

CATHOLIC FEMINIST ETHICS RECONSIDERED

The Case of Sex Trafficking

Hille Haker

ABSTRACT

Taking Catholic sexual ethics and liberal feminist ethics as points of departure, this essay argues that both frameworks are ill-prepared to deal with the moral problems raised by sex trafficking: while Catholic sexual ethics is grounded in a normative understanding of sexuality, liberal feminist ethics argues for women's sexual autonomy, resting upon freedom of action and consent. From a perspective that attends both to the phenomenological interpretation of embodied selves and the Kantian normative interpretation of dignity, it becomes possible to critique both the Catholic and the liberal feminist frameworks of ethics. I argue that Catholic sexual ethics requires a reconceptualization as social ethics in order to meet the challenges of our present time, but that the shift is possible without giving up the moral imperatives of both Catholic and feminist ethics to protect human dignity and women's rights.

KEY WORDS: *Catholic sexual ethics, feminist ethics, sex trafficking, human dignity, women's rights, social ethics, justice*

1. Introduction

One of the most important aims of feminist ethics, Christian and non-Christian alike, is to fight sexual violence against women. Hence, it is a welcome development for feminists that the Catholic Church has begun to acknowledge trafficking, and sex trafficking in particular, as one of the practices contributing to violence against women.¹ However, the Vatican's approach raises several questions. In contrast to the Vatican's position on sexual ethics, numerous non-Christian feminist scholars, mostly working from within the philosophical tradition of liberalism, have emphasized women's autonomy in such a way that their consent to sexual practices renders sex work of any kind—including sex work based on trafficking—morally justified. Neither of the two approaches, I will argue, sufficiently addresses the ethical problem of sex trafficking.

Hille Haker is the Richard McCormick, S. J., Chair of Moral Theology at Loyola University Chicago. Her work addresses questions of continental philosophy and critical theory, moral identity and concepts of the self; new technologies and bioethics; hermeneutics and ethics, feminist ethics, human rights and justice. Hille Haker, hhaker@luc.edu

¹ Although sex trafficking concerns both girls and women, in this essay I will address it only with regard to women.

It is estimated that in 2012 more than 20 million persons were trafficked for forced labor, crimes, wars, or sexual exploitation. Women constituted 60% of those trafficked that year; about 15% were girls. These figures have improved little over the last decade (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2012). These numbers alone call for an ethical analysis that is able to address the challenges associated with trafficking. This essay addresses only one element of the overall debate on trafficking, namely sex trafficking (in other words, trafficking as a pathway to sex work). I will consider some versions of Catholic and (liberal) feminist ethical theories: the Vatican's normative sexual ethics as the foil for morally good (and *therefore* licit) sexual practices, and a liberal feminist ethics that argues for consent as the central criterion of morally acceptable sexual practices.² Obviously, these approaches do not account for the many voices who seek to overcome the shortcomings of these particular positions. I will show, however, that even though neither can be fully embraced, both raise concerns any feminist ethics of sex trafficking must address.

Since I consider myself a Catholic feminist ethicist, it troubles me that the Vatican is hostile to feminist ethics and gender theory and does not seriously engage with scholarship in these fields from the last few decades. Even though most Catholics, and most Catholic feminist ethicists, have criticized the Vatican's doctrine on sexual morality, I understand why many non-Christian feminist scholars regard the Catholic Church as an adversary rather than an ally in the struggle against sexual violence. And yet, because more than one third of all women worldwide report having experienced sexual violence (World Health Organization 2013), we need to ask how the impasse between these two camps can be overcome.

The United Nations adopted the *Convention on Transnational Organized Crime* in 2000 (United Nations 2000b), which is accompanied by three protocols, two of which address human trafficking and human smuggling. The *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* (United Nations 2000a) is often also referred to as the "Palermo Protocol" (United Nations 2004). It is complemented by annual reports by the UN. The focus on women and

² The term "liberal feminist ethics" is used in this essay to describe those approaches that focus on the concept of autonomy as choice and consent, as well as those that focus on value neutrality with respect to actions that meet this criterion. I am aware of the fact that much work has been done over the last few decades to overcome the narrow concept of individual autonomy; still, I want to argue that the notion of autonomy as consent is central to any version of feminist ethics that leaves the analysis of moral "goodness" of practices to the agents. As I will argue below, this easily narrows the ethical analysis to a question of negative rights, which is insufficient as a normative framework for an ethics of sex trafficking.

on sex trafficking that this essay takes up is motivated by the 2012 report's numbers (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2012). Of the roughly 15 million trafficked girls and women worldwide, sex trafficking is more common (or more documented) in Europe, the Americas, and Central Asia than in other regions. Here, it accounted for 57–62% of all trafficking between 2009 and 2012, a decline from 79% in 2006. In addition to the UN report, the International Labor Organization estimates the amount of global forced labor, with trafficking as one factor among others resulting in forced labor. Its 2012 report states that 22% of all forced labor takes the form of sexual exploitation (International Labor Organization 2012).

In what follows, I will analyze the existing ethical frameworks, beginning with two opposite positions that are implicitly or explicitly echoed in many debates on sex trafficking.

2. The Normative Framework of Catholic Sexual Ethics

In a nutshell, the normative framework of Catholic sexual ethics is centered on two main assumptions: the central notion of the “givenness” of human existence via creation theology, and the “self-giving” sexual act within marriage as the moral norm of sexuality. The “givenness” of human nature is reflected in the “complementarity in difference” paradigm of the male and female person—it simultaneously transcends and constrains the freedom of human beings. The “given” sexual difference is not only grounded in “nature” (that is, the natural law), it also represents, theologically speaking, the order of creation.³ Human love—including the bodily, sexual love between a man and a woman—is the human symbol of the self-giving love of God. Within the order of the two sexes, different sexual identities and different social roles for men and women arise, and while there is some space for changes in the assumptions about what constitutes masculinity and femininity, these changes are normatively limited by human nature. Although a slow correction process about paid work for women has taken place, the dominant Catholic gender imagery sees men as primarily providing the financial means *for* a family, while women provide the emotional care *within* the family. The ethical theory of human sexuality explains how sexuality is tightly connected to one's overall identity: sexuality is but one way to express the bond between a man and a woman; but this bond, as the symbol of God's love, entails the unconditional and lasting commitment between them. This ethics of

