Maintaining the Carceral Echo Chamber

Tensions Within the Anti-Trafficking Movement in Canada

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Abstract: The anti-trafficking movement in Canada has grown rapidly since the late 2000s, branding itself as a feminist human rights-based effort to eliminate human trafficking and taken up by the Government of Canada to position itself as a benevolent leader on the international stage. Focusing on the membership of an anti-trafficking coalition in Toronto, Canada, this article explores how the movement creates moral spaces that validate a wide range of anti-trafficking efforts. In unpacking how tensions between members are navigated through the suppression of direct conflict and an ethos of collaboration, it demonstrates how carceral feminist approaches to imagining and eliminating human trafficking continue to remain dominant despite a growth in the efforts of individual members to promote harm reduction and reduce the criminalization of marginalized communities.

Keywords: human trafficking; sex work; human rights; non-governmental organizations; Canada

Résumé : Le mouvement de lutte contre la traite des êtres humains au Canada a connu une croissance rapide depuis la fin des années 2000, se présentant comme un effort féministe fondé sur les droits de l'homme pour éliminer la traite des êtres humains et repris par le gouvernement du Canada pour se positionner comme un leader bienveillant sur la scène internationale. En se concentrant sur les membres d'une coalition anti-trafic d'êtres humains à Toronto, Canada, cet article explore comment le mouvement crée des espaces moraux qui valident un large éventail d'efforts anti-trafic. En exposant la manière dont les tensions entre les membres sont gérées par la suppression des conflits directs et une éthique de collaboration, il démontre comment

les approches féministes carcérales visant à imaginer et à éliminer la traite des êtres humains restent dominantes malgré une augmentation des efforts des membres individuels pour promouvoir la réduction des dommages et réduire la criminalisation des communautés marginalisées.

Mots-clés : Trafic humain ; travail du sex ; droits humains ; organisations non-gouvernementales ; Canada

Introduction

The afternoon's anti-trafficking Coalition[1] meeting has drawn to a close. As members return to their home organizations, Willow, a founding Coalition member, sits down to speak with me. She is frustrated, as during the meeting another member, Mira, shared that she has been giving workshops about sex trafficking to local high schools and needs referral information for students. Willow's anger stems from what she considers to be Mira's lack of qualifications and preparedness. Willow says she "was really mad about the workshops—there's no oversight on the workshop content and most importantly, students are disclosing to her and [Mira] in no way has the skills, knowledge, or training to respond appropriately." Willow spoke to Mira privately after the meeting to "make it clear that [Mira] was doing more harm than good," and suggests to me that Mira's organization should no longer be part of the Coalition. However, in the following months, no organizations are asked to leave. Mira continues to attend meetings, where her work receives positive feedback.

This article focuses on how human trafficking and anti-trafficking efforts are diversely conceptualized by anti-trafficking organizers in Toronto, Canada. I am interested in how the Coalition, as an organizational hub bringing together anti-trafficking organizations and activists, creates a particular kind of moral space within which the suffering of victims and survivors of human trafficking is imagined, solutions are put forward, and actions are validated. In this space, members collectively share and validate different approaches to eliminating trafficking, raising public awareness, and providing support services to those affected. As this vignette suggests, tensions exist regarding what counts as an "appropriate" approach, but there are few consequences for directly or indirectly causing harm through one's anti-trafficking efforts. In exploring these tensions, I unpack how the moral space of Coalition meetings is sustained by members' repeated emphasis on key axioms of unity (Tsing 2005), which

include an abhorrence of violence against women (VAW) and girls, a desire to eliminate this violence, and a belief that this can only occur by, in the words of Coalition organizer Ava, "holding two sides in tension" and "bringing everyone to the table." The results of these efforts to work together are uneven and, in part because not all voices are, in practice, welcome at the table, the cumulative effect is the perpetuation of carceral feminist anti-trafficking discourses in collective efforts to eliminate human trafficking.

Contemporary organizing occurs against a backdrop of quasi-historical conflict that saw the first instantiation of the Coalition splinter and divide along pro- and anti-sex worker rights lines (Ava's "two sides"). Those that remained predominantly took carceral feminist approaches to anti-trafficking, which Elizabeth Bernstein (2010) conceptualizes as feminist activism that conflates all sexual labour with "sex trafficking" and supports criminal justice system-based approaches to eliminating the sex trades and trafficking through criminalization. To avoid conflict, those that favoured harm reduction prioritized a unified stance against gendered violence over addressing the harms anti-trafficking work causes to marginalized communities. However, as outside criticism of the Coalition grew, these members increasingly endeavoured to limit activities that received validation at meetings to harm reduction-based work in a conscious effort to displace hegemonic carceral feminist work.

Globally, critical anti-trafficking scholars have demonstrated how the "making" of human trafficking into a human rights issue reveals the racial, gendered, and sexual discourses at work in shaping senses of national identity and belonging (Hua 2011). At the same time, human trafficking is presented as a humanitarian issue, which has led to the rise of "sexual humanitarianism" (Mai 2013) and a "Rescue Industry" wherein governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and academics profit from the perception that "sex trafficking" is a rampant problem that they know how to solve (Agustin 2007). Anti-trafficking discourses lend a foil of benevolence to government nation-building efforts that seek to maintain and (re)create the fiction of the "otherness of the third world" (Ticktin 2011), constrain the mobility and labour cost of racialized migrants from the Global South (Sharma 2005), and police highly racialized and gendered social boundaries regarding what counts as acceptable sexual activity through the increased surveillance and criminalization of marginalized populations.

