

**Sex Trafficking and the Political Economy of Care:  
A Feminist Moral Analysis**

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# Sex Trafficking and the Political Economy of Care: A Feminist Moral Analysis<sup>1</sup>

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*'A global demand exists for labour whose core component consists of 'women's work'. By this I mean sex, childcare and housework. Demand exceeds supply of female citizens of affluent states willing to provide these services in the market. By and large, this has not led to a decline in the demand for commercial sex, a systemic redistribution of unpaid domestic labour between the sexes, or an increased market valorization of 'women's work. Instead, migrant women from poor countries are recruited to top up the deficit at low cost'.<sup>2</sup>*

*'Sex service discourse is not so different from discourses on housework and caring, all trying to define tasks that can be bought and sold as well as assert a special human touch. Paid activities may include the production of feelings of intimacy and reciprocity, whether the individuals involved intend them or not, and despite the fact that overall structures are patriarchal and unjust'.<sup>3</sup>*

## Introduction

This paper seeks to interrogate the particular confluence of 'moral understandings' currently prevalent in local, national and international contexts which have allowed for the prevalence of 'sex trafficking' as a global phenomenon. To do so, it uses a critical feminist ethics as care as an ontological and normative lens through which to view the ethics of sex trafficking. This feminist approach does not understand ethics as a set of principles waiting to be 'applied' to a particular issue in world politics; rather, it views the task of normative or moral theory as one of *critical moral ethnography* -- understanding how morality is 'seated and reproduced in actual human societies' (Walker 1999: 211).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Audrey Macklin (2003) 'Dancing Across Borders: 'Exotic Dancers', Trafficking and Canadian Immigration Policy', *International Migration Review*, 37(2): 454.

<sup>3</sup> Laura M. Agustín (2007) *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*. London: Zed Books, p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> The terms 'critical moral ethnography', 'moral understandings' and 'social-moral systems' are taken from Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Elsewhere I have elaborated in detail on

On this view, morality is not, as Walker says, 'socially modular' -- on the contrary, it is embedded in the social, material and discursive hierarchies that characterize most societies. Thus, moral standards, statuses and distributions of responsibility must be seen as working *through* social differences, rather than in spite of them (Walker 1999: 211).

When 'doing' ethics is understood in this way, it becomes clear that the moral theorist cannot choose to abstain from the work of *really looking* at the social, economic and political arrangements by claiming that they are not the stuff of moral theory. On the contrary, these arrangements are mutually constitutive of prevalent norms and moral understandings which obfuscate, ignore or, potentially, license exclusive and exploitative practices. From this perspective, debates on the 'ethics' of sex trafficking which focus on the 'morality' of prostitution -- or, for that matter, of sex -- or on the 'evil' of 'criminals' involved in sex trafficking are fundamentally misguided. These debates focus on 'deviant' and 'immoral' behaviour -- of prostitutes and their clients, and the criminals who traffick them across borders; this behaviour is regarded as existing *outside of* and in contrast to dominant moral understandings and 'social-moral' systems. This paper will argue that the 'ethics' and 'morality' of sex trafficking are in fact constitutive of, and constituted by, the social, economic and political processes of the gendered global political economy, which increasingly relies on the movement of women across borders to fulfill demand for 'women's work' -- including sex work and carework.

This paper draws on research which seeks to problematize the failure to understand 'sex trafficking' as linked to other forms of labour exploitation (van den Anker 2006; Chang and Kim 2007, Agustin 2007). Failure to link sex trafficking with wider processes regarding women's migrant labour in the gendered global political economy will hinder efforts to think ethically about these developments. As Agustin points out, most commentators view carers and domestics in the same light, and a few include people who sell sex, but many refuse strenuously on the grounds that selling sex can never be work (Agustin 2007: 58). This assertion reflects the dominant moral understandings which surround sex work -- that it is morally wrong, since sex 'ought to be' an expression of love for a particular partner or that it is morally wrong because it demeans, degrades and victimizes women. Thus, the moral lenses we use to view sex trafficking tend to be limited to those concerning the morality of sex and 'deviance', where women are portrayed as defenseless victims of criminal activity.

This moral discourse, moreover, is usually seen as separate from the 'economic' discourse of sex workers as workers. The voices of this discourse argue strongly that sex work must be recognized as labour, and that this is crucial if the agency of the women (and men, boys and girls) selling sex is to be recognized. Advocates for the recognition of workers' rights for sex workers tend to shy away from moral analysis -- largely to avoid

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Walker's epistemology and methodology as a methodological framework for feminist normative IR theory. See Fiona Robinson, 'Methods of feminist normative theory: a political ethic of care for International Relations', in Brooke Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True, eds., *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

the myopic 'moralizing' that characterizes the abolitionist perspective. But arguments from this perspective are often clearly normative; they tend to be framed, however, in terms of 'global justice' and 'women's rights' (Kempadoo 2005; van den Anker 2006). While there is obviously a place for the recognition of legal rights in this context, I will argue that a thoroughgoing rights-based approach to sex trafficking, which is focused on women's labour rights, cannot effectively address the *constitutive conditions and nature of that labour*. Specifically, a rights-based or global justice approach tends to abstract away from the complex relations of gender and race which constitute migrant women's work in the global economy. Moreover, these approaches tend towards ontological individualism, and thus fail to recognize the extent to which all persons are embedded in networks of relations on which they rely for their well-being and security.