³ This theology of gender is reflected in multiple Church documents. One notable example from the twentieth century is John Paul II's *Letter to Women* (John Paul II 1988). It serves as the reference point to the more recent statements. For a thorough analysis, compare Cahill 1996 and Haker 2012. For an explicit critique of the concept of choice in the context of sexuality, compare Benedict XVI 2012.

sexuality explains why the official Catholic moral theology is opposed to most of the sexual practices modern societies embrace, for in redefining the unconditional commitment of partners as conditional and therefore reversible, the Catholic Church depicts individuals at risk of losing their moral identities, and modern culture at risk of losing its moral sources.⁴ It is important to note that Catholic moral theology since the 1960s has replaced the hierarchical order of the sexes in favor of the model of equality in complementarity, and furthermore it has replaced the derogatory understanding of sexuality as a (necessary, yet potentially sinful) means to reproduction with the “personalist” understanding of the “self-giving” love of the (heterosexual) partners (Barnhill 2013; Toth 2013). Since, however, sexual encounters outside of this normative framework are considered *morally illicit*, there is no way that sex work could ever qualify as morally licit or, as Martha Nussbaum, one of the influential liberal feminist philosophers standing in direct opposition to the Catholic sexual framework, emphasizes, “just another kind of work” (Nussbaum 2006). Sex work is trapped in two traditional (gendered) religious images: as sex *work*, it questions the normative ideal of the feminine role as caring wife and mother, and as *sex work*, it contradicts the moral order of sexuality, which is constrained by the normative ideal of marital love.

Until a few years ago, the Vatican rarely addressed either sex work or sex trafficking in a way that went beyond statements that were not in line with its overall theological ethics, stating rather than explaining that it constitutes a violation of human dignity.⁵ Academic Catholic ethics, too, has broadly shied away from the debate that addresses the question of sex work as a possible element of a person’s moral autonomy and identity, and instead emphasized the violence associated with sex work and prostitution.⁶ In Catholic ethics, prostitutes are predominantly viewed as passive victims who are *involuntarily* engaged in sex work. This view is echoed, for example, in the final document of the *First International Meeting of Pastoral Care for the Liberation of Women of the Street* (Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of the Migrants and Itinerant People 2005):

⁴ This interpretation is more radical than the “mere” rejection of sexuality that is often associated with Catholic sexual ethics. In the approach to sexual relationships, not only sexuality, but rather one’s whole identity, or even more precisely one’s *moral* identity, is at stake. It is beyond this essay to address the question of moral identity further. For a thorough argumentation see Haker 1999.

⁵ Compare, for example, John Paul II’s statement: “The trade in human persons constitutes a shocking offense against human dignity and a grave violation of fundamental human rights. . . . Such situations are an affront to fundamental values which are shared by all cultures and peoples, values rooted in the very nature of the human person” (John Paul II 2002, para. 2).

⁶ For example, in her influential book on sexual ethics, Margaret Farley does not dedicate a separate chapter to sex work, although she sets up minimal norms that would render sexual practices such as prostitution or any traded sex morally illicit (Farley 2006).

Who is the victim?

She is a human being, in many cases crying for help because selling her body on the street is not what she would choose to do voluntarily. She is torn apart, she is dead psychologically and spiritually. Each person has a different story, mainly one of violence, abuse, mistrust, low self esteem, fear, lack of opportunities. Each has experienced deep wounds that need to be healed. What are they looking for? They seek relationships, love, security, affection, affirmation, a better future for themselves and for their families. They want to escape from poverty and lack of opportunities and to build a future.

The premise that “women of the street” are passive victims who must be liberated raises many questions, some of which I will address in light of the feminist debate.⁷ The document certainly pretends to know what these women seek—a pattern that can be found in most of the Vatican’s documents addressing women—and it calls for the Church to provide the help for which women are looking. Most importantly, however, the document simply presupposes that a woman would not *voluntarily choose* to sell her body on the street—and thereby dismisses the (feminist) liberal position that raised exactly this question over the last few decades.

In November 2013, the Pontifical Academies of Sciences and Social Sciences held a working group meeting to address trafficking again (The Pontifical Academies of Sciences and Social Sciences 2013). Here, the participants took up the analogy of trafficking as slavery that has shaped the debate considerably since the vote on the UN Convention. The final document of the conference states that “trafficking in all forms, and in particular trafficking for sexual exploitation and prostitution,” must be considered as a “crime against humanity.” It is exactly this analogy of the *structural conditions* of slavery and trafficking that enables us to see the global dimension of sex work, which a social and political feminist ethics of (sex) trafficking needs to embrace. As we will see in the next section, however, liberal feminism is not necessarily better equipped than Roman Catholic sexual ethics to tackle trafficking as one pathway to sex work, unless it, too, changes its traditional approach.

3. Feminist Ethics: The Liberal Position Towards Sex Work

Fighting for the liberation and autonomy of women, the international women’s movement over the last century has engaged in critiquing a

⁷ Yvonne Zimmerman states that sex trafficking has shaped the international anti-trafficking agenda disproportionately. Her study (2013) of the (Protestant) theological agenda behind the U.S. politics against trafficking, especially during the Bush Administration, is very insightful. The (Protestant) moral theology she discerns reflects a normative sexual ethics centered on heterosexual marriage, as is the case in Catholic moral theology. It may be justified, then, to speak of a Christian sexual ethics rather than of a Protestant and Catholic sexual ethics. For a good summary of evangelical sexual ethics see Edger 2012.

normative gender order that not only denied women their political rights but also rendered them as the “second sex” (de Beauvoir 2012). This does not only mean that men come first in sexual affairs, but it means that their views, their experiences, and judgments are the normative foil against which women are perceived and defined. It is in this respect that sex and gender are seen as socially constructed. Historically, most of the debates of twentieth-century feminist theory up to the 1970s were directed at the central institution of marriage as the symbol of women’s subordination. Hence, feminists critiqued the normative gender order represented in traditional marriages, in the essentialist understanding of women’s roles as wives and mothers, and in socio-economic inequality. Feminist ethics argued that liberation means the empowerment of one’s own moral agency as authorship over one’s life (Benhabib 1992), or as “undoing” the normative (social) construction of gender (Butler 2004). Sexual autonomy, too, was tied to the overall understanding of women’s liberation or freedom. With respect to sexual practices, it was therefore regarded as an important step towards women’s freedom and agency that *mutual consent* had to be the central condition for any morally justified sexual encounters. Were these to take place in contractual consensual relations such as sex work, it was held, a liberal society should tolerate them (Pateman 2006).⁸

