

Introduction

The Slave-Free Good

At the annual End Trafficking Now conference in Orange County, California, dozens of young women eagerly flock toward an eight-foot pillar emitting neon-blue light, punctuated by bold black text designating the entrance to a “Freedom Store.” The large, tented outdoor venue houses more than a dozen vendors, and a group of friends traces the periphery of tables selling products from around the world, with compelling slogans inviting consumers to “Purchase with Purpose,” before being drawn to a booth selling jewelry. The table for the Cowboy Rescue project in Thailand—where I worked as a jewelry maker and volunteer as part of my ethnographic fieldwork between 2008 and 2010—displays a wide assortment of jewelry: rings, bracelets, chokers, and earrings made of silver, gold, colorful gems, and pearls.¹ Two silver necklaces are neatly overlaid on each other like perfect Venn diagrams. They are identical except that each bears a different slogan engraved on its dangling silver-plated dog tag pendant:

“Not For Sale”

“Not Buying”

One customer picks up the “Not Buying” dog tag and inspects it closely. Sensing her curiosity, a salesperson approaches her with rehearsed enthusiasm: “This is our his-and-her series,” she says. “You wear the one that says, ‘Not For Sale,’ and you ask your husband or boyfriend to wear



FIGURE 1. At the End Trafficking Now conference, a large neon pillar marks the entrance to the Freedom Store and urges attendees to “buy cool stuff.” Photo by author.

the one that says, ‘Not Buying.’ Worn together, they are part of our global commitment to end human trafficking.” The impassioned vendor continues: “All of our jewelry is handmade by survivors of sex trafficking in Thailand. We run a rescue program in the red-light districts that trains victims of trafficking to become jewelry makers. These jobs allow them to live dignified lives, free from sexual slavery.”

A few months earlier, I was hanging out with one of Cowboy Rescue’s employees after work. It happened to be my friend Ploy’s forty-third birthday, and she wanted two things as part of the celebration: a game of pool and a glass of expensive red wine. As someone who formerly worked in the sex industry, Ploy wielded intimate knowledge of local hot-spots—the best place for noodles, to hem clothes, or to buy secondhand electron-

ics, and certainly the pool hall with the best red wine. Ploy hesitated, however, because the pool hall she wanted to take me to was nestled amid go-go bars in Soi Cowboy, where she was a sex worker for over ten years. Soi Cowboy—the namesake of the Cowboy Rescue project—is one of Bangkok’s largest red-light districts, named after an American airman who opened one of the first bars in the area after being stationed in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War in the early 1970s.

Walking through the crowded street on this hot August evening in 2010, our eyes darted back and forth cautiously before we reached our destination. Once inside, we chose a table in the farthest corner of the bar to avoid being seen by American outreach workers from Cowboy Rescue, who regularly visited the bars in the early evenings to recruit new jewelry makers from among the different workers there. We were nervous because the outreach workers posed a threat to Ploy’s job security and safety: being seen inside a bar on Soi Cowboy would constitute a violation of Ploy’s employment contract. In the name of freeing them from so-called sexual slavery, Cowboy Rescue contractually forbids its jewelry makers from patronizing the red-light districts where they formerly worked. Once settled in our seats, Ploy—visibly annoyed and understandably a bit on edge—shook her head and pointed to her right shoulder where the Thai word for freedom was stitched neatly just below the organization’s logo on the breast of her uniform. “I must wear this uniform to work every day,” she said sharply, “but my boss doesn’t let me choose where to celebrate my own birthday . . . Do you think this is freedom?”

Manufacturing Freedom takes up Ploy’s poignant question in order to expose how the compelling claims of American anti-trafficking organizations often clash with and betray the lives of migrant women workers in the global South. This book takes readers across the global commodity chain of “slave-free goods,” an emergent niche market created by the global anti-trafficking movement in the early 2000s. Following this commodity chain not only leads us to, from, and in between the physical sites of production and consumption of jewelry, but also connects the global imperatives and moral sentiments of the anti-trafficking movement with the political and economic circumstances facing migrant women workers in China and Thailand.² Ethnographically, I trace jewelry from sites of ethical consumption in the United States back to their very sources of virtuous production in China and Thailand. Understanding the varying roles and perspectives of consumers, activists, and producers exposes the asymmetric power and visibility each differentially wields.

By framing vocational training as victim rehabilitation, anti-trafficking organizations have introduced a widely palatable way to export low-wage women's work throughout the globe. In working alongside and speaking with women in these programs, however, I found that they often contested the labor processes of reform work. They also objected to the individual moral-reform requirements of such organizations—pervasive, but largely invisible in sites of movement organization and jewelry sales. Within such rescue programs, manual labor is embedded in the tactics of moral reform, collapsing transnational moral panics about sexuality and gender-based rights. Claiming that jewelry represents a proxy commodity for freedom from enslavement as well as a virtuous wage, American rehabilitation programs import a *racialized redemptive labor* in which traditional exchanges of wages for labor are replaced with affective commitments between white First World rescuers and their purported victims in Asia. Calling these arrangements “racialized” emphasizes more than the racial identity of the different actors; it names how the structures that allow for First World saving are produced through the histories of colonial and imperial dispossession and reaffirm a racial order of moral righteousness and division of low-wage labor.

While vocational training programs are presented as a technical solution to the moral and spiritual issue of sex work, this solution blurs the political and economic causes behind what activists monolithically characterize as human trafficking. In practice, vocational training does not offer pathways for long-term social mobility or economic independence but, rather, creates new forms of dependence on American aid and intervention and on the global market economy. Despite claiming to revise these dynamics, the global anti-trafficking movement reproduces low-wage women's work by seeking to replace the sale of sex with the sale of jewelry.

