

My Experience is Mine to Tell: Challenging the abolitionist victimhood framework

Claudia Cojocaru

Abstract:

This article is an analytical auto-ethnography of an art exhibit on trafficking into the sex industry in New York City in 2015. The analysis is informed by my own experience as a formerly trafficked person, and by other women's own interpretations of their lived realities as trafficked or as migrant workers in the Japanese sex industry. This paper challenges the abolitionist movement's unidimensional interpretation of all women engaged in sex work as victims trafficked in the sex industry; and introduces the concept of 'secondary exploitation', where these representations are framed and repackaged for consumption by opportunistic actors, while arguably further stigmatising and marginalising already vulnerable women.

Keywords: trafficking, sex work, auto-ethnography, secondary exploitation, abolitionist movement, United States

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From 17 February to 3 April 2015, the Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York hosted *Of Human Bondage*, an art show focused on trafficking into the sex industry. The five participating artists, who have never been trafficked, or engaged in sex work themselves, showcased photographs and mixed media works revolving around images and conceptual descriptions of sex workers as trafficked. Most importantly, the curator focused on how the artists explored their feelings¹ regarding trafficking into the sex industry in the pieces presented, and how the exhibit helped redefine prostitution as trafficking. When conceptualising the exhibit, neither the artists, nor the curator² of the show, appeared to have taken into consideration that these highly processed portrayals of sex workers did not represent the lived realities of trafficked individuals, the complexities of their experiences, how they interpret their lives, or construct their identities. Furthermore, perhaps neither the gallery nor the artists expected a formerly trafficked individual to attend the exhibition and evaluate the artwork through the lens of her own experiences and converging identities. As a formerly trafficked forced sex worker, and relying on my current position of scholar and activist, I present an alternative narrative to the dominant anti-trafficking discourse, anchored in my experiences and analysed through my interpretation of the current empirical research literature on human trafficking and sex work. Tracing the mainstream US anti-trafficking movement's construction of victimhood in trafficking and prostitution³ through a symbolic and instrumental power analysis,⁴ I seek to generate a discussion on some of the consequences the narrow, simplistic constructions of victim typologies have on women working in the sex industry. These conceptualisations of sex workers as lacking agency and needing immediate rescue damage rather than empower trafficked and voluntary sex workers alike, placing them at higher risk of structural violence and discrimination. I argue that the abolitionist conflation of voluntary sex work and trafficking has created a toxic climate of *secondary exploitation*,⁵ in which various actors perpetuate misleading and dehumanising stereotypes, which contribute to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of sex workers and trafficked individuals.

To provide a counter-narrative grounded in scientific inquiry and critical assessment of the dominant anti-trafficking discourse while reflecting the voices silenced by the abolitionist construction of victimhood, I use a 'multi-layered

¹ The five artists in this show Steven Cavallo, Eleni Lyra, Yiannis Christakos, Angelo Gavrias and Photini Papahatzi explore their feelings on the subject of trafficking into the sex trade. Some of their works deal directly with the subject as do Cavallo's, Gavrias' or Papahatzi's while others comment on the topic in a subtler more abstract way as do Christakos and Lyra's, in 'Of Human Bondage', Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery, retrieved 6 January 2016, <https://shivagalleryjjay.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/of-human-bondage/>

² Thalia Vrachopoulos, Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery, retrieved 6 January 2016, <http://shivagallery.org/portfolio/thalia-vrachopoulos/>

³ Although the term 'sex work' is preferable to 'prostitution', I use them interchangeably here.

⁴ J.R. Gusfield, 'Moral Passage: The symbolic process in public designations of deviance', *Social Problems*, vol. 15, issue 2, 1967, pp. 175—188.

⁵ C Cojocaru, Concept paper, currently under review.

account to relate my narrative, shifting forward, backward and sideways through time, space, attitudes and culture?⁶ Adopting an analytical auto-ethnographic perspective,⁷ this article addresses the way representations of trafficked individuals and voluntary sex workers are conceptualised and shaped to generate emotionally resonant frames. These frames have been successfully employed to redefine voluntary sex workers as passive victims of trafficking, and have been instrumental in empowering an elite group of moral crusaders to redefine public discourse and policy on prostitution as trafficking.

United States Human Trafficking Law

Human trafficking was first defined in the US with the adoption of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA). Despite the anticipated high numbers of arrests and prosecutions for trafficking not materialising, as well as the expected figures of recovered trafficking victims not being as significant as law enforcement agencies and the US Congress had projected,⁸ every TVPA reauthorisation called for (and was granted) increased resources. The TVPA reauthorisations have sanctioned expanding terminology and social and legal categories,⁹ and justified new technologies of surveillance and intervention. The Bush administration's financial largesse to faith-based and non-governmental organisations (FBOs and NGOs) adhering to the evangelical rhetoric of salvation, propelled the prostitution abolitionist faction of the anti-trafficking movement on a path to unprecedented prosperity and socio-political influence, not just domestically, but also at the global level.¹⁰ Under these circumstances, anti-trafficking NGOs morphed into profit-oriented ventures, moving away from social service provision models. One investigative journalist observes that after the 2008 recession, US-based abolitionist NGOs seem to comprise one of the few sectors experiencing steady financing and growth.¹¹ Recent years have seen an increase in federally funded anti-trafficking initiatives focused on the sex industry with programming on raising awareness, education and training of community members, schools, law enforcement agencies and hospital staff. The *anti-trafficking industrial complex*¹² supports the careers of numerous actors in the abolitionist movement and provides financially lucrative opportunities for anyone associated with it, a phenomenon I conceptualise as *secondary exploitation*.¹³ Artists, writers, actors, directors, internet and mainstream media journalists are exploring their 'feelings and ideas' about prostitution and trafficking and packaging these as artworks, books, articles and films. These moral entrepreneurs are often privileged and have access to mainstream cultural and political spaces, reaching a receptive audience. In this way, through their own success, moral entrepreneurs are helping disseminate the abolitionist construction of victimhood while gaining public exposure and 'positioning themselves as white saviours'.¹⁴

