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*Captivated: Abolition, Absolution and the Economics of the Evangelical Fight against Sex Trafficking*

**Abstract**

As the capital of the British Raj and the site of Mother Teresa’s famous charity work, Calcutta (now Kolkata) is a mission field with affective importance to Western evangelicals. The city signifies exotic abjection, legacies of colonialism and a laboratory for religious work in their fight against human trafficking, particularly “sex trafficking.” A lexicon of objectification, coercion and choice undergird evangelical interest in sex trafficking in which conservative theological and neoliberal logics are laced with feminist vocabulary and fantasies of global human rights. In Kolkata, an economy of freedom parallels the city’s network of Indian businesses. These “freedom businesses,” which range from bakeries to textile factories run by foreign evangelicals, employ women and girls who were once part of the local sex industry. Beyond simply an economic niche, these freedom businesses link free enterprise, sexual slavery and evangelical mission. This paper examines the humanitarian and missionary narratives that the evangelical fight against sex trafficking deploys, many of which are economic and political in scope.

By tracing how sex trafficking emerged as a central missions concern for U.S. evangelicals in the late 1980s to mid-1990s, and tracking its growth alongside evangelical investment in HIV/AIDS activism and broader global humanitarianism, this paper nominates sex trafficking itself as a central lens through which the evolution of evangelical mission commitments can be understood. Sex trafficking as an issue for missions and investment combines evangelical missionary commitment with a Foucauldian, discursive power. Though echoed in individual churches and NGOs, tracing the emergence of sex trafficking as a missions focus within InterVarsity Christian Fellowship’s mission programs—Urbana, Global Projects, and specifically the Global Urban Trek, which has a specific focus on Kolkata—offers a specific avenue for interrogating the emergence of (and the economy of) affective appeals to the work of fighting sex trafficking for young, mission-minded evangelicals in the U.S. By offering a genealogy of the Trek, exploring in particular the trips to Kolkata in which college students interested in sex trafficking work at freedom businesses throughout the city, this paper presents market participation as one culmination of missions energy surrounding sex trafficking. Familiar fantasies of the redeemable but wayward fallen woman animate the many incarnations of evangelical outreach to the sex industry. Now, however, the fallen woman requires more than a change of heart, as the employees at Kolkata’s freedom businesses demonstrate, her rehabilitation is facilitated by a chance to participate in the market as a proper worker; her freedom is their business.