In this paper, I argue that a critical feminist ethics of care offers an alternative to these limitations of both the 'morality of sex' and the 'women's rights' discourses by focusing on normative and ontological claims about relationships, responsibilities and care in the context of the gendered global political economy. An ethics of care that is both critical and feminist is useful in elucidating the specific confluence of interpersonal, societal and global social-moral systems which govern the distribution of 'intimate services' and of responsibilities and demand for those services. As a feminist ethics, it can help us to understand why women are 'responsible' for sex work, as they are for 'housework' and 'carework', and why there is relatively little critical moral reflection on this in the context of relations of gender and race at the global level. Why does the discourse of 'sex trafficking' focus on 'defenseless women victims' (when men -- especially transgendered men and boys -- are trafficked for the sex industry as well)? Why are women -- particularly servile, 'exotic' women -- regarded as the natural providers of caring and 'intimate' labour? How can we distinguish, morally, between sex workers and 'mail-order brides'?

Care ethics also reminds us that all people exist in webs of relations with others, and rely on those others for their care and, hence, their security. From this perspective, illusions of self-sufficiency are enabled and sustained by the undervalued and often unremunerated caring labour of the least advantaged members of society -- often women. From this perspective, decisions about the distribution of and responsibilities for care are not private or personal decisions, but *political* decisions which cut to the very heart of what is valued in a society. These insights lead to further questions: How are the sexual needs of men regarded by societies (compared to, for example, the physical and mental needs of children, the elderly and the chronically ill)? Who is benefiting from the organized export of women? While women sex workers and careworkers are attending to the needs of their clients, who 'cares' for those workers (and their immediate and extended families)?

In what follows, I will seek to shift the focus of moral attention away from both prostitution and criminalization -- and their attendant ethical and policy implications -- towards a critical moral analysis of sex trafficking that relies on an account of hegemonic masculinities and neo-liberal restructuring in the context of the contemporary gendered global political economy. In particular, I will argue that, in both moral and policy terms,

the issue of sex trafficking cannot be separated from the organized export of women for domestic labour and carework. Using a critical feminist ethics of care, I seek to develop an informed understanding of the ethics of sex trafficking which moves beyond the 'moral crusade' and 'moral panic' mentality fuelled by discourses of prostitution and crime. Critical moral analysis, I argue, is essential to uncovering the 'root causes' of widespread practices of exploitation and oppression; however, moral analysis can only succeed in this if it refuses to abstract away from experiences 'on the ground'.

### **Discourses of Trafficking**

While interest in 'human trafficking' and 'sex trafficking' in particular have peaked since the start of the twenty-first century, these are issues that have been of global concern for almost two centuries (Kempadoo 2005: vii). From the earliest days of the abolition of slavery and the systems of bonded or indentured labour that followed, to the first use of the term 'White Slave Trade' in 1902, discourse, legislation and activism surrounding trafficking has been explicitly gendered, racialized and moralistic. By 1921, the term 'white slavery' was officially dropped and replaced, by the League of Nations, with 'traffic in women and children' (Samarasinghe 2007: 13). The League Conventions, like the 1949 UN Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, emphasized the perceived link between prostitution and the 'accompanying evil' of the traffic in persons.

Interest in trafficking waned over the next thirty years, but gained momentum again after the end of the Vietnam War, as feminists began to highlight the prevalence of sex tourism, militarized prostitution, and the violence involved in the movement of women from the south to developed states for work in sex industries (Kempadoo 2005: xi). Here, feminists were seeking to counter the perception of trafficking as simply a 'moral' issue connected to prostitution; rather, they sought reconstruct the problem as constituted by neo-colonial relations of race and gender in the context of newly-emerging forms of global governance. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000) shifted the focus yet again towards criminalization and 'irregular migration' (Kempadoo 2004: xiv). Indeed, the Protocol is part of a broader UN Convention concerning transnational crime, and reflects a link -- also evident in national policies and initiatives -- between trafficking, organized crime and the need to control 'irregular' and 'illegal' migration.

For some, this shift is to be welcomed insofar as it widens the focus away from the narrow preoccupation with forced prostitution, and incorporates all activities which are non-consensual based on movement of persons (Samarasinghe 2008: 21). However, it has also been argued that this approach tends towards policy decisions which focus on stricter immigration laws 'to protect' women from traffickers; one possible effect of this, of course, is an increased need for women to seek traffickers to help them circumvent these laws and to migrate (Berman 2003: 43; Sassen 2000: 517). The contemporary sex-trafficking discourses -- which 'reframe' border transgression and immigration as 'cases of crime and kidnapping exclusively' -- may result in rendering immigration more

dangerous and costly to women while not necessarily hindering their movement nor capturing the traffickers who have committed crimes (Berman 2003: 43).

