

Evangelical women are shaping public attitudes about sex work

January 4 2018, by Carly Daniel-Hughes



Anti-trafficking evangelical activists are often sensationalist and incite fear, prurient interest, and a sense of moral righteousness in their crusade against sex work. Credit: A21

Evangelical speaker and activist Christine Caine wants you to know: "[Slavery still exists](#)." Her organization A-21, which aims to abolish "injustice in the 21st century," [says human trafficking affects 27 million people each year and is a \\$150 billion criminal industry](#).

Caine is on a mission to eradicate [human trafficking](#). [Stories of missing](#)

[women and girls abducted in Europe and sold into the sex trade](#) ignited her outrage and motivated her and her husband Nick Caine, an evangelical pastor, to launch the organization a decade ago. A-21 now works with law enforcement in 11 countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, and provides safe houses where girls and women can be rehabilitated.

Caine is quick to tell her audiences the [atrocities victims of trafficking have suffered](#) . Girls are [treated like livestock](#). They are crammed into shipping containers, some drown at sea; they are moved forcibly across borders; locked in apartments and brothels; made to have abortions, or "they give birth and the babies are sold into pedophile rings." These girls [are raped twenty maybe thirty times every day](#)," says Caine.

These are gripping stories. And Caine's talks engage audiences with gruesome details, and then end on a high note. Every girl that is "saved" is given a new life. She is made free. This is a classic Protestant redemption story.

Dominating the sex work debate

While Caine speaks about human trafficking, in fact, sex trafficking is her primary target, and with it the sex industry. In this, Caine is not alone. She represents a powerful constituency of conservative Christians who have formed non-profits of their own, such as [FAAST](#), [Wellspring Living](#) and [Concerned Women for America](#), [and made alliances with anti-prostitution, secular feminists](#).

It is a surprising affiliation. In the U.S. in particular, secular feminists and conservative women have usually found themselves on opposite sides of social issues. For [four decades they have been embattled over women's rights and abortion, as historian Marjorie Spurill has noted](#).

Yet evangelical women and anti-trafficking feminists come together on this point: The sale of sex threatens a woman's very humanity. And these groups dominate public discussion of sex work. They have, and continue to influence policy-making and legal enforcement of anti-sex-trafficking laws despite vehement criticisms by sex worker rights activists and their supporters.

The public debate about the sex trade finds [sex workers](#) unable to seek legal rights and protections on their own terms. Sex work, according to anthropologist Laura Maria Agustin, is very often an intelligible response made by women, men and trans-people to social, economic and political realities; [it is strategic equation for many who engage in it](#). Their attitudes about the work vary. They do not always "like" their job. They would not deny that it can be dangerous ([though the dangers are magnified when their labour is criminalized](#)).

Yet for anti-trafficking campaigners, sex work is not work—it is exploitation. It is servitude. Even [rape and sex work become synonymous for anti-trafficking activists](#) because no women could ever *choose* it. The only solution, they say, is for women to leave the industry: to be saved or reformed.

Even "the most seemingly benign 'rehabilitation' programs for sex workers" writes Melissa Gira Grant in [Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work](#), "may be described as shelters, but the doors are locked, the phones are monitored, and guests are forbidden... This isn't charity. This is control."

Criticisms of anti-trafficking campaigns

Critics of these anti-trafficking campaigns have argued that the numbers of trafficked people put forward are inflated, or entirely unsubstantiated. They have asked [whether most coerced labour is actually made of up](#)

[trafficked women and girls](#), as the campaigns claim.

Sex-worker rights advocates and scholars have rejected the conflation of sex trafficking and prostitution that animates much anti-trafficking crusades, Christian and otherwise. For instance, Donna Hughes, an activist who helped to inform the Bush administration's anti-trafficking legislation, asserted that most of what people see as prostitution is ["actually trafficking because it involves force, fraud and coercion or underage girls."](#)



Sex workers in Cambodia face criminalization, violence and discrimination.
Credit: UNAIDS

In fact, [studies of sex workers even in sites of "sex tourism" \(notably Cambodia\) have not revealed large-scale sex-trafficking rings](#). But what chance do such studies have in the face of the moral panic promoted by anti-traffickers?

The rhetoric of evangelical anti-trafficking activists, like Hughes and Caine, is sensationalist. Yet it works to incite fear, prurient interest, and a sense of moral righteousness. It is, explains scholar and sex worker rights advocate, Jo Doezma, evocative of the fabricated ["white slave panic" of the 19th century](#) that in its own day facilitated draconian measures against prostitutes and other working class women.

Why, we should ask, has it caught the moral imagination of evangelical communities and, particularly, evangelical women?

Why anti-trafficking campaigns attract evangelical women

One historic reason that drew evangelicals generally to the cause of anti-trafficking occurred during the Bush administration (2001-2009). Bush established the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, giving conservative Christian organizations new access to federal funds for their charitable work. [Under Bush, however, anti-trafficking initiatives also became government policy. The Trump administration, too, may be investing in the issue.](#)

In the last two decades, the fight against human trafficking has become something of an evangelical mission. One now finds [fundraising walks](#), [prayer weekends](#), [Bible studies](#), [self-help books](#) and even [praise songs](#) devoted to ending global slavery.

Political factors alone did not draw evangelical women to

anti-[sex-trafficking](#) crusades, however. So did the crusades' rhetoric, which is grounded in values that resonate deeply with conservative Protestant sexual morality.

A traditional script of sexual and gender roles is foundational to anti-trafficking activism. Girls are rehabilitated so that they can occupy their true positions as women, that is, as married women and mothers.

This is ultimately what anti-trafficking activists mean by freedom, Yvonne Sherman argues in [Other Dreams of Freedom: Religion, Sex, and Human Trafficking](#). This notion of freedom is entirely commensurate with conservative Protestant views of sexuality—initially articulated by the [16th century reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, who championed marriage](#) and rejected celibacy and monasticism.

Following their teachings, conservative Protestants have argued that marriage alone is the appropriate sexual relationship, divinely ordained. It is the only one that ensures a proper relationship with God. As such, sexual relations outside of marriage are imagined as bondage. Here, then, we see how sex work can readily become sex slavery.

But there is more: Evangelical women can see themselves as uniquely suited to this particular cause because of its moral tenor. Conservative Protestant women have a long history of fashioning themselves as [guardians of the moral order](#), more specifically [of marriage and the family, a strategy they have employed to legitimate their political and social campaigns](#), from suffrage and temperance to abortion and same-sex marriage debates.

Trafficked women are victims in need of saving, evangelical anti-trafficking activists proclaim. The labour that evangelicals undertake to do so is arduous. Caine warns: [few will be rescued, only one per cent](#).

Her assertion, however, is not self-defeating. It compels her audience to action, by playing on an apocalyptic scenario that amplifies the testimonial power of one "saved" victim, and so, too, her heroic saviours.

Could it be that Christian anti-sex traffickers, like Caine, solicit large evangelical audiences and prop up a legal system that criminalizes sex work because they are better story tellers than their opponents?

Sex worker rights activists offer accounts of women, men and trans-people who migrate to new countries; who turn tricks on the street, acts as escorts, perform sex acts on camera, strip or whatever, to make ends meet; who fear police crackdowns and try to avoid deportation.

Christian anti-trafficking activists, instead, paint dramatic pictures of millions of innocent, vulnerable (even desirable?) victims: women and girls under threat of the voracious appetites of a cruel and dehumanizing [sex trade](#), and they need you to rescue them.

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