Since feminism is first and foremost a historical—and hence ongoing—struggle for women’s rights, it contributes to (political and legal) frameworks intended to set up safeguards against those structures that violate the conditions of mutuality and freedom. Feminist theory and ethics therefore did not oppose constraints on sexual liberty when acts and practices were regarded as harming women. Many articles and books have been written about sexual violence over the last few decades, and with the “intersecting” categories of class and race, sexual violence is now much better understood, resulting in multiple social, cultural, educational, and political changes. But again and again, feminist scholars have struggled with the question of whether prostitution and sex work should be considered sexual violence. As the discourse on prostitution and sex work continued at the beginning of the new millennium, it became clear that the concepts of force and coercion were too complex to be countered by pointing to women’s consent as a litmus test for the absence of force, coercion, or exploitation, which the UN Convention identifies as criteria. For even in the context of slavery, which often serves as a foil for coerced labor, historical research has shown that coercion was not the only way *into* slavery. Rather, as in trafficking today, historians now speak of “voluntary slavery” (Appiah

⁸ The phrase “sex work” is part of the normalization policy and therefore often meant as a political statement. In the context of this essay, however, I use the term in order to emphasize the dimension of “work” in sexual encounters.

2010), stressing that the mere presence of consent is not the decisive moral criterion for rendering a practice right. In the context of slavery, voluntariness does not resemble the “free choice” of contractual interactions but rather requires further analyses of the background motives. The question that haunts feminist ethics today is therefore whether sex work can be defined *within* the framework of voluntary, free interaction and outside of forced labor so that it could be tolerated—and hence legalized—by liberal societies, or whether it falls into the category of sexual violence, which needs to be fought against. It is exactly this question that is radicalized when asked in the context of sex trafficking.

Let us briefly take a look back at the framing of the ethical debate on sex work in the 1980s. On the basis of the tradition of modern liberalism, several feminists argued that prostitution and/or sex work is “just another kind of work” (Nussbaum 2006).⁹ This position is liberal insofar as it is morally indifferent to the kind of labor or object of exchange: in a liberal society, the decision as to which products or which services are commodified is left to the parties of trade or commerce as part of their freedom of action. As Julia O’Connell Davidson and Bridget Anderson put it so aptly, sex work is the “mutual, voluntary contractual exchange between adults” (as quoted in Widdows 2009).

But this was not the only position within feminist philosophy. As Alison Jaggar states, feminist philosophers who would emphasize the equal right to enter into commercial and contractual transactions could nonetheless distinguish between the negative right an individual can claim towards the “value-neutral” state, on the one hand, and the *ethical or moral* critique of prostitution, which raises concerns about the potential subordination of women in sexual interactions, on the other (Jaggar 1980).¹⁰ Opponents of the above-mentioned liberal position argued that sexuality is exactly not just a “property” that can be traded, and stressed the exploitative nature of sex work under the conditions of the twentieth-century sex industry.

Upon re-examining the arguments of late twentieth-century feminists in the context of contemporary concerns about sex trafficking, it seems that the optimism of those who argued for the liberalization and

⁹ For a good summary of the discussions in the 1980s and 1990s and the authors engaged in it, see Spector 2006.

¹⁰ The relation between political ethics as an ethics of the (legally) right and social ethics as an ethics of the good *and* (morally) right requires close attention because the reduction of ethics to political ethics only reduces the reflection to the democratic requirements of tolerance and respect. Both Catholic social ethics and moral theology argue—in line with feminist scholars—against this narrowing of ethics to the public and political sphere. Political liberalism, it has long been argued, reinforces the separation of the public and the private sphere in the name of the political and the moral—something feminist theory has long fought to overcome.

normalization of prostitution and/or sex work is ungrounded when confronted with the reality of the sex industry and the transnational sex trade, to which the UN Convention responded. Whatever one may think about prostitution in general, sex trafficking, as one pathway into sex work and often as part of organized crime, cannot be integrated into a framework of “freely traded sex” between equal partners.

Hence we are confronted with two mutually contradictory positions. On the one hand, the Christian/Catholic position argues that sex work can never meet the standard of a morally justifiable practice, and that sex trafficking in particular must be considered as a crime against humanity and therefore be *abolished*. On the other hand, we see a feminist position arguing for the neutrality of the state with regard to values or life plans, for the freedom of citizens as long as they do no harm (by using force and coercion, for example), and that sex work is not to be judged morally as long as it is based on the choice and consent of the partners.

The alternative position that I want to pursue in the remainder of the essay is situated equally in the Christian and Catholic tradition as in the feminist tradition. However, it modifies both the Vatican’s framework of morally good sexuality constrained to (heterosexual) marriage and the liberal abstention from moral judgments in matters of sexual practices as long as they are based on mutual consent. Christian ethics *and* feminist ethics, I will argue, can become allies in the struggle against sex trafficking. While they may still disagree about the moral foundations of their respective positions, they can come together in their assessment of the social structures that cause violations of women’s rights. But this turn to social ethics does not mean that we can lose sight of the individual persons. I will show that the opposite is the case by closely analyzing the violation of human rights in the fate of one person.

4. Trapped in Trafficking

Here I recount the story of Valentina, a Moldovan mother of two children who was trafficked to Romania. I will use her account as my starting point to examine the problem of “free choice” and “coercion,” in view of the human rights violations that render trafficking a crime in the international legal framework.¹¹

¹¹ I take this account from a recent issue of *Concilium*, which I co-edited, that treated human trafficking (Haker, Cahill, Wainwright 2011). I refer to an article by German theologian Maria Katharina Moser who interviewed Valentina for a TV documentary (Moser 2011). Any narrative one takes up in ethical argumentation is used in a particular way, and I am fully aware of that. My purpose here is not only to give trafficking “a face” but also to show how difficult it is to draw the line between “choice” and “coercion.” Narrative ethics, as I understand it, serves as an intermediary between description (facts) and prescription (norms). Thus, I will not draw immediate conclusions from Valentina’s story but include it

What could I have done here in Moldova at that time? There just wasn't any work. That's the long and short of it: not enough jobs. So I decided to take off somewhere else to earn some money. I had two children, my mother was ill, and we needed cash. I thought it would work out.

Someone I knew said: "The wages are good. You'll earn a respectable amount. You don't have to go to Moscow or anywhere that far away. It's quite close to us here and after all the people there speak Rumanian, like us here in Moldova. It'll all work out, you'll see." I went home feeling good about it. I would be able to send money home. We could see to the house. Plans, plans galore. And I'll be able to send the children to a good school. I was happy to go because I wanted to work and earn money.