Discursive shifts indicate transformations in dominant moral understandings as constituted through evolving social and political processes, structures and institutions. While dominant moral theories rely on 'schematic examples' from which social and political context have disappeared, feminist ethics is committed to examining how moral vocabularies and practices 'interlace' with other historically and culturally embedded beliefs and practices (Walker 1998: 54-5). A moral analysis of sex trafficking which focuses on individual sexual and criminal behaviour fails to see how sex trafficking is sustained by the feminization and racialization of work involving the comfort and bodily needs of others. And this, in turn, is not about 'sex' or 'crime', but about the contemporary restructuring of the global political economy in ways that are licensed by dominant moral and cultural understandings about women, their bodies and their labour.

### **The Ethics of Care and Sex Trafficking**

*'The domestic and caring sector is often referred to as feudal, involving servitude and servility. How is it that these social phenomena are looked on so uncritically within Western societies?'*<sup>5</sup>

While the earliest conceptualizations of the ethics of care were constructed around empirical data used to build hypotheses in moral psychology, a number of more recent feminist accounts of care ethics have been self-consciously political. Indeed, it may be more correct to say that many feminist scholars -- in philosophy, political theory, and legal studies -- took seriously the powerful political implications of Carol Gilligan's early findings regarding the gendered differences in responses to a variety of moral dilemmas. While a few feminist scholars were wary -- of essentialism, of the reification of stereotypes, or of Western bias -- a large group of feminists from a variety of disciplines have recognized the enormous significance of bringing 'care', as both a set of values and a type of work, out of the 'private' sphere. In so doing, these feminists are seeking not to 'transfer' care from one sphere to another (i.e. the public sphere), but rather to deconstruct the gendered dichotomies which have created to separate realms of human existence.

While accounts of the nature of the ethics of care differ, it is possible to isolate a number of key attributes of the 'substance' of care ethics that distinguish it from other approaches to ethics. Joan Tronto's well-known formulation of care ethics highlights the importance in this approach to ethics not of moral values or principles as such, but of *practices* as constitutive of morality. These include attentiveness, responsibility, nurturance, compassion and meeting others' needs (Tronto 1993: 3). Building on these central moral practices, I would argue that a critical feminist ethic of care must include reference to not only the substance of morality, but also to key ontological and methodological assumptions which provide the groundwork for thinking about morality in this way.

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<sup>5</sup> Laura M. Agustin, 'A Migrant World of Services', *Social Politics*, 10(3), 2003: 387.

Thus, on my view, an ethics of care includes the following: a relational ontology, which conceptualizes the selves as fully relational -- existing in and through complex, constitutive webs or relations with others; a focus on attention, responsiveness and responsibility to the needs of particular others as core substantive moral values; a commitment to addressing moral problems in the historical and spatial contexts of real, lived experiences; and finally, a reconceptualization of traditional understandings of the nature of and relationship between the 'public' and 'private' spheres.

The first feature of care ethics -- the relational ontology -- is the philosophical starting point of this approach, and the point from which all its other claims about morality and human flourishing flow. The relational ontology of the ethics of care is, in fact, comprised of two related claims about ontology: first, that the self is properly understood as relational, and thus morality can be said to exist only in the context of the self in relation with others; and second, the assumption that relations of care and responsibility are the key to understanding 'moral substance' as such (Hutchings 2000:123). These ontological claims depart radically from the individualistic, justice-based approaches that dominate moral and political philosophy -- including international political theory.

The dominant ontology of autonomy -- of isolated, self-reliant moral selves -- does not adequately reflect people's lived experience in most communities around the world. Feminist moral and political philosophers have argued that one of the effects of this ontology has been to obscure from view the particular experiences of women, who are most likely to define themselves in and through their relations with children and other family members -- including the elderly or chronically ill -- or with friends or members of their communities. This is not to say, however, that the picture of 'autonomous man' only distorts the experiences of women; indeed, care ethicists argue that all people live lives that are, at least during some periods of time, interdependent with those of others, and that moral analysis must reflect, rather than obscure, this fundamental characteristic of human existence.

The second feature of care ethics -- the focus on responsibilities to particular others -- is among the most controversial. This can be explained in two ways. First, the hostility to this view of ethics arises from the dominance of traditional approaches to ethics which call for impartiality and universality in moral thinking, and which rely on the application of abstract rules to particular moral situations. Morality is said to demand that the moral agent is able to remove himself from the emotional, private feelings that are seen to characterize our responses in the context of personal relationships; indeed, the highest stage of morality is seen to be characterized by a morality of rationality which can apply more principles without bias. As Tronto argues, this kind of approach to ethics presumes that we think most clearly about others when we think of them as distant from us (Tronto 1993: 13). 'Closeness' is seen to lead to 'clouded' moral thinking and, ultimately, to partiality, favouritism and nepotism.

