

Proposal for a critical analysis of the anti-trafficking discourse

I propose a multi-faceted, critical analysis of the anti-trafficking discourse (with particular emphasis on sex trafficking) as consisting of two networks: the closed, prestigious network made up of anti-trafficking activists, social scientists and state-employed specialists, and the open network of public and popular discourse which includes news outlets, digital media and lay-conversation. This is not a bound dichotomy, rather two general tendencies; I intend to investigate the extent to which this distinction is a useful representation, but also the extent of its limitations. This will involve demarcating where the two realms intersect. It is important to note that neither networks are characterised by consensus, particularly concerning how we define “anti-trafficking”.

There is an ongoing debate within the closed network, with a coalition of radical feminists and evangelical christians on one side, and advocates for decriminalisation (of prostitution) on the other¹. The former maintain that all forms of prostitution are exploitative and therefore fall under the trafficking definition; the latter argue this casts too wide a net and fails to distinguish between women forced into sex work and those doing so out of their own volition. I wish to investigate how each definition promotes or inhibits effective discourse, the rhetoric both sides use to argue their case and other ideological factors influencing choice of definition and ultimately motive for anti-trafficking action.

In the public and popular discourse there is even more ambiguity over defining trafficking. In recent years greater attention has been brought to trafficking thanks in part to the media coverage of the “European migrant crisis” from 2015-2019, however the definition in this context is conflated with “human smuggling”, where people consensually pay for assistance entering a country (trafficking is by force or coercion). There is a prescriptivist tendency amongst certain academics to label this definition as “wrong”, however I am interested instead in examining the context the definition is used in. Many trafficking victims believe the line between smuggling and trafficking is in fact quite blurry, as sometimes people pay for the services of smugglers consensually, but find themselves coerced into labour later on.² That is without

¹ Bernstein, Elizabeth. "Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The Politics of Sex, Rights, and Freedom in Contemporary Antitrafficking Campaigns." *Signs* 36, no. 1 (2010): 45-71

² Napier-Moore, Rebecca et al. "Smuggling and trafficking: rights and intersections", (2011): 32

considering the situations outside of people's control that led them to require the help of people smugglers in the first place. Therefore, it may be the case that how the definition is used within the open network has some use, something I intend to research further.

I would like to understand if any dissonance exists between individuals who seemingly have conflicting ideologies within each coalition (such as between the predominantly left-leaning neo-abolitionists and the less "politically inclined" evangelical christians)³, but also amongst the anti-trafficking movement more generally. Anti-trafficking is often framed as "apolitical"⁴, garnering support from across the political spectrum, and also from private, voluntary and state initiatives, many of whom's interests outside of anti-trafficking conflict. As such I want to ask the question if any ulterior motives are at play regarding the involvement of certain organisations, and the effect this may have on the discourse. I hypothesise that certain anti-trafficking groups may indirectly be supporting movements that perpetuate trafficking, whether intended or otherwise.

I intend to investigate the tropes that exist within both the closed and open networks. These include the so-called "white (wo)man's burden"⁵, which Kempadoo says propagates an image of the "benevolent west". This is of particular interest because it exists at the intersection between my proposed networks in the form of "celebrity humanitarianism", where celebrity figures are seen engaging with activism. Trafficking is also often dichotomised as consisting of the "victims" (women sold for sex) and the "perpetrators" (the people traffickers)⁶. I will question the extent to which this narrative reduces the complexity of the power structures at play, and whether it plays into prejudicial stereotypes surrounding ethnicity and gender. It is also important to question whether some parts of the anti-trafficking movement are ill-equipped of a sufficient intellectual framework to talk about certain issues. For example, How do groups with more conservative leanings surrounding sex and gender roles react when LGBTQIA+ issues intersect with the anti-trafficking movement?

³ Chuang, Janie A. "University of Pennsylvania Law Review Vol. 158, No. 6, Symposium: TRAFFICKING IN SEX AND LABOR: DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES" (May 2010): 1664-1670

⁴ Bernstein, Elizabeth. "Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The Politics of Sex, Rights, and Freedom in Contemporary Antitrafficking Campaigns." *Signs* 36, no. 1 (2010): 46

⁵Kempadoo, Kamala. "The Modern-Day White (Wo)Man's Burden: Trends in Anti-Trafficking and Anti-Slavery Campaigns", *Journal of Human Trafficking* (2015)

⁶ Andrijasevic, R and Mai, N. 'Editorial: Trafficking (in) representations: Understanding the recurring appeal of victimhood and slavery in neoliberal times', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 7 (2016) 1-10, www.antitraffickingreview.org

It is important to note that my proposal has been far-reaching and does not focus on one specific area. This is deliberate as I believe it paramount to cover the complexity of the discourse and gain a holistic understanding. With that said, this is a very important area of research and I am prepared to specialise more in depth into one area if it seems beneficial to do so.