Identifying and unpacking the "victim narrative" (Kempadoo 2012) that underlies hegemonic anti-trafficking discourses has been central to research

on anti-trafficking efforts. Characterized by an emphasis on passive, sexually innocent, and morally pure young women and girls who are captured by international organized crime syndicates and forced into prostitution (Agustin 2007; Peters 2013; Roots and De Shalit 2015), anti-trafficking discourses present the public, funders, and governments with a "morally legitimate suffering body" (Ticktin 2011) through an emphasis on "sex trafficking" (Durisin and Heynen 2015). The discursive figure of the trafficking victim is malleable, "a sort of hollow body, an empty figure to be filled up with the assumptions of the relatively privileged staff members at most international organizations, governments, and non-governmental organizations" (Dewey 2008, 164). This narrative and the anti-trafficking discourse it is a part of have demonstrably harmful consequences for both those who are and those who are not identified and imagined as victims.

In Canada, these contemporary homogeneous depictions are connected to the growth of gendered and racialized concerns regarding illegal migration and Asian women in Canada's sex trades that began in the 1990s (Bruckert and Parent 2002). Populations deemed to be "at-risk" (Public Safety Canada 2012, 2019) frequently overlap with those that are racialized, stigmatized, and criminalized, leading to increased surveillance that functions to control, manage, and monitor the movement, labour, and sexuality of already-marginalized bodies—in particular, the bodies of Indigenous women (Hunt 2015), racialized migrants, Black women (Maynard 2015), and those who sell sexual services (O'Doherty et al. 2018; Rose 2015).

Despite large increases in the amount of funding directed to combatting human trafficking, victims and survivors often face difficulty finding appropriate and non-judgemental support services (Brennan 2014; Kaye 2017). As most proposed solutions to trafficking are carceral, this difficulty increases the further survivors find themselves from fitting the pre-established victim narrative, leading to those who have been identified as experiencing exploitation being arrested on suspicion of trafficking in the same moment they are purportedly being "rescued" from it (Lam and Lepp 2019). Rather than providing meaningful support for survivors and addressing the structural factors that facilitate trafficking, including racism and income inequality, the Canadian government and many anti-trafficking organisers overwhelmingly focus on border control, criminalization, and prosecution (Oxman-Martinez, Lacroix, and Hanley 2005).

The hegemony of carceral anti-trafficking discourses in Canada and their negative consequences for marginalized persons is well-documented, as is

the increasing resistance of sex worker and migrant worker rights activists to them (see Durisin et al. 2018; McFadyen 2018; van der Meulen et al. 2013). Yet, the increasing visibility of this resistance, through public rallies, social media campaigns, scholarly publications, and court cases, has been slow to translate into a measurable reduction in the power of anti-trafficking discourses to raise public funds or pass carceral legislation (Lam and Lepp 2019). At the same time, throughout the course of my research, which included ethnographic interviews with anti-trafficking, sex worker rights, and migrant worker rights activists and fieldwork from 2015 to 2016, it became clear that the efforts of sex worker rights activists can have an impact on grassroots anti-trafficking efforts and that a growing number of individual anti-trafficking organizers are moving away from carceral feminist approaches. Why, then, is it not translating into a larger-scale decentring of carceral approaches in anti-trafficking efforts or discourses? How are anti-trafficking efforts being (re)shaped, challenged, and reinforced at the local level and how do anti-trafficking organizers understand their efforts? Engaging with these questions requires us to look beneath the broader ideological underpinnings of anti-trafficking discourses that circulate at federal and international levels to see the active processes of negotiation that are occurring between local organizers.

This article brings together anthropological engagements with human rights and humanitarian endeavours and connects them to the growing body of critical anti-trafficking studies scholarship to illuminate how uncritical adherence to gendered human rights and humanitarianism-based axioms of unity facilitates the perpetuation of carceral feminist anti-trafficking discourses in collective efforts to eliminate human trafficking. I draw on Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's (2005) discussions of universals and axioms of unity as that which allow organizers to connect over, around, and in spite of the disparate particulars that might otherwise push them apart to understand why opposing Coalition members continue to work together, as well as elements of James Faubion's (2011) analysis of Foucault's ethical domains to identify how meeting spaces function as sites of validation where the moral value of members' work is affirmed. This approach draws attention to the existence of hierarchies of suffering within the Coalition's work, identifiable through its exclusions and the different limitations members place on who can be recognized as a "morally legitimate suffering body" (Ticktin 2011). By focusing on the membership of an anti-trafficking coalition in Toronto, Canada, how their meetings operated, and how members navigated conflict and tensions, I demonstrate how, despite a

growth in the efforts of individual members to promote harm reduction-based approaches, the moral spaces they create allow carceral feminist approaches to imagining suffering and shaping ethical action to remain dominant. Identifying the connection between their inability to re-orient the Coalition and their unwillingness to challenge or complicate its axioms of unity creates space to engage with the heterogeneity of anti-trafficking organizers and the tensions between them, allowing key barriers to change and sites for interventions to be identified.