This argument, however, relies on a caricature of care ethics as counseling that moral attention should be bestowed on those 'near and dear' or, worse, those who are in some ways 'like' us. No version of care ethics argues this. Rather, care ethicists argue that

people experience their moral lives in the context of webs of relationships with individuals and groups of particular others, and that one of the main tasks of moral inquiry is to think about how care, and responsibilities for care, are distributed both within and across societies. This does not preclude concern for distant others, or those who are not 'like' us; on the contrary, as I will discuss below, this approach actually offers us resources for critical evaluation of dominant moral understandings.

The other source of hostility towards the particularism of care ethics comes from the frequent invocation of the mother-child relationship as paradigmatic of this approach to morality. This has been wrongly interpreted as suggesting that there is a natural or essential link between women's identity and motherhood, or of idealizing the mother-child relationship as morally superior, and thus ignoring the conflict, power imbalances, indifference and even cruelty that can potentially characterize it. This reading ignores the fact that those who use this example -- including Virginia Held and Nel Noddings -- do so in order to provide a *model* of moral reasoning from which important moral values can be derived. That said, there may be other problems with relying too heavily on the mother-child model; as Selma Sevenhuijsen argues, associating the 'mother figure' with values such as concreteness, care and compassion as opposed to abstraction and justice runs the risk of reproducing the mode of arguing in binary oppositions with which Western thinking is so thoroughly permeated (Sevenhuijsen 1998:13). Moreover, this model may serve to direct attention away from the political aspects of care, and the more basic questions of the quality of moral identities and moral subject positions that feminists construct in their reasoning (Sevenhuijsen 1998: 13).

The third feature of care ethics -- the commitment to context -- is clearly related to the previous two ideas. To quote Sevenhuijsen again, the moral agent in an ethics of care stands 'with both feet in the real world'; this is in contrast to the ideal moral agent of universalist ethics, which must abstract from specific circumstances in order to achieve responsible moral judgement. On this view, situatedness in concrete social practices is not a threat to independent judgement; indeed, the ethics of care demands reflection on the best course of action in specific circumstances (Sevenhuijsen 1998:59). Moreover, as Eva Kittay has argued, there appear to be universal aspects of meaning and experience of caring, including, at a most basic level, that it is required by all human beings at some time in their lives. However, differences in ability, race, gender, sexuality, religion, culture and geography orient us differently towards care, making questions concerning the giving and receiving of care a matter of social, moral and political import (Kittay 2005: 444-445).

Finally, the ethics of care, on my view, must be committed to a radical reconceptualization of the public-private dichotomy -- especially as it has developed in Western societies and 'international society' through the legacy of Western liberalism. This means, most obviously, a rethinking of the nature of public and private as it relates to ethics. In particular, it must challenge the assertion by a number of prominent male moral and political philosophers that care matters in the context of intimate, personal relationships, but that it is irrelevant, or dangerous, in the real context of ethics -- the public realm. But challenging this account of public and private ethics must be part of a



wider contestation of what counts as political, and how these assumptions are fundamentally constituted through historically-constructed gender norms, roles and power relations.

While the earliest work on care ethics concentrated on care as an alternative to justice as a form of moral reasoning, later works sought to interrogate the political implications of care (Tronto 1993; Sevenhuijsen 1998). More recently, research on care ethics and carework has begun to explore care in a global context (Robinson 1999; 2006b; Held 2006, Porter 2006; Lawson 2007). In 2006, Elizabeth Porter argued that there has been minimal application of the themes of care ethics to political issues in international relations, where the care of distant humans is paramount (Porter 2006: 99).<sup>6</sup> Her article, and her 2007 book, go on to elaborate on what she calls a 'politics of care' and a 'politics of compassion', where the latter links the universal and the particular in that it 'assumes a shared humanity of interconnected, vulnerable people and requires emotions and practical, particular responses to different expressions of vulnerability (Porter 2006: 99; 2007). Similarly, in her 2006 book, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political Global*, Virginia Held suggests that the ethics of care is 'beginning to influence how those interested in international relations and global politics see the world and our responsibilities in it, and it holds promise for new efforts to improve global relations' (Held 2006: 155). Like Porter, she argues that a global ethic of care can be constructed in order to extend caring moral responses beyond the realm of private or personal relationships to the global context.

While there is widespread agreement among feminist ethicists and political philosophers regarding the substantive characteristics of care ethics -- the relational ontology and the substantive features of ethics that flow from that -- there is rather less agreement regarding epistemological and methodological questions in care ethics. Care ethicists -- and feminist moral philosophers more broadly -- have differing views on epistemology and, specifically, the nature and status of moral judgment in the ethics of care, the 'form' of care ethics (as opposed to traditional moral theories); and the methods of moral inquiry that arise from a feminist ethics of care.

