

Combating Sex Trafficking: Advancing Freedom for Women and Girls

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Activist Scholarship

I have always considered Women's Studies to be the academic arm of the Women's Liberation Movement. I have pursued my research and scholarship with the goal of advancing women's freedom and equality.

I have done work on women and science, but my most activist scholarship has been on the trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and girls. My goals have been to document the violence against women that is inherent in sex trafficking, analyze the factors that cause and contribute to this complex system of violence and exploitation, raise the consciousness of concerned citizens about sex trafficking in their neighborhoods and around the world, and engage law and policy makers to create new remedies to assist victims and hold perpetrators accountable.

I have conducted research projects on sex trafficking in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and South Korea, and the use of new information technologies, particularly the Internet, to traffic women and girls in Europe, Cambodia, and the United States. I have researched the involvement of mail-order-bride agencies in the trafficking of women in the countries of the former Soviet Union. And I have been involved in contemporary theoretical and policy debates on sex trafficking and prostitution.

The term "sex trafficking" replaces the term "white slave trade" used at the turn of the 20th century. When feminists in the second wave of the women's movement again took up the work against trafficking, they used the word as an umbrella concept to encompass all practices of buying and selling women and children's bodies. According to Dorchen Leidholdt, one of the early activist lawyers against commercial sexual exploitation:

"Trafficking, as we understood it, included American pornography, temple prostitution in India, military prostitution in the Philippines, street prostitution in Peru, and sex tourism from Europe to Asia."¹

¹ Dorchen Leidholdt, "Keynote Address: Demand and the Debate," in *Demand Dynamics: The Forces of Demand in Global Sex Trafficking*. (Morrison Torrey, Editor) Chicago: DePaul University College of Law, p. 6.

Now, the term “trafficking” has been narrowed by legislation, a U.N. Protocol, and common usage, so that one must now say sex trafficking, prostitution, and pornography to be comprehensive.

I got involved in anti-trafficking work in the late 1980s and for ten years all the work I did was of the sort you can do with no money. I included material on trafficking in the courses I taught, participate in conferences, and wrote papers based on data that can be collected with few resources.

Researching Trafficking in a Sexist Culture and Authoritarian Political System

In 1998 and 1999, the U.S. government awarded the first grants for research on trafficking and I was a recipient of two of them. One was to research the trafficking of women and girls into the United States and the other one was to research the trafficking of women from Ukraine.

The National Institute of Justice’s joint research project with Ukrainian researchers was a unique and educational experience. It was the first time that NIJ funded a joint research project with international research partners. I learned a lot about the trafficking of women from Ukraine,² and I also learned a lot about conducting research in a sexist culture and authoritarian system.

In Ukraine, I found myself immersed in a culture with deeply sexist beliefs about women’s nature, behavior, and motivation. Still following Soviet ideology, national interest was considered more important than individual rights. I learned how blatant corruption and authoritarianism can be.

When I questioned police, government officials, and academic experts about trafficking, the responses I got often left me wondering if I was researching the trafficking of women or the manifestations of sexism.

I was told that the reason so many women were being trafficking from Ukraine was because Ukraine had the most beautiful women in the world, so it was not surprising that they would be in so much demand for prostitution all over the world. I was reminded of the lyrics to the Beatles song “Back in the USSR:” “Well the Ukraine girls really knock me out. They leave the west behind.”

Several academics and officials said that the disappearance or migration of so many beautiful women was a threat to Ukraine’s gene pool – the collective DNA of the nation. They were afraid that only the ugly women were going to be left behind to breed in Ukraine.

I was told that so many women had gone abroad, with the assumption that many of them were trafficked, that villages were left without young women and children. The problem was so severe in places that elementary schools were closing for lack of young students. If the trend continued, one can see this as a demographic problem. The Ukrainians considered this to be a looming national disaster. Since I’m always thinking of solutions to problems I wondered if I was going to have to recommend that women should stay home and have babies.

A number of the male experts I spoke to believed that trafficking didn’t really exist. Most believed that women went abroad voluntarily to be in prostitution and made a lot of money.

² Donna M. Hughes and Tatyana Denisova. “The Transnational Political Criminal Nexus of Trafficking of Women in Ukraine,” *Trends in Organized Crime* Vol. 6, No. 3-4: Spr.-Sum. 2001 (Printing date March 2003)

When one academic expert told me this, I pointed out to him that Ukrainian victims had been identified in the Balkans. He countered by saying that these women just claimed to be victims so that they would receive free travel expenses from NGOs to return home.