Human Trafficking and Anti-Trafficking in Canada

Human trafficking, governmentally defined as involving the recruitment, transportation, harbouring, and/or exercising control, direction or influence over the movements of a person in order to exploit that person, typically through sexual exploitation or forced labour (Public Safety Canada 2012), has become an increasingly popular focus for government and public concern in Canada over the past two decades. In 2012, paired with the launch of its *National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking in Canada*, the federal government allocated $25 million to ending human trafficking in Canada, with the majority of funds supporting criminal justice-based initiatives. In 2019, the government announced its new $75-million National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking, emphasising that human trafficking is "an abhorrent crime … which devastates the victims and survivors, their families, and societies" (Public Safety Canada 2019).

Estimates of the actual prevalence of human trafficking in Canada vary greatly, with researchers, NGOs, and international organisations demonstrating that there are no reliable statistics. Existing estimates generally rely on highly emotional language, methodologically unsound data,[2] and a desire to be positioned globally as a benevolent nation doing humanitarian work, while evidence-based approaches to eliminating exploitation and providing support services gain little traction with government funders (Clancey et al. 2014; Roots and De Shalit 2015).

Contemporary concerns with and efforts to end human trafficking have their roots in the mythical "White Slave Trade" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Canada, the United States, and Western Europe. Campaigning on the grounds of social and moral purity shaped by conservative Victorian era values, historical campaigners succeeded in creating a moral panic that targeted sexualized, racialized, and mobile bodies, legislatively

circumscribing the mobility of women and undergirding the passage of racist anti-immigration legislation without tangible evidence that an actual trade in young, white flesh existed (Backhouse 1985; Doezema 2010). In Canada, this involved campaigns and legislation targeting racialized women and men, in particular Indigenous women and Chinese migrants, portraying both as potential corruptors of white settler values and the virtue of young, white women (Mawani 2009).[3] Campaigners were often actively involved in church-based humanitarian endeavours, following Christian traditions of religious charity and the moral salvation of the poor. Some of these organizations, such as the Salvation Army, remain actively involved in anti-trafficking work (Murdoch 1994; Ryan 2011).

While the language of human trafficking saw a resurgence in the 1980s, particularly in the lead-up to the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (UN Women 1995), it was not until 1998 that Canada saw a notable growth in media usage of human trafficking rhetoric. This media coverage revolved around graphic stories of Asian women trafficked into Canada's sex trades and a special Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) unit was established to investigate organized crime and trafficking in women (Bruckert and Parent 2002). In the mid-2000s, after the UN *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children* was released and Canada found itself on Tier 2 of the US *Trafficking in Persons* report,[4] a major increase in public awareness and grassroots organizing regarding human trafficking and the prevalence, strength, and scope of anti-trafficking discourses occurred. As demonstrated by the number of recent publications that reiterate the claim (for example, Canada's *National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking* [Public Safety Canada 2012, 2019] and the RCMP's *Human Trafficking in Canada* [2010] and *Domestic Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation in Canada* [2013]), national anti-trafficking discourses reflect the popular global framing that positions "sex trafficking" as the most prevalent and severe form of trafficking.

As Indigenous scholars and activists have demonstrated, anti-trafficking discourses in Canada have a distinct colonial flavour, particularly in the context of ongoing investigations into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (Hunt 2015) and heavy political investment in the optics of Truth and Reconciliation. In conjunction with the funding announced in 2019, the federal government emphasized that combatting trafficking "advances the implementation of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous

Women and Girls' *Calls for Justice*" (Public Safety Canada 2019). On a national level, government and police agency publications consistently emphasize that Indigenous women and girls are "at-risk" of and "vulnerable" to being trafficked (Public Safety Canada 2012, 2019; RCMP 2013). The position of increased risk and vulnerability is often framed as a result of racism, inequality, and poverty, though these publications rarely acknowledge the role colonial and current government and police agencies play in creating, sustaining, and reinforcing these conditions.

This emphasis on Indigenous women and girls is leveraged by some Indigenous women's organizations as a way to make the suffering of Indigenous communities legible to the general population and access much-needed funds for community development (Hunt 2015). For others, anti-trafficking efforts "reproduce structures of domination more often than addressing ongoing forms of dispossession that continue to naturalise inequalities and produce contexts in which trafficking and varying forms of violence occur" (Kaye 2017, 4). In practice, outside of Indigenous organizations, this public emphasis has not translated into the meaningful incorporation of Indigenous women or persons that have experienced trafficking in policy creation or the creation and provision of culturally appropriate support services. Instead, anti-trafficking initiatives overwhelmingly focus on international organized crime and prevention efforts directed at youth in wealthy, urban neighbourhoods. Nationally, this is demonstrated by Bill 158, the "Saving the Girl Next Door Act," introduced by MPP Laurie Scott in 2016 and championed by prostitution abolitionist MPP Joy Smith (Ontario PC 2016). The associated media campaign overwhelmingly emphasized that "anyone" can be trafficked and used imagery that featured a young, white girl with a dark-skinned hand covering her mouth, echoing the prominent racist stereotypes of the White Slave Trade. In the Coalition, the figure of the trafficked Indigenous woman/girl has played a role in certain public events, such as roundtables, but the lack of Indigenous members, consultations with Indigenous communities, and activities or meeting discussions directed towards supporting Indigenous communities during the time of research suggests that this incorporation is more tokenizing than reflective of a genuine commitment to eliminating trafficking by improving the lives of Indigenous persons.