My own approach to these issues is informed by the work of Margaret Walker and Kimberly Hutchings, who both devote considerable intellectual energy to questions of epistemology and methodology in feminist ethics. For both Walker and Hutchings, feminist ethics has tremendous critical capacity. Walker's idea of 'moral understandings' comprises a collection of 'perceptive, imaginative, appreciative and expressive skills and capacities which put and keep us in unimpeded contact with the realities of ourselves and specific others' (Walker 1995:145). Embedded in this way of thinking about ethics, she argues, are a number of 'potent critical resources' (Walker 1995: 145). These are of great significance to the construction of a critical feminist ethics of world politics:

The obvious ones I see are its structural capacity to challenge "principled" moral stances in the concrete, where these are surrogates for or defenses

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<sup>6</sup> Porter cites Robinson 2001, 1999 as a 'notable exception' to this.

against, responsiveness in actual relationships; to export an insistence on the primacy of personal acknowledgement and communication to institutional and "stranger" contexts; and on a philosophical plane to pierce through the rhetoric of ethics to the politics of ethics as a routine matter (Walker 1995: 146).

Eschewing epistemological foundationalism and moral universalism, Walker defends an epistemology which she defines as 'naturalized' *and* 'critical'. The object of study is moral knowledge produced and sustained within communities. It has two tasks:

First, it must identify what kinds of things people need to know to live according to moral understandings that prevail in (any of) their (possibly multiple communities or societies. And it must supply critical strategies and standards for testing whether understandings about how to live are most credited in a community or society deserve their authority (Walker 1998: 60).

These two tasks may be seen as corresponding to what Hutchings has called the 'phenomenological' and 'geneological' tasks of ethics. The first task involves recognizing, or indeed putting into place, the conditions within which moral arguments will be intelligible. This task flows from the recognition that 'moral judgments make sense within contexts' (Hutchings 2000: 122). The geneological element of feminist ethics, moreover, involves investigation of the role of gender in establishing particular moral judgments as expressions of 'ethical necessity', as well as in the construction and maintenance of particular patterns of benefits and costs associated with those judgments (Hutchings 2000: 122).

Using a critical feminist ethics of care as a moral framework through which to view sex trafficking shifts attention away from individual sexual or criminal behaviour towards an examination of the wider context in which these activities take place. Furthermore, rather than viewing sex workers, their clients, and those who move women across borders as abstract, autonomous individuals who either possess or lack agency to make moral decisions, a critical ethics of care regards all people as embedded in networks of relationships. Relative power, degrees of agency, and moral responses are mediated through these relationships. Some relationships may be nurturing and life-sustaining, while others may be exploitative or violent; good caring relations, however, are always vital for human security

Moreover, using this approach as a lens through which to view sex trafficking facilitates a critique of the stereotype of care as 'bottomless feminine nurturance and self-sacrifice'. (Walker 1999: 108). Critics of care ethics -- including some feminists -- have argued that an ethic of care can serve to reinforce gender stereotypes, and can 'look like the lamentable internalization of an oppressively servile social role' (Walker 1999: 108). That care has come to be degraded in this way, however, is a result of the development of particular moral understandings -- including hegemonic forms of masculinity -- that are mediated through gendered relations of power. As Jan Pettman argues, the domestication

of women naturalises men's sex right to women's bodies, labour and children. Women are there to service men, providing domestic and sexual labour, which is assumed to be a labour of love (Pettman 196:186).

While there is no essential picture of what good caring relations should look like, a critical ethics of care emphasizes the benefits to all people of an image of care which recognizes responsibility and responsiveness to particular others as a positive expression of masculinity. A critical feminist ethics must reclaim the role of caring values as a positive, valuable aspect of all societies, and of caring labour as an important practice of contemporary citizenship. In the context of global politics, it asserts that the adequate provision of care, and equitable distribution of responsibilities for care, is a basic feature of global justice and human security.

### **Which 'Moral Understandings'?:**

### **Interrogating the Ethics of the Global Political Economies of Care and Sex**

#### *Untangling the Morality of Sex and Caring Labour in the Global Political Economy*

Far from being devoid of moral debate, the issue of sex trafficking is, in fact, deeply mired in moral language and discourse. Indeed, Ronald Weitzer has used the terms 'crusade ideology' and 'moral panic' to describe the construction of sex trafficking, and prostitution more generally, in the discourse of certain activists and organizations, especially in the U.S. (Weitzer, 2007). Weitzer describes the contemporary alliance in the U.S. against prostitution and the 'global sex trade'; this alliance -- comprised of groups from the religious right, abolitionist feminists, and the U.S. government -- is remarkably similar to the alliance formed in the early 1980s to combat pornography. Indeed, not only the composition, but also the dynamics, of the coalitions are similar; it is noted that feminists alone would not be getting attention internationally otherwise without the support of faith-based groups with a 'fresh perspective and a biblical mandate' (Weitzer 2007: 449).

