IN THE 2008 ACTION THRILLER *Taken*, the actor Liam Neeson plays Bryan Mills, a former CIA operative who is trying to develop a closer relationship with his seventeen-year-old daughter Kim, an aspiring singer played by Maggie Grace. While overseeing security for mega-pop star Sheerah (played by Holly Valance), Bryan saves her from an attacker, and to thank him, Sheerah offers to listen to Kim sing. But before Bryan has a chance to tell Kim, she asks for permission to travel to Paris with her best friend, Amanda, where they would stay in an apartment with Amanda’s cousins. Leery about her safety but wanting to make her happy, Byran grants Kim permission for the trip. But when Kim and Amanda land in Paris and arrive at the apartment, the cousins are nowhere to be found. As Kim calls her father from her cell phone, she realizes that a group of men have entered their apartment. “There’s someone here,” she says, “The cousins are back?” asks Bryan. “No,” Kim says, before exclaiming, “Oh my god, they got Amanda.” Bryan snaps into agent mode. “Stay focused, Kimmy,” he tells her. “You have to hold it together.”

In the scene that follows, Bryan tersely instructs Kim to go into the next room and hide under the bed. “They’re going to take you,” he says. Kim’s face contorts into a panic as Bryan instructs her to leave her phone on the floor and call out everything she sees. The men—Albanian human traffickers—enter the room; from Kim’s vantage point, we only see their feet. The room goes silent. “They’re leaving... I think they’re gone,” Kim whispers to her father. But within seconds, she is pulled screaming from under the bed, yelling a description of the abductor. The camera is now back on Bryan, who hears breathing and realizes one of the abductors has Kim’s phone. Stoically, he tells the abductors that if they return his daughter now, there will be no
harm, but if they don’t, he has “skills I’ve acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a nightmare for people like you . . . and I will kill you.” After a pause, the voice on the other end of the phone says, smugly and ominously, “Good luck.”

Grossing $226 million at the box office and followed by sequels in 2012 and 2014, *Taken* catapulted Neeson to action star fame and activist status. Although Neeson served as a UNICEF National Ambassador for Northern Ireland since the late 1990s, in a case of art mimicking life, on March 29, 2011, UNICEF announced that it was elevating him to serve as a Goodwill Ambassador, in which position he would engage in humanitarian work to help the world’s most vulnerable children. As an article in the *Sunday Mirror* declared (before Neeson assumed this new position), here he would face “his toughest real-life role yet—war against ruthless sex traffickers” (Jones 2009, 16). Noting his role in *Taken*, the actor said the movie offered “a fresh reminder of the urgency in addressing the problem of trafficking and exploitation and standing up for the rights of children—on a global level” (*Look to the Stars* 2011). But Neeson was not the first celebrity to raise awareness about human trafficking. Celebrities, who are people well known for artistic, athletic, or other endeavors, and particularly those based in the United States, have long been involved in the anti-trafficking movement, speaking publicly, influencing legislators, and devoting significant resources to this cause (Haynes 2014).

As Elizabeth Bernstein (2018) documents, the term human trafficking first appeared in a 1976 *New York Times* article about the trafficking of persons from East Germany, and it was not until 2000, when the United Nations adopted the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Human Beings, Especially Women and Children (hereafter referred to as the 2000 UN Protocol), that the term entered global discourse (see also Molland 2013). The 2000 UN Protocol defined human trafficking as

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (United Nations 2014).
A purportedly massive and gendered problem in the United States and internationally, human trafficking occurs in a range of industries. The Global Slavery Index estimates that there are 40.3 million people trafficked worldwide, and they, along with international governing bodies such as the UNODC, estimate that the majority of victims are women and girls (UNODC 2016; Walk Free Foundation 2021b). Human trafficking has thus become a feminist issue par excellence (Lee 2011; O’Brien 2011), not only because it is a threat to women’s rights and equality globally, but, as I show later in this introduction, because it has been conflated with sex trafficking and sex work—two highly contentious topics of feminist interest. As a result, feminists across the spectrum have debated human trafficking and worked to shape related laws and policies. However, I also show later the anti-feminist consequences of their many endeavors and achievements here, especially in the United States. By centering sex trafficking and promoting criminal justice solutions over those advancing social and economic justice, contemporary human trafficking discourse, laws, and policies often undermine feminist goals such as gender and racial equality.