The Coalition

The Coalition's primary goal, for which it has repeatedly received government funding, is to educate the public about human trafficking and create a

coordinated response model to streamline the process for victims and survivors of trafficking in the Toronto area to access support and emergency services. As Ava, one of the Coalition's founders, described it, the goal is "to make sure no one falls through the gaps." The Coalition gains new members through word of mouth, a website, personal and professional referrals, and public education events, and, in 2016, its membership included 42 different NGOs and nine independent members. Roughly half of these organizations exist for the sole purpose of eliminating human trafficking, though only a minority provide support services, and the remaining half are primarily front-line support service organizations expanding into anti-trafficking work. No new members were refused and the majority of those participating in Coalition activities did so as part of their paid work with their home organization. Demographically, most member organizations had a Christian religious affiliation and members were predominantly middle-to-upper-class white women ranging in age from early twenties to late sixties. The overwhelming whiteness of the Coalition's membership was rarely remarked upon during meetings, despite the demographic contrasts between meeting attendees and the staff and clients of the refugee centre that served as the Coalition's hub, many of whom were people of colour from the Global South.

The Coalition is understood by its membership to be a grassroots entity. To members, this means no membership fees, formal Terms of Reference, or board of directors, consensus-based decision making, and that anyone can join. In part due to its high number of member organizations and despite their relative uniformity, members envision it as a diverse, community-based collaboration. This vision is reinforced by the Coalition being predominantly organized by founding members Maria, Ava, and Willow, who, at the time of research, were employees of the refugee centre. Meetings were predominantly led by the centre's staff, many of whom were themselves immigrants and/or refugees, and were sometimes interrupted due to urgent casework.

I first encountered the Coalition when attending one of its public roundtables in 2013, prompted by graduate coursework and sex worker rights activism that combined to make it an event to attend for both activist and academic reasons. The event included an explosive interaction between a presenter, two uniformed police officers in the audience, and a representative of a local sex worker support services organization, that resulted from the representative's evidence-based objection to the presenter's repeated conflation of sex work and trafficking. Analyzed elsewhere (McFadyen 2018), this event

led to my eventual participation in the Coalition as an independent researcher. During this time, I volunteered on a weekly basis and worked closely with the refugee centre that organized the Coalition with the transparent goal of learning more about how the Coalition functioned, its impact on marginalized communities, and the potential for dialogue between the Coalition and the sex worker and migrant worker rights organizations that I worked with. Methodologically, this feminist ethnographic research reflects my commitment to critically engaged, activist anthropology research methodologies (Speed 2006) and the marginalized communities of sex workers, migrant workers, and trafficking survivors that made this project possible. A focus on anti-trafficking organizers developed out of collaborative dialogue with marginalized research participants, including the sex worker rights organizations that I was allied with, for three main reasons: as a cisgender, white woman without sex working experience, I was unlikely to be discriminated against or experience the space as being unsafe; the possibility that I would be able to leverage my academic privilege to instigate change in anti-trafficking spaces; and information about the anti-trafficking movement was needed because trafficking discourses were increasingly being used to (re)criminalize sex work.

In this role, I was invited by the Coalition's primary organizers to participate and observe meetings and events, speak with its membership, and contribute to activities and event planning. Over sixteen months, I participated in twelve meetings and contributed to planning three major events. The primary organizers introduced me to the membership via an email that included a research description and invitation for members to participate in interviews. At the beginning of meetings, I re-introduced myself and my role, reminding members that I was researching the Coalition's work and taking notes. If members did not want to be included in the research, their contributions to the meeting were omitted. In practice, all meeting participants were comfortable with my involvement and many sent me detailed information about their work in support of the research. As a researcher who supports decriminalization and harm reduction approaches, interviewing the sub-set of members with carceral feminist views was, at times, a delicate task. However, in approaching and framing the interview as an opportunity for dialogue and deepening my understanding, rather than as an assessment, participants felt encouraged to share their views at length. In total, 13 interviews were conducted with Coalition members.

Meeting Spaces, Moral Spaces

From its inception, one of the Coalition's key universals has been that human trafficking is a human rights violation and responses to trafficking should support the rights of trafficking victims. United by this cause, members bring their own interpretation of the issue and ideas about what solutions should look like to meetings. Describing this diversity, Ava said that "while there are always going to be tensions and groups that don't exactly agree with each other, the important thing is bringing everyone to the table, to make sure that we are all connected so that we can meet whatever needs a survivor has." Achieving this goal for survivors undergirds harm reduction members' commitment to continued collaboration despite the contradictions that providing any validation of carceral feminist approaches presents. This has meaningful implications for what can be said in Coalition meetings, how differences are negotiated, and the hegemony of carceral feminist anti-trafficking efforts.

