

Nov 9th, 10:30 AM

Out of the Prison and Onto the Streets: The Trafficking of Incarcerated Women (a Trans- Disciplinary Media Research Project)

Mei-Ling McNamara

University of Colorado Boulder, meiling.mcnamara@colorado.edu

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McNamara, Mei-Ling, "Out of the Prison and Onto the Streets: The Trafficking of Incarcerated Women (a Trans-Disciplinary Media Research Project)" (2017). *The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy*. 3.
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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2017 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

Nov. 8-10, 2017, Dayton, Ohio

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Research Panel: Type style SPHR content

Presenter: Mei-Ling McNamara, University of Colorado Boulder

Title: Out of the Prison and Onto the Streets: The Trafficking of Incarcerated Women (a Trans-Disciplinary Media Research Project)

Abstract:

Women are being actively targeted for the sex trafficking trade within US prisons and are recruited by a network of fellow inmates who are given “finders fees” for supplying victims. In prisons from Florida to North Carolina, Ohio to Massachusetts, women are promised housing and food in exchange for work upon release but instead are deceived and prostituted for the human trafficking trade. Some traffickers stalk their victims through public-access profiles from statewide prison websites, then groom them over months through correspondence and phone calls.

Inside the largest women’s prison in the United States, the Florida Lowell Correctional Institution, officers have uncovered evidence of debt bondage, fraud, and deception to recruit victims but feel unable to stop the exploitation amounting to modern-day slavery.

Combating human trafficking remains a top priority for the US government, yet victims are being cherry-picked from its state prisons and county jails under the watch of local authorities. Perpetrators prey on vulnerable women who may be jobless, homeless, or suffering from drug addiction upon release; they use the bond system, money, and psychological manipulation to lure them. Trafficked women are also failing to be identified by state authorities when arrested for other crimes they are forced to commit — such as prostitution or acting as drug mules — and are instead incarcerated without help if arrested.

Extreme violence is commonplace toward trafficking victims — many suffer rape and abuse by their traffickers — but their imprisonment means they fail to receive the protection afforded to human trafficking victims under national and international law.

This presentation will present the findings from an 18-month research project and journalism investigation supported by the international newspaper *The Guardian*. With extensive primary research, it interrogates the power structures and systemic failures to protect the most vulnerable through the double victimization of human trafficking and incarceration.

About the presenter:

Mei-Ling McNamara is an assistant professor of journalism in the College of Media, Communication and Information at the University of Colorado Boulder. She works in print and broadcast media with a focus on human rights, social justice issues, and in-depth investigations. She has worked for media outlets including *The Guardian*, CNN International, and Al-Jazeera English as a writer, producer, and filmmaker.

Her investigative work for *The Guardian* (“A Slave in Scotland”) and Al-Jazeera English (the documentary *Children of the Cannabis Trade*) received awards in 2011 and 2015 from the Human Trafficking Foundation for in-depth coverage of underreported issues on slavery. She has written extensively on slavery for the University of Oxford journal *Global Perspectives on Human Rights*.

McNamara holds a PhD in trans-disciplinary documentary film from the University of Edinburgh, where her work examined the nexus between liminality, trauma, and survivors of human trafficking. She also holds a master’s in journalism from Goldsmiths, University of London; a master’s in American literature from the University of Essex; and a bachelor’s degree in English from the University of California, Davis. She has produced documentaries and multimedia investigations in the UK, US, Africa, and Asia, and holds memberships in the Society of Professional Journalists, the Foreign Press Association, and the ACLU.