The exhibit at John Jay College is a case in point. When the gallery showed a 'sex trafficking' themed exhibition, artists capitalised on the symbolic association between the themes of trafficking and justice, given its location at the New York City criminal justice college.

⁶ C Rambo-Ronai, 'A Night in the Life of an Erotic Dancer/Researcher: The emergent construct of the self', in Ellis and Flatterly (eds.), *Subjectivity in Social Research: Windows on lived experience*, Sage, Newbury Park, 1992, pp. 102–124.

⁷ L. Anderson, 'Analytic Autoethnography', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 35, issue 4, 2006, pp. 373–395; N K Denzin, *Interpretive Interactionism*, Applied Social Research Methods Series, vol. 16, Sage, 2001.

⁸ A DeStefano, *The War on Human Trafficking: US policy assessed*, Rutgers University Press, 2007.

⁹ D Brennan, 'Competing Claims of Victimhood? Foreign and domestic victims of trafficking in the United States', *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, vol. 5, issue 4, 2008, pp. 45–61.

¹⁰ Y C Zimmerman, *Other Dreams of Freedom: Religion, sex, and human trafficking*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.

¹¹ A E Moore, 'Special Report: Money and lies in anti-human trafficking NGOs', *Truth-Out*, 27 January 2015, retrieved 6 January 2016, <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/28763-special-report-money-and-lies-in-anti-human-trafficking-ngos>

¹² C Leigh, 'Anti-Trafficking Industrial Complex Awareness Day-1st Edition 2015', retrieved 24 August 2016, <https://storify.com/carolleigh/anti-trafficking-industrial-complex-awareness-day>; see also K Kempadoo, 'The White Man's Burden Revisited', *Open Democracy*, 11 January 2015, retrieved 6 January 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/kamala-kempadoo/white-man%E2%80%99s-burden-revisited>

¹³ C Cojocaru, p. 5.

¹⁴ T Cole, 'The White Savior Industrial Complex', *The Atlantic*, 21 March 2012, retrieved 6 January 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>

Why an Anthropology of Experience?

Trafficked. I was trafficked into the sex industry twice, and I place both instances within the extreme end of force, fraud and coercion outlined in the UN Trafficking Protocol.¹⁵ The first time, in Romania, I was abducted by a person I knew from my neighbourhood and sold to a pimp for several hundred dollars, a situation from which I escaped on my own. The second time, seeking to put as much physical distance between myself and the pimp from whom I had escaped only a few months earlier, I accepted a contract to work in Japan as a hostess. I did so after being assured that the job entailed serving drinks and talking to men in the evening, and explicitly prohibited sexual labour. However, once I arrived at my destination in a hostess club in Tokyo, the working conditions were much different from those that had been described. Club staff and the brokers in Romania routinely exercised physical violence and sexual abuse and made constant threats of harm to my family.

Activist. Unwilling to endure further violence, abuse and exploitation, I devised an escape plan with other trafficked women. Although we failed and each ended up sold to different hostess clubs, I did not forget I had promised to help them escape. Upon the completion of my six-month entertainer contract, I resolved to return to Japan on a tourist visa and work independently in different hostess bars. This marked the beginning of about eight years of facilitating and aiding the escape of women who wanted to leave exploitative situations in sex work. During this time, I constructed a small but efficient network to help migrant workers gain some control over their lives, while I kept my own identity and position concealed by shifting across different layers of underground and mainstream society strata, negotiating status and identities, and collecting data.

Scholar. Upon relocating to the US, I was referred to programmes attending to the needs of victims of domestic violence and trafficking. These programmes made me witness first-hand the devastating consequences that poorly informed approaches to rescue, rehabilitation and reintegration have on the lives of trafficked and voluntary sex workers. I noted that the abolitionist representations of trafficking in the media were based on a manufactured framework of victimhood, inconsistent with the experiences of me and my peers as trafficked women. Because major actors in the anti-trafficking field were silent whenever I pointed out these discrepancies, I turned to empirical research for answers. After spending a considerable amount of time examining the literature from an analytical perspective stripped of ideological convictions, I concluded that the abolitionist claims should be placed in the context of a growing moral crusade against prostitution.¹⁶ During this process, as I took interest in the underlying mechanisms of competing constructions of victimhood, I turned my attention to the language and performances required to establish the dominant narrative. This is how I learnt that my experiences have an epistemological value that can provide a counter-narrative to the dominant anti-trafficking discourse. Some of these experiences are related here as a part of an ‘anthropology of experience’, by which I mean the processing, interpretation and expression of my own experiences within transnational socio-cultural contexts, placing emphasis on my meaning making processes, and on my interpretation of how the objectification of similar realities were situated within the artistic space of the gallery.¹⁷