But when I got to Romania, they took my passport away from me. And my earrings, all my jewelry. . . . They took everything I had, even my clothes. . . . They looked at me and one of the men pointed at me and said to one of the others: "She should sell things. She's too fat to put to work on the street." They hit me and didn't give me anything to eat but just let me starve. It's absolutely true. It was terrible what I went through. We had to sell stolen goods on the black market. We had to go to the market every day, and when we got back home in the evening they took everything from us. They took it all, everything. . . . We had to sell and earn a set sum every day. If you didn't bring the money back they would beat you up. (Moser 2011, 64)

Valentina, as with so many victims of trafficking, is lured into forced labor *after* her voluntary agreement. Taking her consent as the only criterion, she might as well be called a migrant. In this case, however, even though she consents to *some kind* of labor abroad, she does not give her consent to the force and violence, or to the deprivation of legal rights she experiences later on. So what happens here, as in so many other cases where women are deceived into trafficking, with or without sex work?

Valentina sees no way to flourish in Moldova: there is no work, and she needs cash. Her choice to go to Romania is "free" only on the surface. Rather, for her it is a lesser evil, or a sacrifice for a better future for herself, and a sacrifice for her family (which, as is all too familiar to many women of all cultures, is run by a woman). Her "choice" does not exactly fall into the same category as a writer's choice, as Nussbaum has argued (Nussbaum 2006). Trafficking is not comparable to the (voluntary) employment of a professor who is paid for her intellectual scholarship and teaching.¹² To fall into the hands of (transnational) traders takes away

as a reference point for my own reflection, because without attending to the personal journeys of women, I, as an ethicist who lives under conditions of economic and social security, cannot even begin to understand what it means to survive trafficking. For an elaborated methodological account of narrative ethics, see Haker 2010.

¹² Nussbaum 2006 compares prostitutes with six other groups who all "trade" their bodies on the market: a factory worker, a domestic servant, a nightclub singer, a philosophy professor, a masseuse, and a (fictitious) colonoscopy artist. The comparison is intended to

one's human rights in ways that "other kinds of work" do not, or at least should not: the right to move freely, to end the "contract," to negotiate the wages, or even the basic right to physical integrity. Furthermore, while there is considerable intrinsic value associated with academic scholarship and teaching—rendering the pursuit as a valuable dimension of one's identity and life—it seems cynical to see any *intrinsic value* instead of existential *necessity* in going abroad with smugglers or traders, leaving one's children and sick mother behind, and selling stolen goods on the black market.¹³

As we can see from Valentina's case, a clear line between (voluntary) migration and (coerced) trafficking may be difficult to draw, with major consequences for policies in both areas. The UN Protocol defines cases like Valentina's as trafficking and turns explicitly to the concept of consent:

Art 3: (a) "Trafficking in persons" shall mean 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;

(b) The *consent of a victim* of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article *shall be irrelevant* where

show that there is no *categorical* difference between prostitution/sex work and other forms of labors, but that the social stigma and the social imaginaries of sexuality construct it as radically different. The difference in degree is in fact, Nussbaum argues, the lack of social and economic opportunities, and these rather than the moral considerations should guide the ethical evaluation. Nussbaum's analysis is valuable for the "mapping" of different forms of labor, and of trafficking in general, and sex trafficking in relation to other forms of sex work; it represents the "liberal feminist" approach that I alluded to in the previous section. Nussbaum considers it possible to distinguish between the "body" used in labor, and the self. Given her other works, however, she surprisingly fails to show how, in this reductionist description, it is possible to disconnect one's body from one's identity; it results in the mistaken assumption that one can distance oneself from another's instrumental use of one's body without one's own identity being negatively affected. This is not only counter-intuitive and empirically wrong, it draws upon a philosophical depiction of an essentially disembodied self that happens to *have* a body (and not *be* an embodied self) that feminist theory has critiqued with the help of phenomenology. Most important in our context, however, is that this conception of the body is morally wrong, as I argue below.

¹³ Of course, it all depends on the imageries of the sex worker. If we speak of her (or him, if we include male sex workers) as a free agent or employee who enjoys the advantages of prostitution, we are more likely to level out the differences between sex work and other kinds of work. When we consider it in connection with sex trafficking, as I do in this essay, however, the point of reference becomes forced labor—and nobody would doubt that forced labor does not fulfill the criteria as "just another kind of work." See below for the elaboration of this argument.

any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used. (United Nations 2000a, emphasis mine)

The statement on consent in the Trafficking Protocol has ramifications going far beyond the actual objective it addresses. For if consent may conceal the fact of an asymmetric relation between the “trader” and the “traded,” consent itself does not provide us with a sufficient criterion to determine whether an action or practice is based on force, coercion, or exploitation of another’s vulnerability. Put differently, *consent does not undo or prevent human rights violations*. Rather, we need to take a closer look at the underlying structures of the relations, the institutional and social contexts, and the very nature of the vulnerability trafficked persons face, in order to understand what is happening—and we need to do this case by case.

While liberalism conceives the citizen as a free *man* who has the means and the opportunities to socially cooperate via economic exchanges, Valentina is *not* free in this sense. The absence of freedom, however, does not at all render her a non-agent or passive victim. Instead, we need to scrutinize which of her human rights are violated and how they were violated, as well as when and where the violations took place and who perpetrated them.¹⁴ While Valentina’s *civil and political* rights are not violated at first, her *socio-economic* rights were never secured at her country of origin. She had few choices to sustain her family and, in a way, decided to sacrifice her own well-being for that of her mother and children. In a country where a third of the population lives below the poverty line, and 40% of citizens live abroad, Valentina’s choice is far from irrational or irresponsible. She acts as a moral agent, and she certainly consents to being taken to Romania. But she is also a member of a society that offers her few chances to make a living above the poverty line, and it is exactly this lack of structural and institutional support that makes her an easy target for—and in this respect, a *victim* of—traffickers. Applying the criteria of the Palermo Protocol to Valentina’s story, we can say this: she is recruited by deceptive means, in a relationship of abuse of power on the one hand, and a position of vulnerability on the other, to achieve her consent.