At the end of these conversations or interviews I was often left wondering whether I was studying sexism or trafficking.

In this project, I was matched with an excellent Ukrainian researcher by the name of Tatyana Denisova. She was head of the criminal law department at Zaporozhye State University and was the highest ranking woman – a colonel - in the Ukrainian militia or police force. She was able to use her extensive contacts among police to get us good information and interviews. We were the only woman-only research team and we worked well together, so much so, I think we became a threat to the head Ukrainian administrator who was promoting the researchers he controlled. I got some lessons on how power operates in an authoritarian system.

First they tried to get information on all our contacts and sources. My research partner, Tatyana, was told to turn over the names and addresses of all people that she interviewed, including the identity and contact information for victims. I quickly countered this by pointing out that the U.S. was paying for this project and in the U.S. we granted confidentiality to research subjects. We won that round.

But there are many ways to interfere with a research project. The Ukrainian research administration disrupted our scheduled research coordinating meetings. On one trip, Tatyana and I planned to meet before the beginning of a conference. We had the date, time and place set up. I made the mistake of mentioning this meeting to the interpreter for the chief administrator. I was quickly informed that the meeting could not take place because Tatyana was delayed in arriving. Unfortunately, since I did not speak Russian or Ukrainian I had to rely on the interpreter to verify this. She placed a telephone call in front of me and said she spoke to Tatyana who was still in her home town and would not arrive until the next day. The next day, when I saw Tatyana she told me that she was in the hotel at the time waiting for me to come to the meeting. I had been blatantly lied to. When I confronted the interpreter on her lies; she just smirked. She had prevented the meeting and being caught in a lie was irrelevant.

At another conference, I tried to go to lunch with Tatyana, but was told the chief administrator would like me to attend a luncheon in his private dining room. I said I had an arrangement to eat with my research partner and started to walk down the hall in that direction. One person stepped in front of me with raised arms blocking my way and another person grabbed my arm tightly and restrained me. It would have taken a physical fight to get passed them to meet with my research partner. Once again the administrator's assistant just smirked and walked away.

Back in the U.S., I was encountering growing resistance to my research and work as well. My research and experience showed that trafficking of women was directly connected to prostitution. The Clinton administration's position was that trafficking was not linked to prostitution. As a result of this difference, I was blocked from participating in projects. In one instance I was working with people in the Treasury Department to plan a conference. I was informed that the State Department objected to my participation because of my political views. After that, I was not able to obtain any more funding for my work on trafficking until the after the Clinton folks were out of power.

Approaches to Prostitution and Feminist Debates on Prostitution

I want to talk about theoretical and state approaches, as in governmental policies, toward prostitution and layout the feminist debates around them. There are three general approaches to prostitution: prohibition, regulation, and abolition.

With the prohibition approach, prostitution is defined as criminal activity, and all activities relating to prostitution are criminalized: soliciting, procuring, pimping, and brothel keeping. All persons engaged in these activities are considered criminals. No distinction is made between those who sell sex, those who buy sex, those who facilitate the buying and selling or who manage establishments where prostitution takes place. In the U.S., with the exception of a few counties in Nevada, we have a prohibition approach to prostitution.

Under the regulationist approach, prostitution is legalized and redefined as a form of service work, i.e. sexual services. Regulations are set up that control when, where, and under what circumstances prostitution can be engaged in. Selling sex is illegal only if the regulations are violated. Prostitutes become sex workers. Men become clients. Pimps become managers; brothel owners are business people; and traffickers are employment agents who assist migrant sex workers to travel to destination countries and find jobs.

The state expects to collect tax revenue from the industry and income earners. This is the state approach in the Netherlands, Germany, and some states of Australia.

Under an abolitionist approach, prostitution is viewed as a harmful activity and all laws and policies aim to eradicate it. A distinction is made between victims and perpetrators and they are treated accordingly. Women and children used in prostitution are considered victims and offered services, johns – the men who buy sex acts, pimps, brothel keepers and traffickers are all criminalized. The approach is similar to how to treat domestic violence – distinguishing between victims and perpetrators and treating them accordingly.