The dominant anti-trafficking discourse relies almost exclusively on a hybrid framework of *victim-survivor*¹⁸ narratives. More specifically, the abolitionists’ power lies in their ability to control and mould these narratives into simple yet emotionally powerful tropes, which are vital to the survival of the movement. In the years following the introduction of the TVPA, feminist leaders of the abolitionist movement maintained the anti-trafficking discourse as one privileging trafficking into the sex industry over other forms of trafficking. They appealed to collective sympathy via awareness-raising campaigns relating the suffering of sexually exploited women and girls and highlighting gender-based violence through emotionally charged survivor testimonies. Abolitionist activists gradually introduced impactful survivor narratives of ‘reformed prostitutes’ alongside those of the typical rescued victim of trafficking, condensing shared experiences of exploitation into a common denominator framework to justify the classification of voluntary sex work as trafficking. This juxtaposition aimed to relay the message that prostitution is inherently violence against women, thus obscuring the

¹⁵ UN General Assembly, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 15 November 2000.

¹⁶ R Weitzer ‘The Social Construction of Sex Trafficking: Ideology and institutionalization of a moral crusade’, *Politics & Society*, vol. 35, issue 3, 2007, pp. 447–475; G Ellison, ‘Criminalizing the Payment for Sex in Northern Ireland: Sketching the contours of a moral panic’, *British Journal of Criminology*, 28 September 2015.

¹⁷ V W Turner and E M Bruner, *The Anthropology of Experience*, University of Illinois Press, 1986.

¹⁸ The survivor narrative is what gives the trafficking victim template its lifeline. A survivor’s story will re-assure the audience of the existence of other victims waiting to be rescued. See also C Cojocaru, ‘Sex Trafficking, Captivity, and Narrative: Constructing victimhood with the goal of salvation’, *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 39, issue 2, 2015, p. 183.

differences between trafficking and voluntary sex work. Thus the dominant anti-trafficking discourse conceptualises trafficking interchangeably with voluntary sex work.¹⁹

Beautiful Dead Bodies Gallery

When I entered the Anya and Andrew Shiva gallery on the opening night of the show, I thought I had walked into an eerie materialisation of Rutvica Andrijasevic's essay 'Beautiful Dead Bodies'.²⁰

In order to convey the condition of abuse perpetuated by traffickers, the campaigns resort to the visual metaphor of the doll as a privileged signifier. This is most clearly visible in the campaign in the Baltic States that makes explicit reference to the doll. The lifeless body, the cords and the "invisible" third party all invite viewers to associate a victim of trafficking with a puppet. Variations on the theme are also employed, displaying, for example, the same female body in a crouched position or simply body-parts such as hanging legs.²¹

Andrijasevic's analysis of trafficking prevention campaigns directed at Eastern European women in the late 1990s and early 2000s focuses on the representations of female bodies as immobile, lifeless, and doll-like, sketching a stereotypical image of the migrant sex worker as lacking autonomy and self-awareness. She problematises the victim imagery as contributing to sexual objectification as well as reinforcement of traditional gender roles by encouraging women to stay at home and not seek employment abroad. Despite the declared intent of these campaigns to make women aware of the dangers posed by migration and sex work, women's migration for labour in post-communist Eastern Europe was a widespread phenomenon. The Western discourse of prostitution as inherently violence against women was irrelevant to most migrant women. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) carried out anti-trafficking campaigns to deter women's migration, portraying danger in graphic and sexually objectifying terms. Women were shown in positions of vulnerability, such as identified as victims of sexual slavery or shown as inert bodies—marionettes on strings. Short accompanying stories narrated violence suffered by women in prostitution abroad, a strategy meant to alter women's internal schemas so they did not leave their poverty ridden, albeit *secure* homes. Such warnings simultaneously projected Western fears of the sexualised other and generated a new classification for the undesirable racialised and gendered transient labourer—the trafficking victim.²² As evident from my field-notes, these images did not have the desired effect:²³

In my hometown in Romania, most people were seeking work abroad, making use of networks of relatives and friends who had already secured employment abroad. In small communities like the one I grew up in, the collective concern about the people who went to work abroad required the sharing of information and stories for the ones at home. Migrants, both men or women, when returning home from abroad, maintained that, despite experiencing less than ideal working conditions, the goal was to go back and look for better opportunities. These personal narratives were migrants' expressions of their lived experiences. They were part of a larger process of cultural construction of values and standards, and became integral to how communities related to returning migrants. Women were more likely to find work than men, especially the ones who were young and attractive. Growing up in post-communist Romania, it was not immediately clear to me that women in my neighbourhood were migrating for sex work, but the general terminology used in discussions by parents and siblings when referring to these young women, revolved around descriptions implying they were privately contracted dancers and bartenders. In the late 1990s, the main international destinations for Romanian migrant women in my neighbourhood were Greece, Italy, Switzerland and Japan. There was a clear difference between the women who were autonomous agents choosing to leave Romania and work in bars and hotels abroad, and the ones working with a pimp, mainly at hotels catering to tourists or wealthy Romanian men. These migration

¹⁹ J A Chuang, 'Rescuing Trafficking from Ideological Capture: Prostitution reform and anti-trafficking law and policy', *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, vol. 158, issue 6, 2010, pp. 1655—1728.

