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Anti-Sex Trafficking Hysteria, False Narratives and the Rights of Sex Workers (abstract)

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Research Panel: Sexual Violence and Human Trafficking

Presenter: Lonya M. Humphrey, Wayne State University

Title: Anti-Sex Trafficking Hysteria, False Narratives and the Rights of Sex Workers

Abstract: In 2014, a *Newsweek* exposé of Somaly Mam, one of Cambodia's most highly prominent anti-sex trafficking activists, detailed how Mam fabricated her own background and experiences as a sex-trafficked Cambodian prostitute forced into sexual slavery. The Somaly Mam affair not only exposed the problematic and often hysterical victim narratives presented by the anti-trafficking communities; it also calls into question the influence those narratives have on increasingly harsh U.S. government legal initiatives directed at combatting global sex trafficking. Growing research suggest the implementation of more punitive anti-trafficking laws that focus on the rehabilitation of sex workers and the abolition of commercial sex has proven largely counterproductive and potentially dangerous to the very victims the anti-trafficking movement seeks to help.

The analysis in this paper does not deny the reality of the women's exploitation, forced sex work, or the inherent violence, rape and degradation of sex trafficking which represent the worst forms of gender-based violence against women. This paper is primarily concerned with how current anti-sex trafficking legal schemes, often driven by exaggerated or false narratives of female victimhood, have failed to deter the problems of illegal sex trafficking; and in many cases appear to have worsened the state of women involved in consensual sex work. Finally, this paper considers evidence for the consideration of a legalized, pragmatic rights-based approach towards prostitution, grounded in the concern for the health, security, and the human rights of sex workers. Although the decriminalization or legalization of prostitution has so far only taken effect in a few countries (i.e. New Zealand and Australia), their alternative legal approaches to sex work have led to lower levels of associated criminality and greater safety, security, and free agency for women. These novel and more realistic legal approaches to prostitution might offer lessons to other nations currently grappling with the sex trafficking issue.

Keywords: sex trafficking, narratives, prostitution, human rights, evangelism

Biography: Based in Detroit, Michigan, Lonya M. Humphrey is a former Social Sciences Librarian with over ten years of academic library experience. She has provided information and instruction services across the social science disciplines with special emphasis in political science and government, law, international development, and public policy research. Lonya has worked as an academic librarian for SUNY Buffalo, Georgetown University's Law Library and School of Foreign Service in Qatar, and Tulane University in her home town of New Orleans, Louisiana. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in French from Dillard University, a Master's in Library and Information Science from SUNY Buffalo, and is currently working towards a Master's in Political Science at Wayne State University with an emphasis on World Politics.