Under this view, prostitution is seen as a form of violence against women or a form of slavery. Two countries have adopted this approach – Sweden and the U.S. at the federal level. They have conceptualized the problems of trafficking and prostitution in slightly different ways, but the impact of their approaches is similar

Feminists are divided on these approaches between supporting regulation and abolition. No feminist I know supports prohibition. The feminist question is: What is prostitution? Is it a form of work for women, which should be legalized so women can choose freely to be sex workers, or is it harmful to women, a violation of women's human rights, and efforts should be made to stop it?

I want to explain the abolitionist Swedish approach to prostitution. The law was drafted by feminists, and enacted by a social feminist government. Beginning in 1999, the purchasing of sexual services became a crime. The new law was passed as part of a new violence against women act that broadened the activities that qualified as criminal acts of violence. Sweden redefined prostitution as a form of violence against women. They decriminalized women in prostitution, and criminalized the buying of sexual services. With this new approach, “prostitution is considered to be one of the most serious expressions of the oppression of and discrimination against women.” The focus of the law is on “the demand” or the behavior of those who purchase sex acts, not the women.

As a result of the new law in Sweden, prostitution in the streets has been significantly reduced. The law has had a disruptive effect on men seeking to buy sexual services, reducing that activity by almost 80 per cent.

While Sweden has taken an abolitionist approach because they consider prostitution to be a form of violence against women, the U.S. at the federal level has defined forced prostitution and sex trafficking to be forms of slavery. Sex trafficking is referred to as a form of modern-day slavery. This view is partially codified into law and policy and new legislation is being drafted right now to further this position.

In 2000, Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), which takes aim at the traffickers of foreign nationals and provides relief and services to people that have been trafficked into the U.S. for sex or labor. It is abolitionist in that all minors – those under 18 – are considered victims, and any woman who is in prostitution as a result of force, fraud, or coercion is considered to be a victim of trafficking and will not be charged with any violations of the law, such as prostitution.

The U.S. is also focusing more on what is called the demand side of sex trafficking, meaning there is increased effort to reduce the demand for sex acts by focusing on the men who buy sex acts and the pimps who control women and girls and promote prostitution. Last year, I did a research report for the U.S. State Department on the demand side of sex trafficking that focused on men's motivation and behavior related to buying sex acts, and described programs that focused on prosecuting or reeducating men. I'm working on a second report right now.

At present, I am assisting in the drafting of a new federal bill that will provide funding to local government authorities to enhance their prosecution of johns and pimps and provide services to U.S. victims of sex trafficking and prostitution. Although this new bill will not change state and local laws, it does promote an abolitionist policy by shifting the focus to arresting pimps and johns and providing services to victims.

Harm of Prostitution in the U.S.

Here's a quick statistical look at women in prostitution in the U.S.

History of Childhood Abuse

60-85 % victims of incest or child sexual abuse³

60-72% victims of physical abuse in home⁴

62% someone in the household was frequently hit, slapped, or pushed⁵

83% drug or alcohol abuse in the household

56% ran away from home at least once, mean age 13

28% were told to leave home by parent or guardian, mean age 15

³ Silbert, Mimi H. and Ayala M. Pines. "Entrance into Prostitution." *Youth and Society* 13 (June 1982): 471-500; Erbe, Nancy. "Prostitutes: Victim's of Men's Exploitation and Abuse." *Law and Inequality* 2 (August 1984): 609-628; Council for Prostitution Alternatives. *Annual Report* (1991): 2-4.

⁴ Silbert & Pines.

⁵ Jody Raphael and Deborah L. Shapiro. *Sisters Speak Out: The Lives and Needs of Prostituted Women in Chicago. A Research Study*, Center for Impact Research, August 2002

Average age of entry into prostitution⁶

- 87% entered prostitution before age 21
- 62% entered prostitution before age 18
- 35% entered prostitution before age 15

Health Effects⁷

- 86% were physically assaulted by johns
- 80% were sexually assaulted by johns
- 40% subjected to sadistic sex by johns
- 65% assaulted or threatened with weapons
- 86% physically assaulted by pimps, 50% assaulted frequently or daily

Mental health problems⁸

- 86% depressed
- 41% hopeless
- 64% anger and rage
- 64% suicidal
- 63% had hurt themselves or tried to commit suicide
- 68% had post-traumatic stress disorder⁹

Substance Abuse¹⁰

- 92% of women used drugs and alcohol to cope with prostitution
- 90% of women increased drug and alcohol use during prostitution

Mortality Rate¹¹

Based on a long-term cohort study from 1967 to 1999 of 1,969 prostitutes in Colorado Springs

- 100 women died during the course of the study
 - 19% homicide
 - 18% drug overdose

⁶ Raphael & Shapiro.