As Weitzer explains, from a social constructionist perspective, social conditions become 'problems' only as a result of claims-making by interested parties; these claims, moreover, may or may not reflect actual social arrangements (Weitzer 2007: 448). This is reflected in the priorities of various anti-sex trafficking groups, which identify trafficking as a problem for very different reasons and have very different political agendas with regard to the issue (O'Connell Davidson 2006: 7). Thus, for many states, the problem with sex trafficking arises out of issues concerning irregular immigration and transnational organized crime. For human rights NGOs, interest is often based around labour rights and concerns about "modern slavery" (O'Connell Davidson 2006: 8). For feminist abolitionist groups, often in coalition with groups from the religious right, prostitution and sex trafficking are condemned as a 'social evil' which is asserted to be 'immoral' in that it is oppressive and exploitative of women, and /or a threat to marriage and the family (Weitzer 2007: 450). It is this group which makes use of the most explicitly 'moral' language, and which has constructed the fight against prostitution and sex

trafficking as a moral crusade.<sup>7</sup> The goals of a moral crusade, furthermore, are twofold, as Weitzer explains:

These movements ... see their mission as a righteous enterprise whose goals are both symbolic (attempting to redraw or bolster normative boundaries and moral standards) and instrumental (providing relief to victims, punishing evildoers) (Weitzer 2007: 448).

This kind of moral analysis -- which relies on the rhetoric of 'good' and 'evil' and makes authoritative moral prescriptions about threats to moral and social fabric -- fails to incorporate critical moral ethnography -- which, I have argued, is a crucial feature of feminist moral inquiry. As Walker argues, it is a central work of feminist moral analysis to analyze the discursive spaces that different moral views (and theories of them) create, and to explore the positions of agency and distributions of responsibility that these views foreground or eclipse. Importantly, moreover, it must look at where moral views are 'socially sited' and what relations of authority and power hold them in place (Walker 1999: 75).

The moral crusades against prostitution and organized crime fail to understand prostitution and sex trafficking in the wider social-moral contexts of the gendered processes of contemporary globalization, and the moral understandings that uphold those processes. In particular, it obscures the extent to which the contemporary global migration and trafficking of women is anchored in particular features of the current globalization of economies in both the north and the south (Sassen 2002). As Saskia Sassen argues, the last decade has seen a growing presence of women in a variety of cross-border circuits that have become a source for livelihood, profit-making and the accrual of foreign currency (Sassen 2002: 256). Sassen conceptualizes these developments as indicators of the 'feminization of survival'; in other words, it is increasingly on the backs of low-wage and poor women that these forms of survival, profit-making and government revenue enhancement operate (Sassen 2002: 274). These global circuits tend to be concentrated in carework and intimate labour that is socially-constructed as women's work -- domestic labour, including housework and childcare, nursing and care for the sick and the elderly, and sex work. Although unremunerated, the 'work' of mail-order brides can be seen as part of these circuits, in that the process of

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<sup>7</sup> Jacqueline Berman also refers to the 'crime crusade' against 'global gangsterism' which characterizes the responses of European Union to the 'problem' of sex trafficking. Although less explicitly steeped in moral language than the moral crusade of abolitionist feminists and the religious right, this discourse also makes use of horror stories regarding the defenseless victims of sex trafficking and, importantly, the absolute evil of the criminal figures. In the case of EU officials, however, Berman notes how the announced concern over the exploitation of women is haunted by a more visceral concern about border violations (Berman 2003: 42).

recruitment of brides and the contractual agreements between the parties is regulated and institutionalized by governments.<sup>8</sup>

A combination of economic, social and demographic factors have led to these developments. The broad structural conditions of globalization have led to the growth of 'alternative circuits of survival in developing countries'. These conditions include the effects of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), and the opening of economies to foreign firms. In turn, these conditions have led to a series of economic costs: unemployment, the closure of many firms in traditional sectors oriented to local markets, and the ongoing and increasing burden of government debt in most developing economies (Sassen 2002: 257). It is this 'growing immiseration' of governments and whole economies in the south has 'promoted and enabled the proliferation of survival and profit-making activities that involve the migration and trafficking of (low-wage and poor) women' (Sassen 2002: 255).

In spite of discursive and policy efforts to separate 'sex' workers from other forms of migrant female labour, all of this global women's work may be traced to the same norms and processes. As Audrey Macklin argues, there is a global demand for 'women's work' which can no longer be supplied by women in affluent, developed states. While the types and nature of this work differ somewhat, all these forms of labour can only be made sense of when viewed through the lens of global gendered relations of power. Thus, as Macklin points out, sex-trade workers supply sex, live-in caregivers perform childcare and housework, and so-called 'mail-order brides' furnish all three. But although sex-trade workers are 'frequently criminalized as prostitutes and 'mail-order brides' are not formally designated as workers (insofar as their labour is unpaid), these migrations occur within a commercialized context where the expectation of economic benefit (to the women and to relatives in the country of origin) structures the incentives for entering the process'. (Macklin 2003: 464-465).

One solution to the problem of separating sex workers from other types of work is to address all of this work from within the framework of women's rights. For example, Christien van den Anker points to the lack of integration between the discourse on migrant workers' rights and the discourse on women's rights, and argues that migrant women 'should be an important part of the women's rights agenda' (van den Anker 2006: 180). She insists that, in spite of the fractured and legalistic nature of rights discourse and implementation, a rights approach is regarded as the best way to conceptualize, and potentially to transform, the problem of human trafficking. This is in line with the analytical and normative framework taken by many non-abolitionist feminists towards the human trafficking (see Kempadoo 2005; Chang and Kim 2007; van den Anker, 2006), and gender and human security more broadly.

