Radical Feminism

At the same time public and state interest in the issue of human trafficking was receding in the 1950s, a “second wave” of feminism was beginning to gather strength, mobilizing the activists who would successfully place trafficking back onto the American public’s agenda by the end of the century. Susan Brownmiller, author of the landmark feminist analysis of rape Against Our Will, identifies two wings of the this new feminist movement: reformers, who gravitated toward the National Organization for Women (NOW), and radicals, who dubbed themselves the vanguard of “Women’s Liberation.”¹ Both wings of the movement echoed Carol Hanisch’s rallying cry that “the personal is political,” mobilizing around rape, wife battering, sexual harassment, reproductive rights, and other “personal” issues that had previously been excluded from discussion in the public sphere. Radical feminists such as Hanisch, however, departed from the reformers in their identification of sexuality as the root cause of all of these issues, and it was from within this theoretical framework that the feminist movements against pornography, prostitution, and trafficking in women would emerge.²

Theory of Gender

Since the early days of the women’s liberation movement, radical feminists have sought, along with their liberal and socialist counterparts, to establish “women” as a meaningful political category. Early radical feminists argued that “women are oppressed

² See Dorchen A. Leidholdt, "Demand and the Debate,” Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/leidholdt_2003_demand_and_the_debate.pdf. I use “feminist abolitionist” when referring to activists and ideas associated solely or primarily with the traffic of women for sex, and “radical feminist” when referring to activists and ideas associated with all forms of female sexual exploitation. The latter group subsumes the former.
not by virtue of their class or race, but simply by the fact of their womanhood. That is, women are oppressed as women.”3 Women, in short, are akin to a social class.4 In order for feminists to assert women’s common oppression, however, they had to address a more fundamental question: What do women have in common at all? What unites women as a collective subject such that “there exists ONE universal patriarchal oppression of women which takes different forms in different cultures and different regions”?5

For radical feminists in the tradition of Catharine MacKinnon the answer lies within a single mechanism: male supremacist sexuality, the “primary social sphere of male power.”6 In MacKinnon’s words, “Women and men are divided by gender, made into the sexes as we know them, by the social requirements of its dominant form, heterosexuality, which institutionalizes male sexual dominance and female sexual

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5 Charlotte Bunch, "Network Strategies and Organizing Against Female Sexual Slavery," in International Feminism: Networking Against Female Sexual Slavery; Report of the Global Feminist Workshop to Organize Against Traffic in Women, ed. Kathleen Barry, Charlotte Bunch, and Shirley Castley (Rotterdam, the Netherlands: International Women’s Tribune Center, 1983), 53. Emphasis in original. Diane Bell and Renate Klein go on to claim that identity is the basis of political action: “Radical feminists have always understood that race, class, sexuality, age are intertwined, but they hold fast to the identity of woman.” Diane Bell and Renate Klein, "Beware: Radical Feminists Speak, Read, Write, Organize, Enjoy Life, and Never Forget," in Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed, ed. Diane Bell and Renate Klein (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1996), xviii. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler, who is critical of the notion of universalist subjects herself, notes, “For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued.” Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1999). 3.
Identification of sexuality as root cause rather than symptom of women’s subjugation represented a marked departure from earlier feminist analyses that had variously posited nature, the family, religion, and the state as initial impetuses for the oppression of women.

While specific instantiations of male supremacist sexuality vary according to context, radical feminists argue that its scope is universal: “Prostitution... wife battery, rape, incest, bride burning, excision and pornography... are carefully woven into the structure and content of patriarchal power and male domination around the globe.”

Indeed, Barry declares that all women, regardless of class, ethnicity, or nationality, have their sexual victimhood in common. Sonia Johnson further elaborates on this theme in The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism, a collection of radical feminist writings inspired by a 1987 conference of the same name. Drawing upon the sexual slavery narrative, Johnson writes:

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8 Writing about the meaning of “radical feminism,” Robin Morgan muses that “etymology is usually revealing: the word ‘radical,’ for example, refers to ‘going to the root’ (as in radish) of an issue or subject. (That is to say, why waste time on political superficialities when you can wrestle with the most primary, basic oppression of all?)” Robin Morgan, "Light Bulbs, Radishes, and the Politics of the 21st Century,” in Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed, ed. Diane Bell and Renate Klein (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1996), 5.
10 See Bunch, "Network Strategies and Organizing Against Female Sexual Slavery."
12 Female Sexual Slavery: 41. In Jaggar’s words, “Radical feminists believe that women, whether they recognize it or not, are the sexual slaves of men. Consequently, women’s sexual relation with men is typically that of rape.” Jaggar, Feminist Politics and Human Nature: 261.
All of us—all women in patriarchy—are seasoned to be slaves, are seasoned to be prostitutes. All of us, in some sense, are, or have been, prostitutes and slaves, and most of us will continue to be for the rest of our lives.\textsuperscript{13}