Central to this goal is connecting organizations with each other and working together. To achieve this, in-person meetings take place every four to six weeks and serve as spaces that help members connect, share information about their activities and resources, plan collaborative events, and receive feedback on and support for their work. Casual in tone, meetings are significant events for members where they reaffirm the axioms of unity and universals (Tsing 2005) that bind the Coalition together through a process that simultaneously reaffirms the Coalition's existence and the positive contributions members believe they are making to the world through their work. Through a process of collective sharing and affirmation, meeting spaces function as a kind of Foucauldian ethical domain (Faubion 2011) that encourages and facilitates members in pursuing a form of ethical subjecthood through anti-trafficking work. These actions are intertwined with ideologies of sexual morality and heteronormativity, making anti-trafficking domains charged moral spaces where the activities and kinds of sex a person engages in informs whether an organization recognizes their suffering as "morally legitimate" (Ticktin 2011). However, unlike the physically bounded ethical domains typically created through traditional sites of humanitarian intervention, which have clearly established guidelines for ethical action and matrices of justification (Faubion 2011), sexual humanitarianism-influenced (Mai 2013) Coalition spaces rely on the continued willingness of members to elevate the virtue of working together over fundamental ideological differences that are framed as "tensions." There are no clearly designated ethical pedagogies that provide guidance within

these spaces and new members do not receive any training or orientation upon joining the Coalition. Instead, members are predominantly self-taught and may choose to pursue the approach to anti-trafficking most congruent with their existing worldview, facilitating the perpetuation of hegemonic anti-trafficking discourses and reducing the likelihood that new members will pursue harm reduction approaches.

Looking at the content of meetings, members' ideological motivations, and members' actions during meetings helps illuminate the Coalition's axioms of unity and the ways that members shape and navigate the moral space of meetings. Members and their organizations broadly fall into several overlapping groups: religious organizations that view trafficking work as an extension of their faith-based outreach and support services for prostitutes[5] and/or eliminating VAW; radical feminist[6] organizations that consider all prostitution to be sex trafficking/VAW; and organizations working with migrants, including refugees and migrant workers. Across these organizations, many express a commitment to "social justice values" and all use the language of "human rights."

During our interview, Kaila, a member of a Christian anti-trafficking organization that does prayer-based outreach to exotic dancers, elaborated on the significance of the Church to her social justice work:

> the biblical basis for social justice … it's actually a really strong theme in the Bible, that Christians should be involved in justice … because when you actually do look through the Bible … what you can actually see is that it's a theme from the beginning to the end … and it's clear when you go through it that God actually has a heart for the oppressed.

In a Coalition meeting, Kaila shared this explanation and other members responded positively by verbalizing their agreement and nodding their heads.

Danielle, a Christian minister who created her own anti-trafficking organization, shared with members that her work, described as "working predominantly with women in prostitution," is her "calling and sense of vocation, it's what I know God is asking me to do." In response, Kaila said her "work sounds wonderful" and suggested future collaboration opportunities, while another member promised to "raise awareness about the services [Danielle's] organization offers." Others, such as Mira, introduced herself as "a feminist, really, but aren't we all?," describing her work as secular and rooted in her commitment to "fighting for the human rights of women," which was

well received by all members. Regardless of their points of origin, all members present at meetings are validated for being there.

"Sex Trafficking"

Many describe their involvement as tied to a moral compulsion to act that results from their individual "awakening" to the "horrors of sex trafficking" (Kaila), leading to anti-trafficking activism becoming central to their personal goals and key to the ethical subject positions (Faubion 2011) they strive to occupy. As Kaila described:

> I feel like I was moving through my life, pretty comfortable and set, and then our Minister told us a story about his encounter with a sex trafficking victim, this poor girl who he came across, who needed to be rescued. He told us that there are so many more like her out there and that it was our duty to help them … and it was like a blindfold was removed. I just knew. And once you know, you're awake and you can't go back to sleep. So, I volunteered to help him with his work and here I am.

When asked during our interview how she defined a "sex trafficking victim," Kaila's description remained vague, characterizing the woman in the minister's story as "someone who clearly needed help, he could see it in her eyes. She was working in a strip club, but, you know, she was doing more than that." While definitions of "sex trafficking" vary, it was regularly defined by members as forced prostitution, distinct from and a more egregious rights violation than "labour trafficking."

For founding member Christine, eliminating the sex industry is key to eliminating sex trafficking. A retired law enforcement officer, she believes that "only when society has realized the harm that it's causing itself through the sexualization of young girls, through the explosion of pornography that teaches young boys that it's acceptable to own women, to beat them, to prostitute them, only then can we get rid of sex trafficking." Enid, representing a Jewish women's organization, shares a similar outlook, often encouraging more outreach into schools to teach children about "the warning signs of sex trafficking." Characteristic of Enid's approach is an emphasis on needing to "scare young girls away from prostitution," a point that she made when Mira was discussing the content of her high school workshops.

While Mira did not agree with the need to "scare" girls and disagreed with Christine and Enid regarding the sex industry, she frequently commented in

meetings on what she perceived as "ridiculously high rates of sex trafficking in high schools." In her definition, sex trafficking extends to include instances of sexual assault where there is no financial gain, as well as sexual abuse more broadly. This draws attention to the flexibility of sex trafficking definitions and how its use rarely reflects legal definitions. Rather, it functions as a catch-all emphasizing the speaker's abhorrence of the acts being described, thereby leveraging the Coalition's axiom of unity regarding VAW to validate a wide range of actions despite different understandings of violence and trafficking.