⁷ Janice G. Raymond, Donna M. Hughes, and Carol J. Gomez. Sex Trafficking in the United States, Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, March 2001.

⁸ Raymond, Hughes & Gomez.

⁹ Melissa Farley and Howard Barkan. "Prostitution, Violence against Women, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Women and Health*, 27 (3): 37-49, 1998.

¹⁰ Raphael & Shapiro.

¹¹ John J. Potterat, Devon D. Brewer, Stephen Q Muth, Richard B. Rothenbuerg, Donald E. Woodhouse, John b. Muth, Heather K. Stite and Stuart Brody, "Mortality in a Long-term Open Cohort of Prostitute Women," *Am. J Epidemiol.* 159: 778-785, 2004.

- 12 % accidents
- 9% alcohol related
- 8% AIDS

Women in prostitution were 18 times more likely to be murdered than women of similar age and race

Women had a mortality rate of 391 per 100,000 compared to the standardized mortality rate, adjusted for age and race, of 1.9 per 100,000.

Pictures of Melissa¹²

These photographs are a graphic illustration of the impact of prostitution and drugs on a young woman. The photographs were taken by Pinellas County Police Dept. The first photograph is of Melissa when she was first arrested for prostitution at age 18. The second photograph of Melissa was taken at age 21 when she was arrested for prostitution and drugs. In between those times, she was arrested 17 times for prostitution. Her longest time in jail was 10 months. Because of the number of times she'd been arrested, she faced felony charges and 10 years in prison.



Escaping Prostitution

89% of women want out of prostitution

Sex and Race Discrimination Against Victims of Prostitution¹³

Although state and local laws against prostitution criminalize both men and women for engaging in prostitution, in a clearly discriminatory manner, women are arrested many times more often than men.

Lansing 2000 3 women arrested for every man

¹² Lane DeGregory, "Girl next door," *St. Petersburg Times-Flordian*, October 19, 2003.

¹³ Donna M. Hughes, "Fact Sheet: Domestic Trafficking and Prostitution in the United States," July 26, 2004, Unpublished

Boston 2003 11 women arrested for every man
 Chicago 2001-2004 89% of arrests were women, 9.6% were men, .6% were pimps¹⁴

In Chicago, to get tough on prostitution they increased the penalty for repeat prostitution offenses to a felony, which means that women were going to prison. 86 out of 89 prostitution related felony charges were women. Felony charges have a long term harmful effect because a felony conviction reduces women’s ability to access good paying jobs or educational benefits. This increases the likelihood they will remain in prostitution. As a result of felony charges for prostitution, from 2001 to 2002, there was a 182% increase in women being admitted to the Illinois Department of Corrections. From 2000 to 2003, 388 victims of prostitution were convicted of felonies for prostitution. During the same period, no pimps or johns were convicted of felonies.

Women of color, particularly Black women, are over represented in prostitution, and over represented in prostitution arrests.¹⁵

Numbers and Percent of Black, Latina, and White Women Arrested in Chicago by Race¹⁶

	Percent of Population	Prostitution arrests by race in 1999
White	52%	19%
Hispanic	16%	5.9%
Black	28%	75%

Conclusion

My research and experience working in this field for over 15 years tells me that sex trafficking and prostitution are forms of violence against women. They are forms of sex and race discrimination. Women and girls are arrested for being victims of crimes.

I think it is the work of activist scholars to research, document and assist the general public and law and policy makers to understand how sex trafficking and prostitution destroy individual woman and girls, and threatens the freedom, rights and status of all women and girls in our communities and throughout the world.

I’m doing what I believe women’s studies was created for: feminist scholarship to advance freedom for all women and girls.

¹⁴ Andy Kim, “Demand Side of Prostitution in the United States,” Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 2004.

¹⁵ Donna M. Hughes, “Sex and Race Discrimination against Victims of Commercial Sex Acts,” March 2004, Unpublished

¹⁶ Andy Kim.