In this way, radical feminists argue that female oppression under patriarchy is a universal phenomenon, and that “women” constitute a coherent, unified subject with common interests despite differences such as race and class.\textsuperscript{14}

Although male sexual supremacy is institutionalized as heterosexuality, lesbians are not freed from the sexual victimization common to all women.\textsuperscript{15} Even as the binary distinction between dominance and submission and its mapping onto men and women are central to patriarchal oppression, this excludes neither homosexual acts nor solitary sexual activity.\textsuperscript{16} Radical feminists identify the vast majority of contemporary sexual practices, including those occurring solely with one’s self or between or among same-sex partners, as sexually exploitative insofar as they reproduce “the eroticization of dominance and submission”\textsuperscript{17} constitutive of male supremacy. Especially problematic practices include “sadomasochism, pornography, prostitution, cruising (promiscuous sex with strangers), adult/child sexual relations, and sexual role playing (e.g., butch/femme relationships).”\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, the domain of sexuality is not limited to sex

\textsuperscript{14} According to MacKinnon, radical feminists believed “that we didn’t all have to be the same in order to be part of this common condition... [Radical feminism was premised] as much on diversity as on commonality. It did not assume that commonality meant sameness.” Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Liberalism and the Death of Feminism," in \textit{The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism}, ed. Dorchen A. Leidholdt and Janice G. Raymond (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990), 5.
\textsuperscript{16} Radical feminists criticized gay male sexuality in particular, and rejected the idea that gay political activism had much affinity with lesbian political activism. See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," \textit{Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society} (1980), which includes an extensive discussion of Barry’s Female Sexual Slavery.
\textsuperscript{17} MacKinnon, \textit{Toward a Feminist Theory of the State}: 113.
\textsuperscript{18} Ann Ferguson, "Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists," \textit{Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society} 10, no. 1 (1984). See also Kathleen Barry, \textit{The Prostitution of Sexuality}
acts, but rather encompasses a much larger sphere of human experience. MacKinnon writes:

Sexuality is not confined to that which is done as pleasure in bed or as an ostensible reproductive act; it does not refer exclusively to genital contact or arousal or sensation, or narrowly to sex-desire or libido or eros. Sexuality is conceived as a far broader social phenomenon, as nothing less than the dynamic of sex as social hierarchy, its pleasure the experience of power in its gendered form.\(^19\)

Importantly, MacKinnon’s articulation of sexuality to hierarchy is meant to be read as a commentary on male supremacist sexuality. Although, as we have seen, all forms of sexuality are suspect within a patriarchal or male supremacist system, radical feminists have also sought to theorize and create space for the realization of feminist sexuality.\(^20\)

Building on their argument that male supremacist sexuality is faced by women universally—though not identically—radical feminists further contend that these harms are not discrete: all female sexual exploitation contributes to the oppression of all women. In other words, women are linked not only by their common experiences of sexual exploitation, but by the patriarchal mindset that is both cause and effect of the sexual exploitation of any woman. Leidholdt, for example, argues that “sexually exploited women and children are the sex industry’s primary casualties but not its only victims. Commercial sexual exploitation diminishes the lives of all women and girls by inculcating in men and boys profoundly misogynistic beliefs and attitudes.”\(^21\)

In a paper presented at the Holy See 20th anniversary conference on trafficking in persons hosted

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\(^19\) MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*: xiii.
\(^20\) See Rowland, "Politics of Intimacy: Heterosexuality, Love and Power."
by the Pontifical Gregorian University, Leidholdt reiterates the radical feminist argument that forms of sexual exploitation such as sex trafficking and pornography are responsible for women’s universal inequality, “coloring the way husbands treat their wives and daughters, bosses treat female employees, and men and boys treat the women and girls they encounter on the street.” Barry likewise classifies sexual violence as a form of terrorism that “goes beyond one women’s experience of sexual violence [to] create a state of existence that captures the hearts and minds of all those who may be potentially touched by it.”