Once in Romania, Valentina’s passport, among other things, is taken, and with this the condition for claiming any *civil* rights. Among others, civil rights concern the freedom to return to her family or move freely. Valentina’s initial illusion that she will be able to handle the situation is naïve given the nature of organized crime. And we must also note that given the hierarchical structure of criminal organizations, traffickers often use victims at the

¹⁴ Human rights are complex. This is evident from the fact that there are eighty different treaties concerning particular topics of application. However, in this essay, I only refer to the two general treaties, namely the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948), founding the “civil and political rights,” and the Universal Declaration of Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights (United Nations 1966).

“bottom” once they are working for them. For example, they are used for the recruitment and control of other victims: “Bottoms collect the money from the other girls, discipline them, seduce unwitting youths into trafficking, and handle the day-to-day business for the trafficker” (Walker-Rodriguez 2011). It should not come as a surprise that many “bottoms” are women—victims, yet agents—who, because they are “trapped,” become complicit in the perpetuation of the structures of violence.

In her desperate situation, Valentina looks for help. She turns to the police, but the officers turn her away—she has lost the right to *claim* rights, as Hannah Arendt famously phrased it.¹⁵ Then she manages to escape. Far from being safe now, she ends up in another relationship of power, this time a relationship of sexual violence—this we can identify as a violation of a *basic civil* human right, namely her right to physical integrity. Valentina gives birth to a child and finally manages to return to Moldova. Here, she is helped by the NGO La Strada to re-integrate into her own society.

Valentina, who told Maria-Katharina Moser her story in an interview for a TV documentary, tries hard to tell us a “happy end,” but in fact, her story ends where it began: “‘At home it’s . . . how can I put it . . . well, of course, it’s much better at home. . . . I’m back here again, and I’m back with my children. I’ve had to get down to work instead of feeling sorry for myself’” (Moser 2011, 71). She agrees with her children: “life goes on, even if things are difficult.” But nothing in her society has really changed. She is still left with the question of how to care for her children and her mother, and left with the psychological burden of raising a child originating from rape.¹⁶

Valentina’s story offers a glimpse into the realities of individuals hidden behind the statistics of trafficking. Yet numbers matter, too. Trafficking has become one of the fastest growing businesses of organized crime, and it is the third-largest criminal enterprise in the world. One may certainly claim that Valentina’s story is only one among many, not representative of sex work in general, and only indirectly related to sex trafficking; furthermore, it is true that “victims’ narratives” are highly politicized in an ideological minefield of normative ethics concerning sexuality

¹⁵ For a thorough and helpful analysis of the “rights of others” see Benhabib 2004, especially 49–70. Here, she quotes Arendt’s statement on rights: “We become aware of the existence of a right to have rights (and that means to live in a framework where one is judged by one’s actions and opinions) and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerge who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global political situation” (Arendt 1968, 177).

¹⁶ Depression and post-traumatic stress disorder are common side effects in the lives of prostitutes (Carter and Giobbe 2006). It is inconceivable that trafficked women will not suffer from the same health issues as “common” prostitutes. Again, this alone is an indicator that sex work has different effects on women than other kinds of work.

(Zimmerman 2013). And yet, without her story we cannot even begin to unfold what exactly the Trafficking Convention means by its criteria. Furthermore, I return to the question, fully acknowledging the highly emotionalized use of narratives in the fight against sex trafficking: who decides—and who has the authority to decide—*whose* story and *what* narrative counts?¹⁷

5. Sex Work and Sex Trafficking: Abolition or Regulation?

While those Christians and feminists applying the slavery analogy agree that abolition of trafficking, and sex trafficking in particular, should be the goal for social activism, others in both traditions have argued that regulating the working conditions is a better way to fight against sexual violence in the context of sex work. They claim that engaging in the amelioration of working conditions is the better political-ethical strategy, because the “abolitionist” strategy may not escape a normative judgment of sexuality that undermines the autonomy of women working in the sex industry—a normative or moral judgment the liberal tradition strives to evade. Furthermore, the foundational critique of (sex-)trafficking, they argue, is hypocritical given the global economic structure that rests upon forced labor; hence, the turn to regulation instead of abolition seems to be consequential to a realist ethics that can be found in political philosophy as in the Christian tradition (Lovin 2008). Such feminist Catholic ethics departs from its moral theological framework and instead turns to its own tradition of Catholic Social Teaching in order to contribute to the improvement of the working conditions of trafficked persons. And yet, the question remains whether this paradigm shift from sexual ethics to a realist feminist social ethics does not give up too easily on a stance that it could—and in fact should—uphold instead of withdrawing to a position of value neutrality toward sex work. In this section, I will briefly look at the regulatory model as it could be depicted in the context of sex trafficking, before returning to the moral argument that calls for abolition rather than normalization.

Two regulatory models have emerged in recent decades concerning sex work: the *legal model* that sets up a structure allowing some kinds of prostitution, and the *self-regulation model* which calls for voluntary efforts to improve labor conditions.¹⁸ In 2000, the Netherlands was the first

¹⁷ Valentina not only agreed but also *wanted* to tell her story, and wanted her story to be shared publicly. Ethicists must pay attention, among other things, to the way and for what purpose narratives are being told. For further information on the context of the interview, see Moser 2011.

¹⁸ Often, these are centered on “soft” self-regulations that have no legal force but rather count on the necessary social acceptance of labor conditions: the best-known governance strategies concern codes of conduct or different models of corporate social responsibility.

European country to legalize prostitution (Germany followed in 2001). In contrast to legalizing sex work, the Dutch Criminal Code prohibits sex trafficking. However, it is easy to see that the legal framework itself creates new injustices: since non-European sex workers are excluded from legal protection, the law distinguishes between the legally “tolerated” and protected sex worker, and the criminalized and therefore legally unprotected sex worker whose status is meshed together with (illegal) immigration.¹⁹ Given the *transnational* dimension of trafficking, in part resulting in sex work, the legal framework does not have much to offer to the victims of sex trafficking.

A second strategy to regulate sex work is the International Labor Organization’s Decent Work Agenda, which falls under the category of self-regulation, although the ILO certainly tries to implement as many elements as possible into national regulations (International Labor Organization 2012). One premise of the ILO’s overall position is that work is an essential characteristic of human existence, and as such it is tightly related to one’s identity. Work, the ILO states, is important for the freedom of choice, for the welfare of the family, and the stability of the society. Work is an important social practice that generates not only material security but also social recognition (Wahl 2011). Applying the Decent Work Agenda to the context of sex work, a central goal would be to establish conditions for sex workers that meet the standards of human rights. Feminist theologian Thia Cooper has set up criteria for sex work echoing this line of argumentation. She applies criteria from the Fair Trade movement (Cooper 2011), which can be modified in view of the Decent Work Agenda. These include licenses and working permits, health care provisions, age thresholds, audits of working conditions, possibilities for establishing unions, fair wages, and a standard of living above the poverty line. This list is certainly not exhaustive but could serve as a guide to improve the current system of sex work.