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<sup>8</sup> Sassen notes that the Philippine government, through the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (PIEA), has played an important role in the emigration of Philippine women -- as maids, nannies, nurses and 'brides' -- to the US, the Middle East and Japan. See Sassen 2002: 271.

Clearly, rights-based ethics, rights discourse and human rights law has a role to play in addressing the issue of sex trafficking, in both academic and activist contexts. This is especially the case when rights are seen as embedded in wider structures of globalization and so-called 'root causes'; as van den Anker argues, 'gender, race, nationality and ethnicity are at least some of the factors influencing who ends up trafficked and under which circumstances. Universalist approaches (to rights) therefore need to take into account that these structural and long-term causes may need recognition before equal respect can be implemented' (van den Anker 2006: 179). On this view, rights are not seen as abstract or ahistorical, but situated in the gendered effects of globalization, and framed by an intersectional approach (van den Anker 2006: 179).

I would argue, however, that while this kind of women's rights approach to sex trafficking moves in the right direction -- in terms of its commitment to situating trafficking within gendered globalization -- that it is destined always to see trafficking as a women's rights 'issue', and thus of relevance only to women; furthermore, it is likely to remain plagued by debates over universality and difference -- especially among so-called 'first world' and 'third world' women. Furthermore, a rights-based approach cannot give us insight into *why and how* these abuses are licensed by dominant social and cultural norms or 'moral understandings'. A critical feminist ethics of care, by contrast, helps us to understand the designation and assignment of 'women's work', and subsequent feminization and devaluation of the values and practices of care.

### *Hegemonic Masculinity and Gendered Globalization*

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is only about two decades old, but it has had a considerable influence on thinking and research on gender relations in a variety of contexts (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 829). Most importantly, the idea of hegemonic masculinity was able to explain how there could be multiple masculinities at a given time, and yet how certain forms of masculinity could be more socially central, or more associated with authority and social power, than others. The term 'hegemonic' moreover, supported the idea that the hierarchy of masculinities is a pattern of hegemony, not a pattern of simple domination based on force. Thus, although they may only be enacted by a minority of 'real' men, hegemonic masculinities are created and reinforced through cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or delegitimation of alternatives (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:846).

Feminist analyses of global political economy have demonstrated how cultures of hegemonic masculinity are integral to both the discursive and material constitution of globalization. As Charlotte Hooper has argued, the imagery of hegemonic masculinity positions globalization firmly in the 'glamorous masculine conceptual space of the "international", as far from the feminized world of domestic life as possible' (Hooper 2000:67-68). 'It is "out there" in the international arena which only intrepid businessmen fear to tread, as opposed to "in here" in the domestic space of businessmen's homes where global restructuring has directed a tide of often illegal and under-age female migrants and domestic servants' (Hooper 2000: 68).

Understanding the influence of hegemonic masculinities in the constitution of governance rules at global and national levels is crucial to an analysis of sex trafficking. Indeed, this can help to explain why these rules have yet to give due recognition to the significance of women's work relative to men's work, and women's security needs relative to men's security needs (Truong 2003:32). As Thanh-Dam Truong argues, whereas care for the old, the sick and the young -- socially defined as women's work -- tends to meet with less supportive responses from state-based and community-based entitlement systems, care for men's sexual needs is highly responsive to market forces (Truong 2003:32-33).

Norms of hegemonic masculinities contribute to the feminizing of domestic, service and sex work; in so doing, they serve to reify the public/private dichotomy and mute the contradictions of transnational liberalism (Chang and Ling 2000: 41). Just as the articulation of two separate spheres of human social life -- the public and the private -- served to obfuscate the gender contradictions of early liberal theories of rights, the 'transnational ideology of sexualized, racialized service' allows the public, masculine face of globalization to flourish (Chang and Ling 2000: 41). This 'public' globalization -- what Chang and Ling call 'techno-muscular capitalism' -- valorizes those norms and practices usually associated with Western capitalist masculinity, but masked as global or universal. They argue that this face of globalization is supported and sustained by a 'privatized' regime of 'labour intimacy' -- a sexualized, racialized, class-based regime of low-wage caring services provided by mostly female migrant workers (Chang and Ling 2000: 27). It is a feminized, privatized globalization which, although muted, is essential for the survival of both the processes and practices of 'techno-muscular capitalism', and for the reproduction of the moral understandings which legitimize and sustain it.

Thinking about sex trafficking from the perspective of global political economy demands that attention be paid not only to the 'supply side', but also to the demand from the organizers of the trade (Bertone 2000:7). This doesn't mean focusing on individual male 'customers', or even different 'groups' of men from industrialized and developing countries that perpetuate sex trafficking; rather, it means paying attention to how contemporary forms of hegemonic masculinity are constructed through accounts of femininity as caring, docile, dependent and self-sacrificing. Importantly, these accounts in the context of the sex trade are also raced, and thus construct this type of femininity as foreign, exotic and 'Other'.<sup>9</sup> Here, relations of gender and race intersect; as Pettman argues, in a post-colonial era, colonial relations live on in racialised power differences and intensifying relations of dominance, subordination and exploitation (Pettman 1996: 198).