Positing women as universally subject to sexual violence such that harm to one is harm to all enables feminist abolitionists to begin erasing distinctions between the helpers and the helped within any single feminist campaign. In MacKinnon’s contribution to The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism, she makes this point explicitly:

> When women were hurt, this movement defended them. Individually and in groups, it organized and started shelters and groups of and for all women: battered women, incest survivors, prostitutes. We did this not because these women were thought ‘bad’ by society or considered outlaws or shunned. We did it because what was done to them was a systematic act of power against each one of us, although they were taking the brunt of it. This was not a sentimental identification. We knew that whatever could be done to them could be, was being, would be done to us. We were them, also.”

MacKinnon’s comments here are instructive. For radical feminists, the claim that “we” (the movement) were or are identical to “them” (the hurt women to be defended) is a powerful one used to rebut charges of racism and western imperialism. Compare

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22 “A Call to Action: Joining the Fight Against Trafficking in Persons” (paper presented at the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See 20th Anniversary Conference - A Call to Action: Joining the Fight Against Trafficking in Persons, The Pontifical Gregorian University, June 17 2004).

23 Barry, Female Sexual Slavery: 42.

MacKinnon’s comment, for instance, to Doezema’s charge that “CATW’s construction of ‘third world prostitutes’ is part of a wider western feminist impulse to construct a damaged ‘other’ as the main justification for its own interventionist impulses.”

Radical feminists’ assertion of a universal female subject has the additional effect of granting all women standing to challenge instances of systemic oppression of any woman. Anti-pornography protests and legal action in the late 1970s and 1980s provide an early example of how this worked in practice. Drawing connections “between media violence to women and real-life violence to them,” radical feminists claim that pornography is a “blueprint for female enslavement and gynocide,” a tool of patriarchal oppression that cannot be countenanced under any circumstances due to the dangerous cultural environment it reinforces for women.

In Robin Morgan’s words, “Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice.” In the introduction to *Take Back the Night*, Laura Lederer’s foundational anthology on pornography and violence against women, Lederer describes pornography as “the ideology of a culture which promotes

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25 Jo Doezema, “Ouch! Western Feminists' 'Wounded Attachment' to the 'Third World Prostitute',' *Feminist Review* 67, no. 1 (2001): 17. Doezema does not limit her criticism to CATW. She goes on to argue, “CATW feminists are not alone in their attachment to 'third world prostitutes' suffering bodies'. Feminist anti-trafficking organizations that nominally support the recognition of prostitution as a legitimate profession can slip into orientalist representations of third world sex workers.” Ibid., 18.


27 Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery*: 252. Leidholdt notes, “To radical feminist at the beginning of the Second Wave, pornography was nothing more or less than a codification of a male supremacist value system and the reification of male sexual power over women [...].” Vance and Snitow, in contrast, challenge the anti-pornography movement’s conflation of categories. They argue that “the failure to make distinctions—between violent pornography and pornography, between pornography and sex, and between sex and violence—makes it hard to describe complex relations that involve both similarity and difference.” Carol S. Vance and Ann Barr Snitow, "Toward a Conversation about Sex in Feminism: A Modest Proposal," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 10, no. 1 (1984): 182.

28 Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery*: 252. MacKinnon, for example, baldly states that “[pornography] is sexual reality.” MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*: 198. The precise distinction between the pornographic and the erotic, and the question of whether such a distinction is meaningful under patriarchy, remains an area of disagreement among radical feminists.

and condones rape, woman-battering, and other crimes of violence against women.”

Insofar as the existence of pornography is understood to be inherently abusive to all women, radical feminists oppose harm reduction strategies such as working to improve conditions within sex industries and protecting performers against sexually transmitted infections. Such measures are themselves harmful, propping up a male supremacist system that must be destroyed entirely.

**Radical Feminist Epistemology**

Mackinnon contends that radical feminists first ascertained the fundamental role of sexuality in explaining women’s oppression as a result of feminist practices such as consciousness-raising, a “face-to-face social experience that strikes at the fabric of meaning of social relations between and among women and men by calling their givenness into question and reconstituting their meaning in a transformed and critical way.” Consciousness-raising sessions frequently began with “going around the room in a meeting to hear each woman’s testimony.” Kathie Sarachild, one of the initial radicals who developed and popularized the practice, cautions that the purpose of consciousness-raising was not, as opponents on both ends of the political spectrum characterized it, simply therapeutic:

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30 Lederer, *Take Back the Night*: 19-20. Following the publication of the anthology, “Take Back the Night” became the rallying cry for feminist protest marches against pornography, and Lederer went on to play a prominent role in activist, academic, and government circles in the feminist abolitionist campaigns against trafficking. Ibid., 19. *Take Back the Night* is now a charitable foundation that organizes events about violence against women and sexual violence. See http://www.takebackthenight.org/index.html.