²⁰ R Andrijasevic, 'Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns', *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, issue 1, 2007, pp. 24—44.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²² R Kapur, 'The "Other" Side of Globalization: The legal regulation of cross-border movements', *Canadian Woman Studies*, vol. 22, issue 3/4, 2003, p. 6.

²³ I rely on field notes to illustrate the context with elements showing my survivor validity. The field notes were written from 1998 to 2008. To my knowledge, no one has kept a journal, taken field notes, or documented their experiences as I did the whole time I was trafficked, and afterward, or, if so, no one has spoken about it publicly. The field notes format is valuable to facilitate shifting through timelines, as the exhibition was in 2015.

experiences on the ground contrast sharply with the anti-trafficking discourse. This is not to say that there were no instances of trafficking into the sex industry, as happened to me in 1998 while searching for a part-time job at a major tourist destination on the Romanian Black Sea coast.

I walked around the gallery looking at how the artists imagined sex workers as victims of trafficking. A different story was weaving in front of my eyes—one where the women in these representations had no control over how they were portrayed. Devoid of voices and life force, these images could represent any scenario, tell any story, be given any interpretation; they were objectified and used to convey a message I found misleading and harmful.

Frames and Images of Shape-Shifting Abolitionism



Image 1: Photograph of Eleni Lyra's work, Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery

These images and stories are deemed obscene, immoral and exploitative—criminalised or controlled when sex workers make a living from it, but not when artists, the media, or service providers are profiting.

A row of photographs by artist Eleni Lyra²⁴ depicted a pair of white legs, looking as if they belonged to a child or a young woman. Resting on red cloth, the legs appeared bound together by invisible restraints. As stated in the exhibit's introduction, positioning in these photographs was intended to conjure the association of trafficked individuals with very young women.²⁵ I felt this display of dismembered legs only accentuated the commodification of what many see as women's 'innate vulnerability'. Their fragility and innocence are sanctioned under the pretense of a moral imperative to prioritise and 'save' the deserving victim, as well as 'raise awareness' about the existence of the undeserving, yet possibly redeemable, one. Situated at the core of the anti-trafficking movement, these categories propose a fluid conceptualisation of victimhood, constantly changing and adapting to benefit moral entrepreneurs who use them to alter, construct and mould exploitative and highly prejudicial representations of sex work and trafficking. This *secondary exploitation* is thus carried out by entrepreneurial entities who can profit from the fascination and voyeurism surrounding trafficking and sexual commerce. An increasing number of artists, celebrities and professionals are generating captivating and suggestive imagery²⁶ of sexual violence and exploitation in Paradoxically, sex workers themselves are

²⁴ E Lyra, Athens Photo Festival 2015, retrieved 6 January 2016, <http://www.photofestival.gr/exhibitions/eleni-lyra>

²⁵ See the following introduction to the artist's work in the exhibit: 'Eleni Lyra's work comprises 9 photographs digitally printed on fabric panels depicting children's legs on red cloth. The youngsters' legs are spindly, and appear malnourished and are in some of the works, crossed and hanging reminiscent of the Crucifixion. Indeed they can be read as martyred children not only because of their legs' positioning but also because of the red cloth that serves as background which we associate with Christ's passion' in 'Of Human Bondage', Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery, retrieved 6 January 2016, <https://shivagalleryjjay.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/of-human-bondage/>

²⁶ An example of a collective of artists building careers out of using trafficking into the sex industry as inspiration or an interpretation medium can be found at ArtWorks for Freedom, retrieved 26 July 2016, <http://www.artworksforfreedom.org>; and 'Art Against Human Trafficking', Amo Tiffani: Multi-media journalist, retrieved 26 July 2016, <http://tiffaniamo.com/art-against-human-trafficking/>



Image 2: Photograph of Photini Papahatzi's work, Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery

the increase in punitive legal measures against both workers and their clients²⁸ and interventions in the lives of migrant workers through highly publicised raids.²⁹ Although there is nothing in this photograph to suggest enslavement or exploitation, categorising it as trafficking into the sex industry supports the damaging anti-sex work discourse.



In this photograph two women, presumably in a brothel, seem to greet each other. The beauty of connection between two people is shattered by the artwork's intent to force the subjects of Papahatzi's gaze into the abolitionist tradition of objectification of trafficked bodies. One female headless body appears immobilised in a mannequin-like pose, arms gracefully opened, almost like in a dance. She is almost nude, the only visible garment being a red bra tied with a string, going around her torso in a crisscross pattern. The other woman, whose visible face is slightly blurred but still recognisable, wears a frosty pink bra and frilly panties. As she enters the room from behind a red curtain, she looks open to an embrace with the woman whose head is removed from the photograph. Perhaps unintentionally, the image captures the bond between the women, as their body language suggests openness to each other,

Image 3: Photograph of Photini Papahatzi's work, Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery

²⁷ P Papahatzi, Studio Utopia, retrieved 15 January 2016, <http://www.photinipapahatzi.com/studio-utopia>

²⁸ J Levy and P Jakobsson, 'Sweden's Abolitionist Discourse and Law: Effects on the dynamics of Swedish sex work and on the lives of Sweden's sex workers', *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, vol. 14, issue 5, 2014, pp. 593—607.