This book grounds and specifies some of the claims of the global anti-trafficking movement within local sex, labor, and migrant-worker struggles in China and Thailand. In doing so, it details how these forms of market governance represent new articulations of American empire. The resounding salience of market-based approaches to managing low-wage women's work is not limited to American nongovernmental organization (NGOs) and social enterprises: it must be understood within the global policy goals and nation-state politics of anti-trafficking efforts in China, Thailand, and the United States. Unique state-society and state-market relationships in China and Thailand ultimately shape in-country

understandings of and transnational mobilizations around human trafficking. These differing political economic relations in China and Thailand shed light on how market-based social movement organizations mobilize resources in different political economic environments. The same environment in Thailand that favors foreign economic and political capital—through mass tourism, foreign direct investment, humanitarian aid, and the presence everywhere of international foundations and NGOs—is also hospitable to transnational social movements and the private-sector turn to movement accountability. Dozens of foreign international anti-trafficking NGOs operate in Thailand, with varying degrees of registration, transparency, and collaboration with the Thai government, law enforcement, international organizations, and the private sector.

By contrast, the authoritarian Chinese government's strict control of local and global civil society and the market creates a more challenging environment for transnational social movement responses. Comparing the anti-trafficking movement in these two countries reveals how China and Thailand graft existing carceral structures onto the global framework of human trafficking, shaping transnational norms in the interests of the state and the market. While the state is not the target of social action for these rehabilitation projects that have chosen instead to seek change through the market, differences in state power and interest in China and Thailand shape how workers, activists, and consumers understand the moral economy of low-wage women's work. Further, these important distinctions reveal how global movements are reciprocally shaped by local politics regarding gender, sexuality, migration, and rights. These powerful systems make resisting them, and challenging the conflation of sex trafficking with sex work, more difficult. The humanitarian promises of rescue and rehabilitation—central objectives of the global anti-trafficking movement—obfuscate the moral and criminal policing of low-wage women's work. Branding and profiting from the racialized redemptive labor of sex trafficking victims and sex workers in the global South, such rehabilitation programs expose how anti-trafficking efforts fortify structures of racialized global capitalism.

MARKETING A MOVEMENT

Jewelry and other “slave-free goods” are heavily marketed as opportunities for ethical consumption as one popular solution to human trafficking. This form of consumption is racialized via white American

sentimentality for the promises of rehabilitation through labor for Asian sex workers. The promotional video for Freedom Unchained, another America anti-trafficking jewelry project that works in China, opens with an Asian woman walking through a wheat field, her face and figure intentionally blurry and out of focus. A narrator, speaking in English in the first person, begins: “I came from a really poor family in the countryside. I was often beaten as a child and I didn’t go to school because girls aren’t worth much where I come from. When I was fourteen, I left my village and was sent by my family to the city. I needed to find work to support them as we had no money. My friends told me I could get a job working at a hair salon, but when I arrived, I realized I had been tricked into something I never intended to do.”

In marketing transnational justice narratives, American organizations like Freedom Unchained, Cowboy Rescue, and others I discuss in this book have had the greatest voice in shaping the contemporary anti-trafficking movement to date. “Xiao Li,” for instance, who is referenced throughout Freedom Unchained’s marketing materials, is a pseudonym, and the story that appears on marketing materials is, the organization discloses, an amalgamation of experiences and struggles that migrants from rural areas faced.

However, because the jewelry is made with an international and specifically American clientele in mind, all promotional materials are in English and most sales (for both organizations) are made either online or through trafficking-related fair trade shows in the United States. This means that while jewelry producers fingered through the pamphlets on a daily basis—attaching earrings to promotional cardboard or stuffing jewelry bags with small cards that tell you “about this purchase”—jewelry producers in Beijing and Bangkok did not always know what these promotional materials were saying about them.

One afternoon, while packaging jewelry alongside its makers in Beijing, workers asked me to translate the English content of the promotional materials scattered across the table. In Mandarin, I roughly translated the story about “Xiao Li” that appeared on the card to which all earrings were attached. As I finished translating, a growing discomfort swelled among the group. I noticed several eyes darting back and forth between them, an exchange of glances to check one another’s reactions. When I asked what was wrong, Bing, a twenty-something woman worker, said that this narrative “distorted parts of some of their lives.” Yao chimed in, “There really isn’t anyone named ‘Xiao Li.’” Rather, they sought to explain together, the narrative seemed to be a



FIGURE 2. Cowboy Rescue and Freedom Unchained's jewelry bags and "About This Purchase" marketing tags. Photo by author.

composite of different kinds of challenges each of them faced growing up in rural farming communities. Despite the depersonalization in this narrative, the name, age, and photographs with blocked-out eyes that adorn all promotional materials offer the consumer a voyeuristic window into what Freedom Unchained claims are symptoms of "human trafficking."

Xiao Li's story—and other stories like hers—stands in for countless victims of trafficking around the world, though their stories are flattened to create the most palatable, marketable versions of struggle. This archetypal tale depicts a woman or child born into poverty and who, faced with limited labor migration opportunities and with family pressures that subordinate girl children, is duped or forced into sex work. The resounding tenor of this message is one of monolithic sexual victimization, which is conveniently and singularly remedied by the intervention of American rescue projects that provide economic alternatives through job training.

During my research, I met and made jewelry with the worker whose life, activists claimed, was the primary template for this story. A fiery and provocative personality, "Xiao Li" had a life history of work, migration, survival, and rehabilitation that was complicated and far too