It is important to note, however, that in the view of the ILO “decent work” and “forced labor” exclude each other—and the ILO strongly promotes the *abolition* of the latter (International Labor Organization 2014). The problem is that the services offered in the sex industry cannot be clearly differentiated into categories of “free” and “forced” labor. For example, one can assume that trafficked sex workers are not free to tell their clients about their background—claiming voluntariness and consent to them is part of the implicit or explicit norm of their work. Therefore, the recourse to choice may be rhetorical albeit without alternatives as long as

¹⁹ The Dutch legal practice is still too young to be evaluated. The first decade of implementation is, however, not encouraging, as the official evaluation from 2006 indicates. Interviews with the licensed sex workers about their social position in Dutch society showed that it has not improved since the introduction of the new law (Siegel 2009).

they want to stay in business. In applying the standard of force in order to distinguish between potentially decent sex work and forced sex work, including trafficking, however, the ILO must implement the broad criteria of the UN Convention on Trafficking quoted above. Once again, we are faced with the dilemma of whether it is possible to conceive of sex work—were it to meet the conditions of the ILO—as “decent work,” or whether it matters that this specific work concerns “sex.”

In the next section, I will argue that feminist ethics needs to aim at the *abolition* of sex trafficking because it does indeed entail a violation of human dignity as the Catholic tradition argues. This does not mean that we need to shy away from calling for better working conditions for those who are engaged in sex work. But we cannot call for a normalization and a legalization strategy if sex work as such is a violation of human dignity.

6. Sex Work as Violation of Human Dignity

I am critical of Catholic sexual ethics for two reasons. First, it promotes one exclusive model of sexual identity (heterosexuality) and sexual relationships (marriage), and condemns any other model of “good” sexuality; second, it has no place for the critique of the normative gender order discriminating against women. And yet, I will now argue that Catholic sexual ethics can be constructively re-interpreted if the link between sexuality (and sexual practices) and identity is analyzed differently. One important tradition to support this alternative analysis is the phenomenological tradition of the embodied self (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Steeves 2004).²⁰ Together with Kant’s concept of autonomy as moral agency that serves as the foundation of human dignity and rights, we will be able to discern why sex work as such raises a problem (Kant 1998).²¹

The phenomenological tradition describes the relation between one’s body and oneself as embodiment: one’s body is not only biological material that can be used for whatever “external” purposes one wants to use it for, but it is also a part of one’s embodied selfhood. Sexuality is one dimension in which a person expresses her identity, but it is also a site of radical vulnerability: the sexual experience is tied to the dialectic of activity and passivity, the act of exposing oneself and/or perceiving the exposure of

²⁰ My reference to the tradition of phenomenology should not be confused with the specific interpretation John Paul II offered in his “phenomenology of the body.” However, Catholic sexual ethics certainly needs to discuss this approach in light of alternative approaches within the same tradition (John Paul II 2006).

²¹ An important reference for this re-interpretation is Christine Korsgaard’s work. She also links Kant’s concept of normativity with practical identity (Korsgaard 2009). For a more thorough discussion of the concept of moral identity, see Haker 1999. The philosophical foundation of dignity does not contradict the theological understanding—rather, theology links the normative concept back to the *existential* question of the unconditional love of God.

another person. Different cultures develop different patterns for how to deal with sexual experience: while some cultures emphasize the private and intimate character of sexuality, other cultures consider sexuality as part of the public and social life (Farley 2006). To be sure, sexual acts can be performed in many different ways, including violent abuses such as rape. But sexuality, like pain, cannot be detached from the person experiencing it. As a practice, sexuality can be realized not only in better or worse ways (both in the ethical and non-ethical sense of the terms “good” and “bad”), but can also be practiced in a *morally* right or wrong way. Hence, sexual practices may be evaluated according to the values people hold—and these will certainly differ among people and cultures—but also according to normative criteria attached to a person’s agency. While it is possible to imagine ever-new models of “good” and “valuable” practices, they are still constrained by the normative principle of morality. The Christian and the continental philosophical tradition—together with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—identifies the normative principle of morality as respect for human dignity, whereas the Anglo-American liberal tradition identifies it as respect for the individual’s freedom rights. Phenomenology reminds us that both ethical theories, however, must consider the fact that we never just use our body, no matter how hard we may try to forget that or others may try to make us forget it; rather, we still *are* our body while we *use* it. I believe that agreement could be reached between Catholic ethics and feminist ethics concerning the concept of an embodied self as the phenomenological foundation of moral agency and autonomy. And even though Kant is not known for his appreciation of the embodied self, it is in fact Kant who offers the best description of what constitutes a violation of human dignity: instrumental actions that use a person as a *mere* means to an end. Dignity, as Kant conceives it, is grounded in autonomy as the freedom to act. But at the same time, this freedom is constrained by the moral principle every agent necessarily must consent to, namely the respect of freedom (and dignity) of *every* agent.²² In the words of Simone de Beauvoir, who integrates this moral principle into her existential ethics, “Moral freedom is the conscious affirmation of one’s ontological freedom” (de Beauvoir 1962, 2). Whether it is in the Kantian terms of using another person for one’s own ends, or de Beauvoir’s language of rejecting one’s own moral agency as not only “ontological” (given), but also “moral” (for the sake of making choices that affect others), we have distinguishing markers for the types of actions that morally violate a person’s integrity and dignity. Dignity, therefore, requires the affirmation of one’s own agency and moral identity, as well as the affirmation of any other person’s agency.

²² For a thorough argumentation of the necessity to universalize the claim to be respected as an agent and the implication for the human rights regime, see Gewirth 1978 and 1982.

Kant's concept of autonomy means that it is impossible to use our own body as a *mere* means without violating our dignity. In addition, he claims that it is irrelevant whether *I* use my body as a mere means or whether another person uses *my* body (merely) for *her* ends. Kant concedes that partial objectification is possible and in line with moral respect—as long as a person is still treated not *only* as a means but also as an end in herself, that is, as an agent who “has” dignity. Even if we do not go deeper than this, we can still see that the reference to autonomy does not suffice as a moral argument unless it is linked to the normative foundation of self-worth and moral identity. It is this link between agency and one's moral identity that sets it apart from the model of consent or choice.