²⁹ R Galusca, 'Slave Hunters, Brothel Busters, and Feminist Interventions: Investigative journalists as anti-sex-trafficking humanitarians', *Feminist Formations*, vol. 24, issue 2, 2012, pp. 1—24.

trust and comfort. It does not signal tension or fear, or an arched, hardened posture of an individual under chronic anxiety. The picture objectifies sex workers' bodies—not because it depicts sex work, but because the artist's own mutilation of that one woman's image renders her dismembered body fetishised and used to advance a dehumanising anti-prostitution agenda. This enactment of power dynamics within art and within anti-trafficking's 'rescuer-rescued' hierarchy engenders and reinforces social inequalities. In the abolitionist imagination, the 'prostituted woman' is accused of operating under false consciousness when asserting agency, and then punished by being assigned a deviant identity.³⁰ These representations force sex workers into a submissive position, not only by the (allegedly) exploitative pimps and clients, but also by rescuers' and social workers' interventions. Such classifications are often inconsistent with sex workers' own perceptions of themselves, and unrepresentative of realities on the ground.

Both in Romania and Japan, I lived and worked with women who were either trafficked or voluntary sex workers. Voluntary sex workers defended their choices to engage in sexual labour, stressing the importance of being economically independent, and preferred to be treated as businesswomen,³¹ rejecting the victim label. These women routinely took time to teach trafficked young women (like me) important survival strategies and tactics. They were aware of how different our circumstances were and hoped we could use those skills to gain independence and avoid further exploitation. The victim status is problematic for trafficked women as well; some of the trafficked sex workers avoided the victim label and saw their situations as the result of bad luck or their own misinterpretation of risk, faulting themselves for trusting the wrong people. Some stressed the role of their own choices and circumstances when making labour migration decisions.³² For instance, while in Japan I distinguished foreign³³ hostesses according to their status as independent or trafficked hostesses. Independent migrant hostesses entered Japan on their own, with visitor, student or marriage visas or as entertainers on a contract brokered by recruitment agencies in their home countries collaborating with Japanese *promoters*. Trafficked hostesses entered Japan mostly on entertainment visas, with some overstaying the legal limit, and becoming subject to various degrees of fraud, force, coercion or deception. Most migrant and trafficked hostesses I worked with in Japan came from Russia, Eastern Europe, Brazil, Thailand, and the Philippines. All these women wanted to improve their economic status at home, and had responded to opportunities to do so. Even when reaching their destinations and realising they had been misled about the nature of the work, many preferred to adjust to the working conditions, hoping the future would bring positive changes. Thus, the opportunity to earn money to buy a house or provide for their families back home remained attractive even to some of the trafficked women, as a sufficiently profitable set of opportunities outweighed most instances of workplace exploitation.

For most women, economic opportunities in Japan presented enough of an incentive to offer their clients not only the entertainment required by the hostess clubs, but to also engage in exchange of sexual services for money or gifts. As non-western foreigners³⁴ working in the complex Tokyo *mizu-shobai*³⁵ industry, we were in precarious social positions. We were tolerated because the Japanese considered us as providing a useful service to their society. Most of the time we were invisible and often relegated to an underclass status. We were assumed to be illiterate, poor, corrupt and morally deficient. When our presence was too obvious to ignore, we became threatening *others*, sexual deviants disrupting the social fabric of the destination country.³⁶

The following excerpt from my field notes from 1998 to 2001 illustrates these points:

Following an attempt to escape during my first six weeks in Japan, the *promoter* picked me up from the first bar he had placed me in and took me to a Philippine Pub in Ikebukuro. Despite the initial shock, the Filipinas and I got along well and became friends. I learnt that life in the Philippines was hard—their families were struggling. The opportunities to come to Japan were valued and appreciated as a chance to lift one's family out of poverty. Even if many women were married at home, they separated their lives in the Philippines from their entertainer-hostess identities in Japan. Some women had intimate relationships with a number of Japanese clients, who also

³⁰ This is based on informal interviews with service providers and sex workers in New York, part of an ethnographic study on specialised courts and prostitution diversion programs I am conducting for an MA thesis; for the concept of false consciousness, see A Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, volumes 1—3, SLP edition, Colombia University Press, 2011.

³¹ K Chin and J O Finckenaue, *Selling Sex Overseas: Chinese women and the realities of prostitution and global sex trafficking*, NYU Press, New York, 2012.

³² C M Jacobsen and ML Skilbrei, "Reproachable Victims"? Representations and self-representations of Russian women involved in transnational prostitution', *Ethnos*, vol. 75, issue 2, 2010, pp. 190—212.

³³ By 'foreign' I refer to citizens of non-western nations. Women from the US, Australia or the UK were foreign as well, but they had a higher status in Japanese society, and that includes differences in opportunities for work.

³⁴ In Japan there is a *gaijin* 'foreigner' hierarchy in which nationals from western countries, like the US, Australia, France, Germany or The Netherlands enjoy a higher status and obvious privilege compared to people from places such as Russia, Romania, China or Bangladesh.