31 Ibid., 29. The question of harm reduction strategies reappears in similar guise within anti-trafficking debates.


33 Ibid. For criticism of the ethnocentrism of early feminist consciousness-raising sessions, see María C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice'," *Women's Studies International Forum* 6, no. 6 (1983).

The purpose of hearing from everyone was never to be nice or tolerant or to develop speaking skill or the “ability to listen.” It was to get closer to the truth. Knowledge and information would make it possible for people to be “able” to speak. The purpose of hearing people’s feelings and experience was not therapy, was not to give someone a change to get something off her chest ... that is something for a friendship. It was to hear what she had to say. The importance of listening to a woman’s feelings was collectively to analyze the situation of women, not to analyze her. The idea was not to change women, was not to make “internal changes” except in the sense of knowing more. It was and is the conditions women face, it’s male supremacy, we want to change.\textsuperscript{35}

Brownmiller provides an example of how such a session unfolded, beginning with the question posed by Sarachild of whether participants preferred having male or female children and moving on to testimonies of secret abortions. She writes, “Saying ‘I’ve had three illegal abortions’ aloud was my feminist baptism, my swift immersion in the power of sisterhood...The simple technique of consciousness-raising had brought my submerged truths to the surface, where I learned that I wasn’t alone.”\textsuperscript{36}

Consciousness-raising and related practices are significant for feminists not only in terms of the truths they uncover, but also for the manner in which they disrupt male-established theories of truth itself. Radical feminists maintain that the realities of sexual exploitation and its foundational support of patriarchy are rendered invisible by male supremacist notions of objectivity and verifiability. In practice, these putatively neutral standards for knowledge are used to sustain patriarchal oppression and de-legitimate opposition from the oppressed. As Dworkin declared in a speech delivered at the University of Michigan School Of Law’s symposium on prostitution:

There is a middle-class presumption that one knows everything worth knowing. It is the presumption of most prostituted women that one knows nothing worth knowing. In fact, neither thing is true. What matters here is to try to learn what the prostituted woman knows, because it is of

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Brownmiller, \textit{In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution}: 7.
immense value. It is true and it has been hidden. It has been hidden for a political reason: to know it is to come closer to knowing how to undo the system of male dominance that is sitting on top of all of us.37

In order to recover hidden knowledge, feminist epistemologists reject pretentions of objectivity, “the male epistemological stance,”38 and profess instead the necessity of building theory from the starting point of women’s lived experiences. Dworkin provides a clear example of this position in her 1986 testimony before the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography in New York City. Here she introduces justification for radical feminist activism against “snuff films,” the empirical existence of which had not been verified by the U.S. Department of Justice:

My information comes from a journalist, whose sources I trust, that such films exist, from women who have seen them, whom I believe, whom no law-enforcement official would, that the films exist, that they have seen them. And so far, all that I could tell you is that it doesn’t mean we won’t be wrong, but so far we have said battery exists and the FBI has said it doesn’t, and we have been right. And we’ve said rape exists and law-enforcement people have said, no; and we have been right. And we said incest is rife in this country and law-enforcement people first said no, and we were right. Our big secret is that we listen to the people to whom it happens. And that’s what we are doing here.”39

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Claims such as these directly challenge what radical feminists take to be patriarchal distortions of reality by shifting “the reference point for truth and thereby the definition of reality as such.”

Women’s testimony to their experiences is established as trustworthy through collective practices such as consciousness-raising that alter “the terms of validation by creating community through a process that redefines what counts as verification.” The notion that standards of verification are necessary, even if radically different from those said to support male supremacist knowledge, suggests that radical feminists are cognizant of the dangers of simplistic appeals to experience, and recognize that accounts of experience require at least some sort of mediation in order to be accepted as true or valid. Moreover, truth claims based on experience are particularly vulnerable to competing truth claims based on different experiences, or on different interpretations of similar experiences. For radical feminists, a persistent puzzle appears. What happens when women’s experiences and interpretations of those experiences produce conflicting accounts of the truth?

For MacKinnon, however, the mere fact of disagreement among women’s interpretations of their experiences is unproblematic for radical feminism, which “recognizes that cognitive judgments need not be universally agreed upon to be true.” Women’s “nonfeminist perception of their situation” simply reflects an absence of feminist consciousness.