Among the many feminist issues that celebrities have engaged, human trafficking both confirms and challenges our ideas about what constitutes a “celebrity-friendly” topic. On the one hand, it is the perfect issue for celebrities. Since their status depends on sustained attention, they tend towards high-profile issues that are relatively uncontroversial and supported by broad audiences (Keller and Ringrose 2015; Van den Bulck 2018). Human trafficking fits the bill here: no one in her right mind defends it, and it is a “made for TV” issue that quickly grabs attention. Replete with sex, violence, victims, villains, and organized crime networks, mainstream media representations of the issue in films like Taken resonate strongly with the contemporary cultural milieu across the Global North (Szörényi and Eate 2014). All of this makes it easy, in a sense, for celebrities like Neeson to take on human trafficking,

But on the other hand, celebrities’ anti-trafficking work challenges the notion that they tend towards simple issues with specific, short-term solutions (Van den Bulck 2018). Human trafficking is in fact a complex and contested issue that requires significant expertise to understand and time to address because it is actually very difficult to define. Even as the 2000 UN Protocol guides how many nations legally define human trafficking, it remains imprecise, never specifying what, exactly, is meant by force, fraud, coercion, vulnerability, and exploitation (Bernstein 2018). While it is true that these actions may occur as they do in Taken, there are many cases where
workers in legal businesses are subject to force, fraud, and coercion, such as in New York City nail salons, where the New York Times reported that workers (many of whom are immigrant women) are routinely subject to fraudulent, exploitative working conditions that include wage theft, forced silence, and no breaks to eat (Maslin Nir 2015). In another example, news reports showed that at Packers Sanitation Services, many workers felt forced and/or coerced to accept its poor workplace safety record because the company hired them despite their felony convictions and paid above minimum wage (Martyn 2021). Given the range of situations that may fit the definition of human trafficking, it is easily confused with a wide variety of practices such as migration, human smuggling, kidnapping, and debt bondage (among other activities that involve labor, coercion, and movement). Moreover, many government officials, the media, and various advocates further complicate things by referring to human trafficking as “modern day slavery” and, in more gendered and sexualized incidences, “female sexual slavery” (UNODC 2016; Salazar Parreñas, Hwang, and Lee 2012).

Definitional confusion, combined with its status as an illicit practice that often goes unreported, makes human trafficking a difficult issue to study and quantify. Since victims may be unwilling to come forward and speak about their experiences due to stigma, their uncertain legal status in many countries, and fears of deportation (among many other reasons), estimates of human trafficking’s prevalence remain tenuous and imprecise at best (Gozdziak 2015; Reinelt 2016; Merry 2016; Bernstein 2018). For example, estimates of people trafficked into the United States each year have ranged from a low of 14,500 to a high of nearly 50,000 (McGough 2013). By extension, there is no typical victim profile or known cause. While women may be the majority of victims, according to current estimates, a growing number of men, boys, and transgender persons are vulnerable as well (UNODC 2016; Gozdziak 2015; Showden and Majic 2018). Furthermore, research indicates that while individual men and organized crime networks may cause some human trafficking (à la Taken), structural factors including but not limited to the demand for cheap, exploitable labor, economic deregulation, dislocation as a result of wars and/or economic development projects, and racial and gender discrimination often increase vulnerabilities to sexual and other labor trafficking (Doezema 2010; Hoyle, Bosworth, and Dempsey 2011; Sharma 2003; Copley 2014; Malloch and Rigby 2016; Showden and Majic 2018; Peksen, Blanton, and Blanton 2017).

Despite this complexity, US-based celebrities have joined the anti-trafficking movement, often citing “the data” as their motivation. As Neeson declared,
he was “haunted” by sex slave statistics he saw when making the violent thriller *Taken*, adding, “I had access to facts, figures and numbers of children who disappear from Eastern Europe and Asia. They would make the hair on the back of your neck stand up” (Jones 2009, 16). Yet even as he and his celebrity peers may access research and other information proffered by high-profile and authoritative bodies like the United Nations, they are not issue experts who understand human trafficking’s complexity and the related challenges of collecting data to represent it. Instead, celebrities’ strength rests in their capacity to reach and present uncomplicated, often dramatic narratives to the broader public (Kogen 2014), as illustrated by celebrities like Neeson, who tell the story of human trafficking as sex trafficking. But since they are not elected officials, they are rarely held accountable for their issue representations, which shape public discourse (Haynes 2014).

To date, scholars have provided an overview of celebrity anti-trafficking activism, considered its online connections and networks, and examined individual case studies of various celebrity anti-trafficking films and awareness campaigns (see, e.g., Heynen and van der Meulen 2021; Baker 2014; Haynes 2014; O’Brien 2013). However, there remains no comprehensive accounting for and analysis of celebrities’ anti-trafficking activism over time as a form of celebrity feminism. As I detail more in the following chapter, celebrity feminism is a hotly debated form of activism through which celebrities mobilize their fame to publicly articulate and promote various feminist interests and ideologies, which I understand broadly as sets of beliefs about and solutions for achieving gender equality and justice—related concepts that, following Mala Htun and Laurel Weldon (2018), encompass “equality and autonomy for people of all sex groups and gender identities” (7), as well as efforts to understand and challenge the social and political structures that shape their identities and their opportunities to participate and flourish in social, political, and economic life.

