have termed a "post-neoliberal" moment hastened by recent economic crises.¹⁰⁵ While gendered moral discourses have indeed been subsumable within broader geopolitical interests, they cannot be entirely contained. As in the previous century's white slavery panic, in which a decades-long feminist campaign against prostitution was eventually supplanted by medico-biological discourses focused on disease,¹⁰⁶ it is clear that new constellations of power can emerge to eclipse the urgency of "sex trafficking," freeing secular feminists, evangelical Christians, and others who advocate on behalf of a more just world to forge new political visions.