Barry, the preeminent theorist of feminist abolitionism, is unequivocal on this point:

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 102.
43 Ibid.
Things simply do not exist only as perceptions. There is an objective reality which precedes perception and is presumed by perceived reality. Objective reality is, where or not it is perceived. It is not merely a matter of perception or opinion that women are sexually enslaved. It is a fact. But social perception is presently inconsistent with objective reality. The decision to suppress the evidence of sex slavery is but one means of maintaining the disparity between social perception and objective reality.44

Barry argues that claims to the contrary represent “false consciousness.”45 Though MacKinnon eschews the terminology of “false consciousness,”46 she makes clear that “in contemporary philosophical terms, nothing is ‘indeterminate’ in the post-structuralist sense here; it is all too determinate.”47 The most significant aspect of this position is that which unites radical feminists: the notion that female sexual slavery is a universal fact of female existence today.

Note that Mackinnon and Barry both emphasize that women’s perceptions of reality may be unreliable—this holds true for physiological perceptions as well. Several contributors to The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism, for example, contend that women’s sexual fantasies, desires, and orgasms represent more the insidious reach of male supremacist sexuality than women’s authentic or true bodily responses.48 Sheila Jeffreys writes:

We have got to understand that sexual response for women and orgasm for women is not necessarily pleasurable and positive. It can be a very real problem. It can be an accommodation of our oppression. It can be the eroticizing of our domination.49

Leidholdt makes a similar point about pornography in the same edited volume:

44 Barry, Female Sexual Slavery: 118.
45 On “false consciousness” as a theory, see ibid., 217-18.
47 Ibid., 137. She continues, “The reality of pervasive sexual abuse and its eroticization does not shift relative to perspective, although whether or not one will see it or accord it significance may.”
48 See, e.g. Leidholdt, "When Women Defend Pornography."; MacKinnon, "Liberalism and the Death of Feminism."; Jeffreys, "Eroticizing Women's Subordination."
49 "Sexology and Antifeminism," 22.
Acting out the roles of dominance and submission that the system forces on us is not the same as choosing them. Experiencing arousal and orgasm in the course of acting out these roles is not defining our own sexuality. I’ve come to believe that a human being can eroticize anything—including banging one’s head against a brick wall.\(^\text{50}\)

Given the suspicion cast upon critics’ personal testimony—even to the extent of questioning the authenticity of one’s own perception of sexual arousal and climax—it is unsurprising that radical feminists’ commitment to “women” as a universal subject, and their subsequent attempts to police the boundaries of what authentically belongs to that domain will continue to be sites of tension, and will carry over to radical anti-trafficking campaigns.

**Feminist Abolitionism**

In addition to Barry, key figures in the burgeoning radical feminist anti-trafficking movement included scholars such as Donna Hughes and Janice Raymond, community activists and self-described survivors of prostitution such as Vednita Carter and Norma Hotaling, and other veterans of the anti-pornography movement such as feminist attorneys Laura Lederer and Dorchen Leidholdt and clinical psychologist Melissa Farley. Despite the ubiquity of Americans in formal and informal leadership roles, the feminist abolitionist community strongly emphasizes both the transnational existence of women’s oppression and the transnational membership of abolitionist organizations.\(^\text{51}\) Abolitionists’ litanies of female oppression include widespread practices such as rape, prostitution, incest, and battering as well as culturally specific practices such as dowry deaths and female genital mutilation.\(^\text{52}\) Barry credited the passion

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\(^{50}\) Leidholdt, "When Women Defend Pornography," 129.

\(^{51}\) See Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality*: 10; Leidholdt, "Demand and the Debate".

\(^{52}\) Aurora Javarte de Dios, "Confronting Trafficking, Prostitution and Sexual Exploitation in Asia - The Struggle for Survival and Dignity," in *Making the Harm Visible: Global Sexual Exploitation of Women*
attached to human rights advocacy with her decision to situate feminist abolitionism within the context of the international human rights movement.53 “Human-rights philosophy matches radical feminist moral outrage,” she wrote, “recognizing any acts that are destructive to human beings—anything that dehumanizes the human condition—as barbarous.”54 Even more important than outrage,55 however, was the universalism of the human rights approach, making it an appropriate “foundation for global feminist struggle based on the common dimensions of women’s oppression.”56 Indeed, both of the major feminist advocacy networks that participated in the Trafficking Protocol negotiations prioritized a human rights approach, pitting the abolitionist “International Human Rights Network” led by the CATW against the pro-sex workers’ rights “Human Rights Caucus” led by the International Human Rights Law Group, the GAATW, and the Asian Women’s Human Rights Council.57

Feminist abolitionists point to the 1980 World Conference on the United Nations Decade for Women in Copenhagen as a foundational moment in the history of their

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54 The Prostitution of Sexuality: 302.