The centrality of sexual morality and heteronormativity to Christine and Enid's approaches became clear during a meeting to develop a trafficking curriculum for high school students when Christine defined "healthy, age-appropriate relationships" as "monogamous, you know, normal, and if there's sex it should be age-appropriate, he shouldn't be pressuring her." Enid, characterizing trafficking as involving "endless, immoral sexual transactions," emphasized "proper long-term relationships," frequently using the terms "innocent girls," "boyfriend and girlfriend," and "husband and wife." This discussion highlights the ideology that informs the anti-trafficking work that Christine and Enid engage in, which places distinct limits on what a trafficking victim looks like (young, sexually "normal" but abused, prostituted), how the issue should be understood (individual crimes with a clear victim and perpetrator), and what the solutions could be (carceral, including increased policing). In this conservative, carceral feminist framework, there was no room for a discussion of those who willingly engage in "morally inappropriate" behaviours. Those who position sex as labour disqualify themselves from being perceived as a "morally legitimate suffering body," demonstrating the hierarchy of rights and suffering common to anti-trafficking efforts (Ticktin 2011), wherein the suffering of the sexually innocent, naïve girl justifies interventions that cause demonstrable harm to those deemed morally suspect. As Christine stated in her interview, sex workers are "part of the problem." These hierarchies also privilege a focus on the local "girl next door," with the Indigenous woman/girl as absent from discussions as she is from the schools receiving presentations. As Christine and Enid's approaches continued to receive validation at meetings, it indicated to others present that their approaches aligned with the Coalition's "ethical orientation toward code and practice" (Faubion 2011), thus incorporating such praxis into it and influencing the moral space of meetings.

Harm Reduction

The work of Maria, Ava, and Willow reveals the development of a different approach to human trafficking that has changed over time. Their early approach is demonstrated by the Coalition's aforementioned public roundtable, which showcased a dozen presentations, including Maria's presentation on labour trafficking and the exploitation of migrant workers. Compared to other public anti-trafficking events, the inclusion of even one presentation on labour exploitation outside the sex trades stands out. However, the singularity of this presentation meant that the hegemonic sex trafficking narrative remained pronounced.

This began to change over the course of my involvement with the Coalition, as Maria, Ava, and Willow responded to criticisms that they received from sex worker rights activists, including myself, in response to the roundtable. These criticisms were rooted in the intersectional critiques of feminists of colour, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), Robyn Maynard (2015), and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, and foregrounded the silencing of sex workers and other marginalized communities by a colonial, white feminist, carceral anti-trafficking movement. Received in the form of letters, papers, and social media campaigns, they pushed back against portrayals of sex workers as victims of patriarchal violence in need of rescue and highlighted the role of the state and police in upholding and perpetuating colonial structural violence against racialized and stigmatized communities. One immediate response to make events more welcoming to Indigenous persons was to avoid holding public events in religious spaces in recognition of the Church's role in the colonial genocide of Indigenous peoples. Willow welcomed and agreed with these criticisms. An advocate of harm reduction and liberal feminist approaches, in our interview she spoke of the need for "the decriminalization of sex work, getting rid of borders, creating more support services that actually provide non-judgemental services, and funding to dismantle the patriarchal bullshit systems that keep us in the dirt." However, due to her perceived need to keep the Coalition together, she said she rarely "rocked the boat" in meetings.

Ava and I often spoke of the work she had done in the past and what she thought needed to be done to eliminate trafficking. As she described it:

> … we've made some mistakes in the past, and we know this, and we're trying to make things better. I was never comfortable with things being about sex all the time, talking about it the way that we do, because for me, for us, prostitution is not different from other kinds of labour. It

> is work, we view it as work. And so, I'm trying to make our work more holistic, to talk about labour, about migration, and the things that make people at risk for human trafficking. Because here at the centre … Most of our clients work as domestics or in agriculture or construction.

The "mistakes" Ava refers to include the emphasis early activities placed on sex trafficking. Correcting them meant Maria, Willow, and Ava rarely commented on or spoke about pornography or the sexualization of young girls in meetings, instead encouraging discussion about helping the migrants whose cases they managed. Discussing schools, they emphasized the difficulties non-status youth face in gaining access to education and the need for better consent-based sex education. They also increasingly emphasized anti-oppressive, harm reduction practices, including non-judgemental, client-centred support service provision. This was closely tied to, in Maria's words, the refugee centres' "human rights and social justice-centred approach [to] working with migrants and those who have survived exploitation." Elaborating on these principles, Ava told me it was crucial that:

> we do no harm—even when we think we are helping, when we think we know what needs to happen, we have to listen, because who are we to really know? And if we are doing harm, we must stop, we must find another way, we cannot violate another's human rights or make things worse for them.

Here, "human rights" are inherent and universal and "doing harm" is connected to violating an individual's human rights. For Ava, supporting trafficking survivors' human rights cannot come at the cost of violating, for example, the rights of sex workers. Maria, Ava, and Willow were critical of carceral approaches to trafficking and legislation criminalizing vulnerable persons. When speaking of sexual exploitation, they generally used the term "sex work" to distinguish voluntary from non-voluntary sexual transactions and supported developing working dialogues with Indigenous, sex worker, and migrant worker support organizations.