While literature on care ethics has engaged extensively with 'femininity' and the

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<sup>9</sup> The extent to which race is a useful concept for analysis of trafficking in women is contested. Laura M. Agustin argues that the fastest-growing group of migrants comes from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union -- women usually considered "white" and "almost" European. Thus, she says, although "exoticizing" may well be taking place, race is not useful concept for analysis at this time (Agustin 2003: 378).

feminization of care, it has been relatively silent on masculinity and its relationship with the values and practices of caring. But notions of masculinity and femininity are necessarily interdependent, and intersect with other social relations of power, including race and class. While the language of care may be the 'different voice' of women, a critical care ethics must eschew gender essentialisms and interrogate how hegemonic forms of masculinity license men's neglect of caring responsibilities and contribute to the manipulation of images of care into images of female subservience and sexual service.

### **Conclusion: Reclaiming Care, Challenging Sex Trafficking**

In this paper I have argued that normative analyses of the ethics of sex trafficking require engaging in 'critical moral ethnography' in order to uncover the moral understandings that have allowed this industry to flourish in recent years. I have further suggested that such an approach to ethics -- here, in the context of sex trafficking -- requires seeing these moral understandings as embedded in the structures and processes of the gendered global political economy. Sex trafficking, then, cannot be isolated from other forms of female migrant labour -- particular domestic and caring labour. The prevalence of these forms of labour in the contemporary global economy demonstrate how the values and practices of care have been denigrated and manipulated by unequal power relations of gender and race, and wider inequalities in the global political economy.

The naturalized epistemology of critical feminist care ethics means that there are no obvious moral or policy prescriptions which flow from it. However, it does start with some clear ontological arguments about relationality and the life-sustaining significance of caring relations and caring responsibilities for all human flourishing. It regards these relations and responsibilities as neither simply 'natural' nor 'contractual', but as fundamentally ethical. As such, they are inseparable from and indeed constituted by the social, economic and political arrangements in which they are embedded in household, local and global contexts. Furthermore, caring relations may be judged 'better' or worse' - - they may be characterized by inequalities, exploitation, oppression, or by fairness, transparency, trust and equity. Responsibilities for care may be gendered and raced, or they may be distributed fairly, based on the assumption that all persons are bearers of responsibilities to care for others; access to care from others may be unequal, or it may be available to all persons.

Current trends globalization -- specifically, the sexualization and commodification of female migrant labour within peripheral sites and the accelerating exchange of money for bodies -- are part of wider trends towards neo-liberal restructuring which contribute to the socio-economic and political conditions that feminize, racialize, denigrate and undervalue the values and activities of care. Rather than being upheld as a fundamental, life-sustaining activity of citizenship, care is associated with subservience, self-sacrifice, dependence, and a lack of agency. Care work, housework and sex work -- increasingly done by migrant women of colour -- occupies the lowest rungs on the ladder of 'success' in the global political economy. Often alone and 'out of place', these women are, ironically, highly vulnerable in terms of their lack of relationship networks, family and



formal citizenship status. Thus, these 'foreign' carers are perhaps the least likely to receive good care, and many lead lives that are perpetually insecure.

What can be done? Thanh-Dam Truong argues that cultural means must be found to deal with forms of expression of masculinity that are harmful to the integrity of women and children as social beings. Current expressions of masculinity in the sex trade need to be countered with 'images of virility as the ability to care and take responsibility for the other' (Truong 2003: 48). She argues for a notion of 'caring and responsible' sex (as distinct from 'safe sex') which seeks not only to enhance personal safety, but also to promote a cultural transformation towards non-violence in sexuality. It is through non-violence, she argues, that mutual respect can be built and a gender-based human security achieved (Truong 203: 48).

Attempts to define what sex should 'look like', however, are problematic, and may lead back to the same 'moralizing' debates that continue to dominate ethical discussion of prostitution and sex trafficking. I would argue, in contrast, for a broader re-analysis of the role of care in societies -- both domestically and at the level of 'global society'. This involves understanding how 'new geographies of inequality' have simultaneously made care a more pressing concern and marginalized care from view (Lawson 2007: 2). Unlike a women's rights approach, a critical care ethics can help us to understand *why* women are economically and physically exploited and subject to violence through elucidating the widely connections between femininity and subservience on one hand, and masculinity and autonomy on the other. Shifts in moral understandings towards the valuing of care and the reshaping of visions of masculinity and femininity must go hand in hand with the recognition of care as the very basis of active citizenship and human security.

Finally, care must be recognized as a global issue. Sex trafficking -- as part of a larger trend of the organized export of women -- demands a consideration of care and relationships in spatially extensive ways; this means that moral analysis must be grounded in the transnational processes, structures and institutions which are slowly and persistently eroding the adequate provision of care services, and the equitable distribution of caring responsibilities.

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