³⁵ *Mizu-shobai*, literally 'water business', refers to bars, restaurants and entertainment clubs open at night.

³⁶ R Kapur, 2003.

provided money and gifts and occasionally took them and their friends out. They did their jobs, helped each other and made the best out of their experiences. Unlike most of these women, I did not agree with the system and tried to escape numerous times, only to be brought back by the police. I resisted in any way I could. I protested the long working hours, the club requirement that hostesses consume only alcohol,³⁷ and the forced daily cleaning of the bar before a one-hour or more meeting was held. My co-workers agreed that the system in that bar was especially exploitative but also pointed out that we were there only for a few months to work and collect a salary at the end of the contract. For them it was worth it to simply put up with the club management, rather than risk being penalised or sent home early. My one-person rebellion was making them anxious and added to their hardships. They promised to take on some of my chores if I stopped resisting and antagonising *tencho*.³⁸ They saw my protests as a source of tension, rather than a tactic to ensure better working conditions for all of us. To illustrate how my actions were putting all of us in jeopardy, the Filipinas held a meeting in our room and opened up about some of their most well-guarded secrets. One of the girls, Eri,³⁹ was only 16 years old and came to Japan using her cousin's passport. She wanted to go to university in the Philippines. If I ran away again and the police investigated the club closer, her dream was going to crumble. Mari was married and had two children. Older than most of us, she was worried that her *promoter* may not hire her for another contract. Gemma was the sole supporter of a family of five. Rika was an *overstay*,⁴⁰ replacing a *run-away*⁴¹ hostess. Neither *mama-san*, nor *tencho*, knew about her true identity or that she had replaced one of their hostesses. Rika's plan was to return to the Philippines with the *runaway*'s passport, come back to Japan, and help the *runaway* also return to the Philippines and avoid the legal penalties for overstaying one's visa. The other women were silent and watched me think about the complex situations behind every single story. They were all true. I knew the *runaway*, Yuri—she sometimes met us at a coffee shop with her boyfriend, a Filipino dancer who was himself overstaying his visa and working in a disco-restaurant on the outskirts of Tokyo; Eri's passport picture hardly resembled her; Gemma's story was not that different from other women's, or even my own. Within the most coercive of environments, these women were going to negotiate survival and would not jeopardise one another. They would find ways to prevail despite abuse, coercion and even violence.

Much like the women I worked and lived with, both in Romania and Japan, I can attest that even within the most coercive and violent situations there was a sufficient degree of agency and autonomy to ensure survival and self-preservation. Portrayals equating all selling of sexual services with chronic victimisation and 'bought and sold rape'⁴² are also disputed by empirical studies of sex workers,⁴³ as well as my own observations of voluntary and trafficked sex workers' experiences.

Although interpersonal violence, emotional abuse and rape have lasting and often devastating psychological consequences, the factors influencing personal experiences are multifaceted and complex, especially in cases involving interpersonal violence. Individuals may react to traumatic events in ways that do not always fit into neatly delimited categories.⁴⁴ Most of the women I had contact with experienced violence to some degree, whether it was at the hands of family members, romantic partners, other men and women, pimps, clients or bar staff. Despite personally experiencing violent incidents, neither I nor most of these women would identify with disempowering and stigmatising conceptualisations of victimisation or exploitation in the sex industry. The anti-trafficking sexual humanitarian discourse lumps all women who sell sex into a common category: whether they are trafficked or not, they are invariably understood to be vulnerable, passive and witless victims. According to abolitionist logic, these women's perceived lack of agency and self-determination justifies a range of coercive interventions,⁴⁵ from stigmatising labelling, to highly intrusive and destabilising rescue missions.

³⁷ We were not allowed to drink any other beverage—soft drinks or tea—during work hours. We had to drink alcohol to add to high-value sales.

³⁸ *Tencho* is a person holding a managerial position in an organisation. In a hostess club, a *tencho* is in charge of the whole club and answers to the owner, *papa-san* or *mama-san*.

³⁹ These names are not the hostesses' real names.

⁴⁰ In hostess jargon, an *overstay* is a migrant worker who has exceeded the stay provisions of his/her visa.

⁴¹ In hostess jargon, a *runaway* is a migrant worker on entertainment visa who ran away from the club.

⁴² See, for example, J Raymond, 'Perspective on Human Rights: Prostitution is rape that's paid for: The U.S. military must have zero tolerance for this exploitation of women and children, at home and abroad', LA Times, 11 December 1995, retrieved 10 August 2016, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-12-11/local/me-12813_1_human-rights; D Post, 'The Legalization of Prostitution by State Parties is a Violation of International Law', *Against Pornography*, retrieved 10 August 2016, <https://againstpornography.org/prostitutionasviolation.html>

⁴³ N Mai, 'Embodied Cosmopolitanisms: The subjective mobility of migrants working in the global sex industry', *Gender, Place and Culture*, vol. 20, issue 1, 2013, pp. 107–124.

⁴⁴ G A Bonnano, 'Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events?', *American Psychologist*, vol. 59, issue 1, 2004, p. 20.

⁴⁵ J L Dunn, 'The Politics of Empathy: Social movements and victim repertoires', *Sociological Focus*, vol. 37, issue 3, 2004, pp. 235–25.