55 The importance of which should not be underestimated. As Bunch and Shirley Castley wrote in their introduction to the published proceedings of the 1983 Rotterdam workshop, “We wish, ultimately, to outrage.” Bunch and Castley, "Introduction," 8.


movement. Barry had just published *Female Sexual Slavery*, and she was invited to lead six workshops at the conference and its associated NGO forum along with Uri Kondo, who had been doing similar work on male sex tourism with the Asian Women’s Association. According to Barry, “It was in these workshops, discussing female sexual slavery and sex tourism that a feminist momentum built which resulted in the governmental conference adopting into the World Plan of Action for Women a resolution against the traffic in women.” The resolution focused specifically on adult women and children of both sexes, urging governments “to recognize that women and children are not a commodity and that every woman and every child has the right to legal protection against abduction, rape, and prostitution.” 64 UN member states concluded the conference by signing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which included the mandate that “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women.”

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58 Barry, “The Opening Paper: International Politics of Female Sexual Slavery.” The objective of the conference, attended by delegations from more than 140 states, was to assess the improvement in women’s status since 1975, the UN-designated International Women’s Year. See Fran P. Hosken, “Toward a Definition of Women’s Human Rights,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1981): 3.
62 CEDAW, which has been ratified by 185 states (not including the U.S.), is a UN convention that requires state parties to seek to eliminate gender discrimination by codifying women’s equality in domestic law and establishing domestic institutions to further women’s equality. UNHCHR, ”Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,” Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/index.htm. According to Fran Hosken, founder of the Women’s International Network, “There is no doubt that in the international context, the Convention is the single most important document speaking for the human rights of women that has ever been devised.” Hosken, ”Toward a Definition of Women’s Human Rights,” 6.
63 CEDAW article 6.
Buoyed by their successes in Copenhagen, a core group of feminists immediately began making plans for another workshop. The 1983 Global Feminist Workshop to Organize Against Traffic in Women succeeding in drawing participants from Africa, Australia, Western Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and the United States to the meeting in Rotterdam. 26 women, including activists, social service providers, Catholic nuns and other religious figures, academics, and lawyers, participated in the 10-day workshop, which concluded with an affirmation of the need for a global network to counter the sexual exploitation of women.

The Rotterdam workshop was followed by the 1988 Conference on Trafficking in Women organized in New York by Leidholdt, Women Against Pornography, and the Minneapolis-based organization WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt). Notably, conference attendees settled upon a definition of trafficking in women as “a broad, umbrella concept that encompassed all practices of buying and selling women’s and children’s bodies.” Participants concluded the meeting with the founding of the network envisioned in Rotterdam, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), and Aurora Javate de Dios, a scholar-activist from the Philippines, was named president.

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64 Keck and Sikkink, Activists Beyond Borders: 178.
66 Ibid., 10.
67 The Trafficking in Women conference was funded in part through the efforts of Take Back the Night’s Laura Lederer, who along with Leidholdt would go on to take a leading role in anti-trafficking politics. Leidholdt, "Demand and the Debate" 1.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
The rapid growth of feminist abolitionism paralleled what activists describe as the dramatic worldwide expansion of trafficking in women. Hughes, for example, concluded in 1999:

At the end of the twentieth century, local and international forces have merged to escalate the sexual exploitation of women and girls. Policies, practices and crises are combining to increase both the supply of women and girls vulnerable to exploitation and the demand by men for women and girls to be used for their profit and sexual gratification.70

Determined to resist this trend, abolitionists coordinated largely by the CATW pursued a multi-tiered lobbying campaign targeting the UN, states with liberal prostitution policies such as the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden, and all levels of U.S. government. The two most significant focuses of abolitionist efforts both reached fruition in 2000: the UN Trafficking Protocol and the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act.71 These more explicitly political activities have been further supported by research of sex trafficking and prostitution undertaken by scholar-activists informed by analyses of sexuality with a distinct radical feminist influence.72

72 See, e.g., Janice G. Raymond and Donna M. Hughes, "Sex Trafficking of Women in the United States: International and Domestic Trends," (New York: Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, 2001). This study was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ).
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Lobasz 2012: excerpts from Victims, Villains, and the Virtuous