Founding member Melissa took a similar approach, emphasizing, in our interview, the need to "respect the human rights of everyone, including sex workers. Those communities could be valuable allies, they should be valuable allies, but you can't expect that to happen if you refuse to acknowledge their work, that it is work, that there can be choice." At the same time, she felt limited in translating this into action, saying:

> The Sisters are great, they're one of the most progressive orders and I have found the leadership here to be very responsive … . But to actually show up would upset a lot of the Sisters … I don't think they would want their name, their organization, associated with that.

Here, to "show up" refers to attending public events or signing public petitions in support of sex workers' rights. This reluctance is common among anti-trafficking organisers that "understand the limits and harm of a criminalization-centred model … [but] in spite of positions of relative privilege, the default stance of these individuals falls short of resisting dominant structures that perpetuate harm" (Kaye 2017, 8).

Bringing Everyone to the Table

Within these self-imposed limitations, these members work to bring harm reduction approaches into the Coalition and influence its moral space by, for example, incorporating conversation topics that emphasize the vulnerability of migrant men and LGBTQ2S+ persons to different forms of exploitation in a conscious effort to disrupt the dominant focus on young women and girls. When discussing eliminating trafficking, they emphasize that human rights violations result from inequality, colonialism, and structural violence, in particular gender and income inequality, racism, and other forms of discrimination. The consistent centring of migrant labourers by members that work for the refugee centre, themselves predominantly people of colour, and their allies, combined with engaging with external criticism, contrasts with the actions of white, sex trafficking-focused carceral feminist members and has been effective in transforming some of the work that existing and new members without prostitution-abolition goals engage in.

These transformations reinforce Ava and like-minded members' belief that their limited interventions will, over time, re-orient the Coalition towards harm reduction, motivating them to continue participating in the Coalition rather than splintering off. These members fear Coalition splintering, in part, because of their genuine belief that they are stronger together and, in part, because of "The Feud" (Ava), which nearly destroyed the first instantiation of the Coalition. Split along pro- and anti-sex work lines, The Feud occurred during one of the earliest Coalition meetings and involved a shouting match between opposing members that resulted in both organizations leaving the Coalition—one for the Coalition's refusal to adopt an explicitly prostitution-abolitionist stance, the other for the Coalition's refusal to adopt an explicit decriminalization stance.

Afterwards, remaining members committed to the current "bringing everyone to the table" approach, without critically reflecting on the consequences. This is why, despite the existence of fundamental disagreements, members are never criticized or censured during meetings. Rather, conflict is deemphasized by an agreed-upon need to work together; an adherence to the accepted axiom of unity that members are stronger together and that this strength is required to achieve the goal of eliminating trafficking.

Working together is achieved by minimizing differences in meetings via repeated reference to points of perceived universal agreement. These universals, which focus on collaboration and eliminating VAW, form a guiding framework for the moral space created during Coalition meetings, providing axioms of unity that supersede the disparate ways that individuals interpret and act upon these universals and allowing a greater range of actions to be validated as ethical. Axioms of unity serve to naturalize, rather than unpack, certain claims or references as common sense and well-understood facts (Tsing 2005). For example, despite known ideological differences, when Christine or Willow spoke about upholding the "human rights of victims," a discussion would not follow to clarify what was meant by "human rights" or the limitations that would, in practice, be placed on who counts as a "victim." Axioms of unity work to smooth over potential conflict and create space for the conversation to be redirected if necessary. When Willow opposed Mira's work in schools, she did not express it during a meeting. In her one-on-one meeting with Mira, she focused on the need to provide immediate support services to survivors rather than challenging the work, only expressing her suppressed anger to me afterwards.

This demonstrates the hard limits that harm reduction members place on themselves when addressing the direct and indirect harm caused by other members, and points to the personal cost of elevating an ethos of collaboration above all else. The absence of communities negatively impacted by anti-trafficking work from the Coalition's table means that the harm caused by such work remains outside meeting spaces and invisible to those who refuse to acknowledge it. These limits are structurally reinforced through practices aimed at reducing the potential for conflict between members. For example, Ava consciously prepared meeting agendas to be ones everyone would support. This meant that discussions of, in her words, "controversial legislation," such as the hearings for the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act* which several member organizations spoke at, were never discussion items. When

Melissa sought to disrupt the sex trafficking narrative put forward by Enid during meetings, she did not do so by challenging Enid directly, but by ensuring that her own words and actions reflected what she described as "a more holistic approach" in the hope that it would "take root" in the minds of others. As Ava described this approach, "We don't want to scare them away or have conflict that drives them away, we want everyone at the table. After all, we're all here for the same reason and have something to contribute."

The Coalition's goal of bringing everyone to the table and avoiding conflict supported members in operating in their own individual silos unless they made a point of actively seeking out evaluations of their work. It represents a form of anti-politics (Ferguson 1990; Fisher 1997) that relies on anti-trafficking work being treated as "above" disagreement or criticism (Musto 2013), allowing harmful myths and misinformation to be reinforced and spread. During my time with the Coalition, there were no direct confrontations, critiques, arguments, or ongoing disagreements voiced within meetings and no memberships were revoked.