In the radical feminist imagination, agency is replaced with the concept of *coercive bonding*, framing sex workers as submissive or as passive victims of an obscure but powerful offender.⁴⁶ A rather clumsy attempt to conflate a number of theoretical elements related to torture, domestic violence, prisoners of war, and rape trauma, and apply it to voluntary and trafficked sex workers alike, the *trauma coerced bonding* theory is a new effort to reformulate the concept of *false consciousness*. According to Raghavan and Doychak:

...the literature does offer a rich body of observational and clinical data drawn from case studies as varied as prisoners of war, hostages, child abuse victims, and intimate partner violence. ... These observed changes, for victims who form trauma-coerced bonds, are marked by a shift in their internal reality and change in cognition because the abuser's persistent and invasive tactics have successfully deteriorated the victim's sense of self. As a consequence of this cognitive shift and lost sense of self and meaning, the victim is forced to adopt a new worldview entirely dependent on the abuser's perspective. ... While the construct of *trauma-coerced bonding* has been explored across different abusive relationships, one important abusive context—sex trafficking—have been less well documented in research. ... The relationship between a sex-trafficking victim and her abuser mirrors the power imbalances and abusive control dynamics within an intimate partnership.⁴⁷

Reflecting on years of living and working with trafficked women and voluntary sex workers, and drawing on my field notes, I find Raghavan's portrayal of trafficked women inconsistent with the way my peers and I interpret our own experiences. As trafficked, I was aware of the differences, and boundaries between forced and consensual sex; I could evaluate and prepare for varying levels of intensity or coercion in sexual exploitation, unwanted sexual contact or even rape. I was always able to tell a well-rehearsed lie borrowed from other sex workers' extensive repertoire of excuses to avoid any kind of sexual activity. Similarly, women who accepted my offer of shelter, once they decided to escape traffickers and exploiters, would look for work as independent agents (*arubaito*)⁴⁸ rather than return home without money.

Like other attempts to universalise discourse,⁴⁹ the use of conceptual constructions such as *coercive bonding* and *false consciousness* fails to address human trafficking or the structural inequalities that sustain it. Instead, it creates a confusing victimhood rhetoric, contributing to an already deeply flawed theoretical background that informs policy makers on sex work and trafficking, and enforces current systems of domination and social control to compel sex workers into compliance. Thus, *secondary exploitation* takes place in state-sanctioned prostitution diversion programmes, operating in collaboration with the anti-trafficking industrial complex to force sex workers into accepting services aimed at integration within the ranks of mainstream 'respectability'.

Depending on their willingness to submit to being rescued and 'redeemed', sex workers are subjected to varying levels of state-mandated therapy. Those who subscribe to redemptive approaches view women in the sex industry as passive victims, or utterly hopeless, broken human beings. When these professionals work with formerly trafficked women and voluntary sex workers who do not fit into this version of victimhood, they clash, as each side attempts to defend their conviction and position. Service providers often experience difficulty in reconciling their theoretical and ideological principles with their clients' definitions of self, worldviews or the way they construct their identities. These attitudes reinforce stigmatisation⁵⁰ and place women in positions of subordination, contributing to the increase in vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

The 'Perfect Victim's' Burden

Trafficking victims are constructed to fit the *ideal victim* trope⁵¹—passive, helpless and defenceless. Even if this category may have been purposed to avoid the harmful effects of prostitution stigma, it has not succeeded in relieving the shame

⁴⁶ C Raghavan and K Doychak, 'Trauma-coerced Bonding and Victims of Sex Trafficking: Where do we go from here?', *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health and Human Resilience*, vol. 17, issue 2, 2015, pp. 583—587.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 583.

⁴⁸ In Japan, *arubaito* is a term used to describe part-time work; in the case of non-Japanese hostesses, whether they were residing in Japan legally or illegally, *arubaito* came to signify their status as working for themselves, rather than for an agent. These women could not find work in any other areas except sex work, so their *arubaito* opportunities were rather limited.

⁴⁹ K Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review*, 1991, pp. 1241—1299.

⁵⁰ B G Link and J C Phelan, 'Conceptualizing Stigma', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 27, 2001, pp. 363—385.

⁵¹ N Christie, 'The Ideal Victim' in E A Fattah (ed.), *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy: Reorienting the justice system*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1986, pp. 17—30.

or the blame that comes with the labels of ‘victim’ and ‘prostitute’, since the former is associated with weakness and the latter with immorality and deviancy. In the exhibition at John Jay, the artists enacted this cultural stigma as a specific technology of power⁵² defining what these bodies projected as art. From the creative process to the exhibit space, the artists were the ones controlling the discourse and shaping the way viewers made meaning of these portrayals of women as victims. Images in the gallery privileged the artists’ own interpretations of sex work and trafficking, thus facilitating stigmatising technologies of power and the ‘keeping in, out and away’⁵³ of sex workers and trafficked persons.



