

**Jennifer Suchland: Economies of Violence:
Transnational Feminism, Postsocialism, and the Politics
of Sex Trafficking**

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According to one of the most common anti-trafficking tropes, young women, typically from states that formerly constituted the Soviet Union, become victims to criminals that turn them into sexual slaves. Jennifer Suchland's book commences with presenting the image of such violated victim—an image that was often referred to as “Natasha”. The writer describes how Natasha became the symbol of the campaign against sex trafficking as transnational cause, and the signifier of sex trafficking as “global specter of abjection” (1). The book convincingly depicts how influx of images, including feature films, documentaries, and public awareness campaigns around the world made international community *see* the violence and the exploitation that sex trafficking produced, but also framed sex trafficking in a certain way, that blurred its structural dimensions. In other words, the common anti-trafficking tropes, focusing on individual victims, shaped the public awareness to sex trafficking as well as the legal tools that were developed to address it, in a way that skirted the structural sources of sex trafficking.

The book delineates how the effort to enforce an anti sex trafficking regime became one of the most internationally consensual projects during the last two decades. In 2000 the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (the Palermo Protocol, aka ‘The Trafficking Protocol’ or ‘UN TIP Protocol’) was adopted and ratified by 165 parties. Corresponding measures that aim to monitor and harmonize anti-sex trafficking laws in member states were also developed in the EU.¹ Than the writer describes how these intricate anti-trafficking schemes shape sex trafficking first and

¹ See: [1].

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foremost as a criminal violation of the bodily integrity of individuals. As mentioned, this framing is facilitated by wide imagery that depicts sex trafficking as enslavement of individual women.²

While not negating the abundance of such real-life occurrences, the book draws a much wider picture. The global focusing on criminal violence framing, it argues, is problematic because it blocks the awareness to structural violence and to political and economic systems—termed in the book economies of violence—that sustain precarious labor. Sex trafficking is one of the symptoms of the economies of violence, and not distinct from it. This contention is developed by reviewing two complementing processes that facilitated the current status of the anti sex trafficking atmosphere and regulations. One is marking sex trafficking as a leading feminist agenda, dominated by images of violence and criminality. The other is the politics of post-socialism, and the transition from socialist to capitalist economies in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc. Both processes played a major part in what the writer terms “the politicization of human trafficking”.

The book describes these multi-faceted processes by employing various cultural representations, texts of United Nations proceedings on women’s rights issues, governmental and NGO anti-trafficking policies, and descriptions of feminist campaigns. The result is an in an over-all picture, offering a meta-perspective on the feminist debate not only regarding sex trafficking but also regarding prostitution, and a significant addition to the scholarship of post-socialist cultural studies, transnational feminist studies, and the field of law and society. I find this perspective particularly timely since the critique it brings up pertains to contemporary feminist controversies regarding approaches towards the links between sex trafficking and prostitution and towards prostitution at large. One approach conceptualizes prostitution as inevitable exploitation and as inherently harmful to women in prostitution and to all women as a group. According to this approach, sex trafficking is a subcategory of prostitution. Such perception is reflected in a non-binding resolution of the European Parliament that was passed in 2014, stressing that prostitution violates human dignity and human rights, whether it is forced or voluntary.³ A rival approach sees prostitution as sex work, and as a legitimate occupation, when deriving from free choice. Such approach is reflected in an Amnesty International decision from 2015, calling countries to decriminalize sex work and to protect the human, welfare and safety rights of sex workers.⁴ One of the book’s main claims is that separating prostitution (or sex work) from sex trafficking on the basis of choice and agency, a separation that the gap between the EU and Amnesty standings resonates and enhances, forecloses the capacity to juxtapose sexual labor and human rights violations, and to ask important questions, such as

² Such sex trafficking tropes are common in many other countries as well as in the US. For elaboration of their presence in Israel see: [2].

³ *State Obligations to Respect, Protect, and Fulfil the Human Rights of Sex Workers*, Amnesty International (2015), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/policy-on-state-obligations-to-respect-protect-and-fulfil-the-human-rights-of-sex-workers/>.

⁴ European Parliament, *Resolution on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality*, Adopted (26 February 2014), online: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=REPORT&reference=A7-2014-0071&language=EN&mode=XML>.

“what gendered and racialized relationship enable different forms of sexual labor?” or “As feminists, are we constrained by political allegiance to a principle for or against sexual labor in order to address the injustices workers face when doing this labor?” (174). As Suchland claims, the fact that some women choose to work in sex trade and the demand that their rights should be acknowledged and protected, “should not shut down questioning of how and why this type of labor functions in its larger economic context” (175). In other words, consent should not serve as a litmus test when dealing with precarious sex labor, and cognizance of the economies of violence is indispensable when thinking about legal and social responses to sex trafficking and to prostitution. The offered perspective is highly relevant to both approaches. What might be referred to as the Amnesty approach seems as not sensitive enough to the reasons and processes that fuel the demand for bought sex. The EU approach, on the other hand, is not adamant on the need to protect the rights of women that are already in prostitution.⁵ As the writer stresses, “Both positions convey a limited vision of economic justice and human rights” (178).

The skeptic reader might wonder if there is an actual chance to oppose or to pragmatically address the economies of violence. This reader will reply that acute awareness to the structural meta-issues described in the book and to the precarious labor they produce, as well as to the power of chosen imagery to highlight certain dimension of the problem while blurring others, is an essential starting point towards reaching better answers to both sex trafficking and prostitution. *Economies of Violence*'s exploration of trafficking's economic and social causes is thus useful not only for decoding the genealogy of sex trafficking discourse, but also as an appeal to governments and societies to develop more robust methods for combatting not only human trafficking but also precarious labor together with the social exclusion and legal inferiority it ensues.

References

1. Askola, Heli. 2007. *Legal responses to trafficking in women for sexual exploitation in the European Union*.
2. Almog, Shulamit. 2010. Prostitution as exploitation: An Israeli perspective. *Georgetown Journal of Gender and the Law* 31(3): 711.

⁵ Israel's Labor Court presents an inspiring model in this context. While Israel represents a moderate abolitionist model, the Labor Court, reflecting awareness to the precarious labor that produces sex trafficking as well as prostitution, developed legal tools that make it possible to grant remedies from the labor law realm to women in prostitution. For elaboration see: [2].