This lack of direct conflict is connected to the efforts of primary organizers to "hold two sides in tension" as a means of "bringing everyone to the table" (Ava). Here the dichotomously presented "two sides" are those who support harm reduction and the rights of sex workers and those who support criminalization and prostitution-abolition. While Ava viewed the Coalition as holding two sides in tension, it is significant that these sides are situated within the anti-trafficking movement, meaning that, regardless of the degree of harm some members perceive the movement as causing sex workers or the potential for allyship, sex workers and sex worker rights advocates are not present in Coalition spaces. While this is viewed as a negative absence by some members, Mira viewed it as the fault of sex worker support services and rights organizations "for not being respectful" of anti-trafficking advocates or "willing to do the work" that would bring them into the space, with little appreciation for why sex workers might find anti-trafficking spaces to be hostile and unsafe.[7] Others view these advocates as "inappropriate" (Diane) and "a distraction from saving actual victims" (Rachel).

As a result of an absence of critique and the desire on the part of the Coalition's primary organizers to bring as many groups as possible to the table, rather than a prioritization of marginalized groups, the environment of Coalition meetings is one where members can have their involvement in anti-trafficking work supported and reaffirmed without risk. Ideological differences about sex work and conflicting approaches are effectively irrelevant, "as long as the needs of survivors are put first, because we are stronger together" (Ava). Thus,

"bringing everyone to the table" means incorporating disparate approaches into the collective moral space of the Coalition and supporting a framework rooted in undefined universals and goals, such as eliminating trafficking and supporting the human rights of trafficking victims. Despite fundamental differences, this framework is enough to bring different organizations into the Coalition and facilitate their collaboration. The limitations placed on conflict are ones that everyone participating recognizes and works within.

Conclusion

This framework relies on a conceptualization of human trafficking as a human rights violation that causes harm in universally identifiable ways, and presents the solution in terms of protecting, upholding, and defending the rights of individual victims. In emphasizing that the Coalition is "stronger" because of its ideological diversity, members uncritically draw upon and reflect Canadian nationalism's value-laden emphasis on multiculturalism or strength through diversity; of being "stronger together" without acknowledging the hierarchies of difference and accompanying critical absences (Mackey 1999), including the continued marginalization of stigmatized communities and a lack of critical engagement with the Coalition's demography. Significantly, though the language used by some members might encourage it, meeting spaces do not require members to extend their concern to those outside a narrowly conceptualized victim of sex trafficking, as there are no repercussions for not doing so. As a result, heteronormative, sexual purity-focused sex trafficking discourses retain the power to shape the moral space of the Coalition and a colonial, carceral feminist focus on local (white) high-school girls remains largely uncontested. This means that the figure of the Indigenous woman/girl that characterizes government discussions and only appears during public events continues to be used as a foil by those who want to be seen as helping Indigenous women/girls without tangibly doing so and that funds for eliminating sexual exploitation continue to be directed to carceral solutions that perpetuate violence rather than eliminate it.

In this way, to the extent that social movements are challenges to the status quo, they are also always shaped by the prevailing injustices and exclusions of their broader social world (Juris and Khasnabish 2013). Though the Coalition seeks to change the world around it by eliminating trafficking, the presence of a hierarchy of suffering and human rights (Fassin 2011; Ticktin 2011) is paradoxically reinforced and validated through the Coalition's ethos

of bringing everyone to the table and resisting meaningful structural changes to its operations. Recognizing the ways that both harm reduction and carceral anti-trafficking organizations reflect and reinforce forms of marginalization that are already pronounced in Canada and elsewhere is necessary if we are to address the structural and systemic violence that facilitates exploitation. In identifying how the Coalition's primary organizers maintain barriers to change through the deployment of a collaboration-focused axiom of unity, and how efforts to collaborate across differences facilitate the creation of carceral echo chambers, we identify sites for intervention. It is my hope that these sites can serve as a starting point for reflective, constructive changes that, at a minimum, displace carceral feminist anti-trafficking approaches and centre the need for anti-trafficking work, if it is done at all, to be led by diverse experiential and impacted persons, in particular Indigenous women and those with sex working experience.

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Notes

1 "Coalition" and member names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy and identities of participants. "Coalition" reflects the language members used to describe their work together.

2 Nicole Barrett (2014) outlines these issues in her report for the Manitoba government. They include: NGOs creating estimates that conflate prostitution and human trafficking; a dearth of reliable information on labour trafficking; and the RCMP offering an estimate in 2004, then rescinding it and offering no new estimate due to the difficulty of accurately estimating human trafficking. Estimates based on criminal charges are also flawed, as charges stem from raids based on where police believe they will find trafficking victims and those beliefs are informed by existing discourses that conflate prostitution with trafficking and downplay the existence of trafficking outside the sex trades (Roots and De Shalit 2015).

3 Examples include amendments to the Indian Act of 1876, targeting Indigenous women believed to be sexually promiscuous and engaged in prostitution, and the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885, which refused entry to any Chinese woman known or suspected to be a prostitute.

4 The U.S. State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons' annual report ranks countries in tiers based on the Office's perception of their compliance with the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act. Countries on lower tiers may face trade sanctions controlled by the U.S. (see Peters 2013).

5 The term "prostitutes" rather than "sex workers" reflects the terminology of the cited organizations.

6 The label "radical feminist" was self-identified with by and ascribed to members whose views aligned with those of prominent "radical feminists," such as Andrea Dworkin (1981), including the belief that prostitution is inherently patriarchal VAW.

7 Members of sex worker support services organizations that participated in this research generally agreed that they would not attend meetings if invited, framing it as unpaid labour in a hostile environment that they would "not feel safe or respected in" (Vanessa).

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