Analyzing celebrities’ anti-trafficking activism as celebrity feminism is thus instructive because celebrities are increasingly visible in political life, and in feminist debates specifically, where “[s]ex trafficking remains one of the most widely and vehemently contested issues” (Szorenyi 2014, 21). Therefore, by inserting themselves as leaders who weigh in on sex and other forms of trafficking—sometimes in ways that lack nuance and obscure structural analyses, sometimes in a range of other ways—celebrities are engaging in feminist politics. In so doing, they potentially illuminate and promote a wide range of feminist interests and ideologies including, but not limited to,
carceral feminism, which describes gender justice in terms of criminal justice, where criminalization, prosecution, and incarceration are integral to women’s liberation and gender equality; liberal feminism, which roots gender inequality in unequal individual legal, social, and political rights and promotes legislative, marketized, and individualized solutions; and a more structurally intersectional feminism that emphasizes how capitalism, patriarchy, and racism (among other macro-structural factors) interact to further gender inequality (Bracewell 2021; Epure 2014).

Studying celebrities’ anti-trafficking efforts, then, draws our attention to how celebrity feminism may advance and constrain efforts to promote gender equality and justice, while also raising and engaging broader questions about the role and influence of unelected elites in the polity. To this end, I raise and respond to four interrelated empirical and interpretive questions. First, I consider how and to what extent US-based celebrities raise awareness about human trafficking. Second, given celebrities’ capacity to inform and influence large segments of the population about issues of concern, I ask how they represent and propose solutions to human trafficking, reading the feminist interests and ideologies they advance from here. Third, given celebrities’ need to distinguish themselves from their peers and members of the general public, while also maintaining their fans’ attention, how may we account for variation among their anti-trafficking activities and representations? And finally, I consider what this all means for how we understand celebrities’—and other unelected elites’—political power and responsibility, particularly in broader movements to end oppression, exploitation, and marginalization. Are they merely engaged in high profile “virtue signaling,” or are they contributing to meaningful change?

To answer these questions, this book draws from an original dataset that captures US-based celebrities’ anti-trafficking activities from 2000, when the contemporary anti-trafficking movement came to prominence in the United States and globally, to 2016, the end of the Obama administration. I focus on the United States because of the reach of the nation’s media and cultural/crity industries, and because it has declared itself a global leader for addressing human trafficking. In addition to being a key destination for victims, the United States is home to many of the most prominent anti-trafficking NGOs, and anti-trafficking efforts now influence the nation’s foreign policy interventions in areas ranging from aid distribution to international security (Heynen and van der Meulen 2021; O’Brien 2011).

The analysis of celebrities’ anti-trafficking activism in the following chapters complicates how we understand celebrities’ political engagement over
time. Challenging assumptions that celebrities are merely uninformed elites who mainly engage in political activism for branding and marketing purposes, I argue broadly that we should understand them as multi-level political actors whose varied interests, actions, and issue representations are shaped and mediated by a range of personal and contextual factors. To illustrate this argument more specifically, I show in response to my first question that celebrities from a range of fields—and white women actors in particular—raise awareness about human trafficking through predominantly high-profile, media-friendly activities, the most popular of which include supporting organizations, appearing in documentaries and awareness campaigns, and engaging with Amnesty International. In response to my second question, then, I find and show that these activities, which I understand as political performances, offer more varied representations of and solutions to human trafficking—and hence feminist interests and ideologies—than we may expect. Indeed, many celebrities do promote the dominant Taken narrative and its attendant carceral and liberally oriented feminist ideologies; however, over time, celebrities also complicate and challenge the dominant narrative to highlight other forms of labor trafficking and signal the importance of non-criminalizing solutions, thereby endorsing a more structurally intersectional feminist ideology.

What, then, per my third question, accounts for this variation? Why do some celebrities reinforce the dominant narrative and its attendant power arrangements while others foment dissensus? Since nothing automatically associates celebrities with human trafficking (or feminism, for that matter), I argue that the answer to these questions emerges when we examine their personal motivations for engaging with the issue and the temporal and organizational settings for their activism. This means that two factors—their positionality and how they became interested in human trafficking (“the personal”), and the time period during which they initiated their activity and the organizations they work with (“the contextual”)—play a key role in shaping their interest in the issue, how they represent it, and the feminist interests and ideologies they communicate as a result. Considering how these personal and contextual factors shape celebrities’ representations of human trafficking thus furthers efforts to map “the shifting terrain of celebrity feminism” (Taylor 2016, 12), namely by complicating assumptions that celebrities are a seemingly coherent group of powerful individuals with similar motivations and goals.

As a result, the answer to my fourth question is not clear-cut: we cannot understand celebrities’ anti-trafficking (or other) activism as either