In order to clarify what sex work means phenomenologically, and whether sex work violates the dignity of a person, it is necessary to examine the relationship between client and sex worker more closely, especially in the context where it is unclear whether the service is based on trafficking.²³ Sex work is dependent on the “demand” of clients who seek the services of sex workers. Sex work is “not the mutual, pleasurable exchange of the use of bodies, but the unilateral use of a woman's body by a man in exchange for money” (Pateman 2006). This “unilateral use” entails, however, that the woman, at least while working, be seen—or see herself—not as an embodied self, but as a “mere” body.

The process of becoming a prostitute entails the systematic destruction of an individual woman's ideas, beliefs, feelings, and desires which are replaced with a compilation of values lifted from the texts of various pornographic paperbacks. A good prostitute is devoid of a unique and personal identity. She is empty space surrounded by flesh into which men deposit evidence of their masculinity. She does not exist so that he can. Prostitution done correctly begins with the theft and ends with the subsequent abandonment of self. What remains is essential to the job: the mouth, the genitals, anus, breast . . . and the label. (Carter and Giobbe 2006, 27)

This description by two former prostitutes stresses the “emptying” of a woman's individual self-identity as a prerequisite for her service. This is what it means to call her “dead psychologically and spiritually” (Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of the Migrants and Itinerant People 2005). And yet, from the perspective of the client, the service must resemble the ideal of sexuality, namely the reciprocal interaction between the client and

²³ It is clear that such an examination requires further studies. Johanna Oksala has recently shown that a helpful methodological understanding for the examination of experiences (which are a necessary source for the analysis of relationships) can be found in the way Michel Foucault analyzes first-person narratives in relation to the discourses in which they are situated (Oksala 2011). The correlation of narratives and discourse resembles what a critical hermeneutics could and should contribute to ethical evaluations. See Haker 1999 for the exploration of literary life stories as a medium of and for ethical reflection.

the woman whose service he purchases²⁴: “A prostitute can’t very well tell a trick the truth: ‘I really just want your money—I don’t want to touch you or have you touch me,’ if she’s to have any business” (Gauthier 2011, quoting Peggy Morgan’s *Sex Work*, 173). Even though her self-identity does not matter at all, a sex worker must still create and maintain the illusion of authenticity. While she may consider her work purely as a strategy in order to make her living or comply with the rules of her “employer,” her work requires of her to pretend that she wants to give her body (as if the commercial act were a “gift”!) over to the man. In other words, it requires her to make the sexual service appear to be a personal encounter rather than the mere use of her body parts in exchange for money. By emphasizing “voluntariness” without attending to this dynamic (or, in the phenomenological phrase, the necessary abstraction from a person’s embodied self that from the self’s perspective *cannot*, and from the other’s perspective *must not* be separated from the body), an ethical argument centered on consent and choice reiterates the client’s perspective.

In their encounter, both client and sex worker, of course, know that there is no moral, that is symmetric, reciprocity. But they must ignore this knowledge in order to get what both of them want: sex for money, money for sex. Whatever regulations one may set up to make the work “decent,” this inauthenticity in the encounter is a constitutive rule (in Searle’s understanding) of sex work, and if we follow Carter and Giobbe’s view, it is a serious harm of the prostitute’s identity that cannot be escaped. Whereas working conditions may well be improved, this inherent disrespect of the sex worker’s dignity is obscured when the specific relationship between a sex worker and her (or his) client is conceived as “decent.” It is also not comparable to most other forms of dependent labor in capitalist societies, which certainly are also based upon merely strategic interactions—but it is not the (partial) instrumental use of one’s body but rather the *dehumanization* in the very act of reducing an embodied self to her body parts that renders commercial sex a violation of human dignity.

While Kant was more interested as well as in what we today call foundational as in political ethics than social ethics, it was Karl Marx who famously developed the theory of commodification. With respect to the ramifications of capitalism, Marx refers to the concept of alienation, as an explication of what it means to distort human dignity as non-instrumental agency:

Finally, there came a time when everything that men had considered inalienable, became an object of exchange, of traffic, and could be alienated. This is the time when the very things which till then had been communicated,

²⁴ Even though sex work is not only provided by women and not only demanded by men, I will here narrow my perspective to this constellation.

but never exchanged; given, but never sold; acquired but never bought—virtue, love, conviction, knowledge and conscience, etc.—when everything, in short, passed into commerce. It is the time of general corruption, of universal venality. (Jaeggi 2001, quoting from Karl Marx 2012)

Marx's theory of alienation has two sides. On the one hand, it describes (and critiques) the transformation of communication and interaction into commercial exchange and commodification. On the other hand, however, Marx analyzes the disparity between labor value and market value, which creates the structures of exploitation. While the first claim is echoed in the new theories of alienation, for example, by Rahel Jaeggi (2014), or in the re-interpretation of reification in light of the broader recognition theory by Axel Honneth (2008), the theory of exploitation must be seen exactly in this context, too: alienation and reification are the social, cultural, and economic background conditions for the exploitation of workers. Seen in this light, sex work, and even more so sex trafficking, not only reifies a woman's body and thereby violates her dignity as a moral agent, it also creates a structure that *exploits* her labor, especially when a third party is involved, as is the case in organized crime networks (Becka 2011). Scrutinizing these mediating agencies is the task of national and international legal institutions. Identifying the organized crime networks and the entanglement of global economic and financial institutions with the sex industry does not involve a consensus on a positive normative vision of "good sex work"; rather, it involves the struggle against structural violence and structures of injustice.