Artist Steven Cavallo contributed to the exhibit with watercolour renditions of Korean ‘comfort women’ on the Japanese front during the Second World War. Cavallo attempted to merge two historically and culturally different eras⁵⁴ into the already flawed mainstream anti-trafficking discourse, which does a great disservice to trafficked and voluntary sex workers from both periods. I examined the watercolours shown in this article closely, noting the pained expressions on women’s faces and their bodies placed against backgrounds depicting partitions, or swamps. In one of these images, a woman is represented lying on muddy vegetation with ripped yellow crime scene tape over her torso. Her eyes vacant, staring somewhere above, seemingly disconnected from her body. The other watercolours reproduce references to Christian martyrdom and ritual sacrifice of piety and innocence, which I interpreted as an attempt to connect the suffering of the Korean ‘comfort women’ to today’s Western audiences. Thus, these watercolours are not telling the story of Korean women’s misery, but instead offer a sanitised adaptation to the Western interpretation of suffering, supporting the dominant anti-trafficking discourse rather than giving a voice to the oppressed.

Image 4: Photograph of Steven Cavallo’s work, Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery

⁵² M Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, issue 4, 1982, pp. 777—95.

⁵³ B G Link and J C Phelan, ‘Stigma Power’, *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 103, 2004, pp. 24—32.

⁵⁴ I am referring to 1) Japan up to the end of WWII, and 2) globally, but especially the US, from mid 1990s to today.



After his speech at the gallery, I asked Cavallo to reconsider the way he interpreted sex workers and formerly trafficked women's personal narratives. I explained that his manipulation of imagery can have an impact, however indirectly, on the already warped perception of trafficking and voluntary sex work. Even as I cited relevant research, Cavallo dismissed all my arguments as inconsistent with his views or experiences, instead insisting I visit him at his studio, to 'talk more about Korean "comfort women" and "sex trafficking"'.

Image 5: Photograph of Steven Cavallo's work, Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery



The disconnect between the self-representations of trafficked people and the frames circulated within the dominant anti-trafficking discourse became most evident when I saw a young woman posing in front of one of the watercolours of a 'comfort woman' to take a picture of herself with a phone on a selfie-stick. She introduced herself as Cavallo's model for the paintings in the exhibition and was accompanied by another young woman who told me she posed for the same series. That image was the most difficult one for me to understand. I looked at these young women laughing and posing with works showing bruised and violated bodies—art intended to make a statement about gender-based violence and sexual slavery from the Second World War to today.

I stood there silent for a while, watching all these people gathered in the gallery, sipping wine, making small talk about the tragedies of human trafficking, and analysing the artworks. I wondered if the women represented in those photographs would agree with how their bodies were fetishised and objectified, or how their lives and experiences were constructed and distorted for other people's profit, while perhaps their own choice to commodify themselves was met with hostility and subjected to stigmatisation and criminalisation.

Image 6: Model for Cavallo's work, taking selfie

Conclusion

The anti-trafficking movement has facilitated the development of profitable niche markets for the media, artists, celebrities, social services and criminal justice professionals. While prostitution abolitionists' awareness-raising campaigns rely on disseminating their ideology by captivating and titillating eager audiences, in the past five years the symbolic power accumulated by the mainstream anti-trafficking discourse has shifted to instrumental power. Stigma, poverty, violence and other injustices confronting most sex workers and trafficked individuals in their daily lives are processed, framed and packed into simple media content for the public's rapid and ravenous consumption. Despite the emotionally charged frames allowing spectators temporary glimpses of the suffering of the *other*, most audiences are protected from these uncomfortable realities by their own socio-economic status or racial and other privilege. These provide the necessary social distance for interested parties to fetishise women trafficked into the sex industry and draw gratification without experiencing trauma. However, even with that layer of social insulation protecting the misery voyeur from becoming mesmerised and falling into the abyss of human degradation, one must be careful to firmly delineate the boundaries between identifying the trafficked person (or the willing sex worker) and identifying with one.

It became evident to me that even in a space where discussion around trafficking, sex work, victimhood and survival was presumably safe to have, a counter-narrative to the dominant anti-trafficking discourse was not welcome. Empirical research on trafficking, prostitution, and the 'Swedish model' of criminalising clients indicates that abolitionist activists and law makers exclude sex workers from the dialogue that informs relevant policies. This othering process facilitates the relegation of sex workers to a marginalised, stigmatised status, justifying the interventions in their lives and the silencing of their voices. Sex workers' rights organisations and academics warn about the professional, financial and political incentives motivating moral entrepreneurs to subdue sex workers and allow only narratives aligned with the ideal trafficking victim archetype. My interrogation of the *secondary exploitation* at the gallery and challenge of the abolitionist sexual humanitarian paradigms placed me, the trafficking survivor, on the same plane with 'unrepentant prostitutes' who were challenging these discourses. My survivor validity was met with resistance, questioned and possibly rejected, even though the whole exhibition was dedicated to the 'millions of victims of sex trafficking exploited and abused all over the world'. Paradoxically, a trafficked person like me, whose lived experiences are inconsistent with the abolitionist construction of victimhood, is burdened to prove that she has the right to resist these damaging representations and challenge the dominant discourse; to retrieve and redeem her own narratives from the abolitionists' grasp; and to regain control over her representations and identities.

Claudia Cojocaru is a graduate student at the School of Criminal Justice at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey, USA. Her interests include labour migration, victimhood, the anti-trafficking movement, and criminal justice policies. She published an article 'Sex Trafficking, Captivity, and Narrative: Constructing victimhood with the goal of salvation' in *Dialectical Anthropology* (2015) and is currently writing an analysis of the prostitution abolitionist movement. Email: claudia.cojocaru@rutgers.edu