Some sex workers may say that their use of their body does not threaten their self-identity in the way as Carter and Giobbe claim it does, and I would in fact hesitate to contest their views. My point, however, is a different one: the concept of the embodied self, together with both Marx's analysis of alienation and Kant's understanding of what the violation of dignity entails, serves as a normative framework for understanding reification and commodification in the practice of sex work. This is a normative argument that is linked but is not identical with an experiential interpretation. There may in fact be client-sex worker relations that do not fall under this description. And it may even be that there is no sharp line between the partial and total use of one's own and of another's body. But feminist ethics will acknowledge that the notion that women altruistically give what men desire is a well-known patriarchal stereotype. Furthermore, arguing with exceptional cases of free exchange of sexual services may not be prudent in the context of sex work based on trafficking. Rather, feminist ethics should analyze the elements, functions, and effects of exploitation in the sex industry, namely exploitation in the form of commodification, and taking advantage of economic, physical, and legal vulnerability. Normative ethics gives women (or the scholars working with their accounts) a moral language to discern what is (and what is not) the case morally. As I have argued, consent does not necessarily render a practice morally justifiable;

neither will it turn an inherently humiliating relationship into a decent one. Phenomenology can argue why sex work is “inherently” humiliating, and experiential accounts will either confirm or question these findings. Yet normative concepts must identify what constitutes humiliation or violations of dignity, and why such acts destroy a person’s self-identity.²⁵

Thus, a feminist ethics based on the violation of dignity requires not only attending to the victims of sex trafficking. It also requires us to reverse the perspective and hold clients accountable for their actions. Furthermore, the institutional structures of the sex industry, especially in connection with organized crime, must be scrutinized. Finally, it would be a mistake to separate organized crime too strictly from the legal labor market. Just as there is a gray zone between forced labor and “decent” work, there is a gray zone between migration and trafficking. Ending the discussion with the most vulnerable persons would be a serious mistake, because it would ignore that responsibility—the response to the other as well as accountability for one’s actions—is the other side of human rights and is a consequence of our moral freedom.

Rather than focusing on the sex worker’s consent and her working conditions, a better strategy for feminist ethics might emphasize the role of the clients and give them a public face. As slaveholders in the nineteenth century slowly lost the social recognition they once enjoyed, the clients and traffickers of sex workers may also become less “honorable.”²⁶ Often enough, in order for such transformations to happen, legal frameworks must change first.²⁷ But whatever legal frameworks nation-states establish, none of them is sufficient to address the transnational character of trafficking. It is therefore necessary that international institutions—including the Catholic Church with its global networks of parishes and organizations—critique the objectification of women as a violation of their dignity. Together with the critique of the global economic order that perpetuates injustices, and the call on political actors to hold individuals and organizations accountable for their human rights violations, Catholic social ethics and (Catholic) feminist ethics can indeed become close allies.

²⁵ Ethics relies upon a dialectical correction process between facts and norms. Hence, empirical analyses may also lead to a correction of the normative assumptions; the concepts of dignity, agency, and human rights are as much subject to re-examination as the interpretations of our experiences are. This is the reason why the “human rights regime” is a dynamic, historically situated framework that is open to correction, and also is vulnerable to being watered down in the transition process to legally binding regulations.

²⁶ Kwame Anthony Appiah has shown in his study of slavery that “honor” (or in Hegelian terms, social recognition) is a decisive factor of social value changes. This could orient the struggle against trafficking—and would be more honest, because most Western societies would need to accept how deeply they are still embedded in the patriarchal thinking that does not question the sexual subordination of women (Appiah 2010).

²⁷ For example, in 1997 Sweden took the opposite view to the Netherlands and passed a law that criminalized the “demand” side of sex work.

7. Conclusion

I agree with the Vatican that sexuality and (moral) identity cannot be separated. I object, however, to the silence surrounding the gender order that feminist ethics has rightly analyzed and deconstructed. I agree with feminist ethics that this order produces norms that conceive of women either as selflessly giving beings or passive subjects with little autonomy. In the Catholic framework, sex work cannot be conceived other than as sin or participation in sin. As far as the clients are concerned, this is correct. By focusing on the sex workers, however, this judgment merely serves to add moral blame to the injustice already faced by those who have been subjected to trafficking and sex work.

While it is clear from the perspective of solidarity and compassion that the first addressee is indeed the sex worker, this is not the case from the perspective of *justice*, which defines the terms of responsibility and accountability. Neither sex work in general nor sex trafficking in particular would be lucrative businesses unless there were ever-new and ever-more clients, traffickers, companies, and the market economy profiting from the trafficked persons' exploitation. It is far easier to consider sex workers as "others," as "women of the street," or as victims with no agency, than it is to identify the "other" side within our selves (our consumption of any product or service linked to the sex industry), in our personal relationships, or within our own cultures that use sexuality as a motor of capitalist consumption. While religious organizations cannot change the political and legal institutions directly, they could certainly help to change the gendered "honor code" by advocating against sexual exploitation and in favor of women's rights. This, then, may serve as the moral litmus test of Catholic ethics.

Over the last decade, many have lost faith in the Catholic Church's ability or willingness to do anything about this issue. It may therefore be the time to make some radical changes. First, the Church must overcome the suspicion and mistrust that any feminist or gender theory aims at undoing the Church's religious-ethical foundations. Second, it must learn to listen to feminist theologians in order to understand why they broadly reject the theological sexual ethics and phenomenology developed over the past few decades. Third, it may need to accept that not everyone will (or can) embrace the normative concept of the heterosexual marriage ethic that the Church promotes as the exclusive model of sexual ethics. It is indeed possible to re-interpret the tradition without being committed to one exclusive model of "good" sexuality. Finally, the Church needs to acknowledge that not every woman is able or willing to just walk away from her source of income which neither turns her into a passive victim nor, as an agent, into a sinner. Sex workers who have been or who are victims of the different forms of human rights violations, including the

violation of their social, economic, and cultural rights (United Nations 1966), require the solidarity of the Church, not as “mercy” but as “compassion” in Metz’s understanding of the term: not calling for another kind of asymmetrical pity but for justice (Metz 2000, 2011; Haker 2001).

Which responses to trafficking work best in different contexts should be explored together with the different non-governmental groups who stand by the women’s side as best as they can. In addition to this social “work on the street,” however, as a civil rights movement, the Church and the Women’s Movement could join in and co-advocate for legal and political changes in order to reveal the entanglement of our global economy with trafficking forced labor. Here, female *sex* trafficking is perhaps not the most urgent question—but we need to respond to the fact that the majority of trafficked persons are in fact female. The role of Christian feminist ethics in all these questions is critical and constructive: it must contribute to the paradigm shift within Catholic ethics, a shift that will still focus on human dignity, but not at the price of women’s freedom. It will, as I have shown in this essay, be consistent with a turn to social ethics, a turn that is required to critique a global economic order that produces injustices. The Church can and should collaborate with others in order to improve labor conditions, including those of sex workers. In light of the recent report by the World Health Organization that considers violence against women as a pandemic (World Health Organization 2013), we need to understand that *any* gender theory and *any* sexual ethics that does not attend to, critique or engage in the struggle against this pandemic contributes to the most radical structural sin of our time, violence against women.²⁸

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