

The Feminization of Victimhood: Rethinking Gender, Power, and Visibility in Human Trafficking Narrative

การทำให้ภาวะความเป็นเหยื่อกลายเป็นเรื่องของเพศหญิง:
การทบทวนแนวคิดเรื่องเพศภาวะ อำนาจ
และการปรากฏร่างในวาทกรรมการค้ามนุษย์

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Submitted: 14th May 2026

Revised: 8th June 2026

Accepted: 19th June 2026

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Abstract

The dominant victimhood narrative in human trafficking primarily focuses on the Ideal victim of a passive, helpless, and naïve young woman from the Global South who is forced into sex slavery. This feminization of victimhood obscures the rising demographic of trafficked men and boys, particularly in forced labor and other forms of exploitation. Utilizing a qualitative conceptual analysis, this study applies three prominent feminist frameworks, Judith Butler’s post-structuralist performativity, Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s postcolonial critiques of homogenization, and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s critical race intersectionality, to deconstruct the gendered, racialized, and structural dimensions of trafficking discourses. It argues that the dominant victimhood narrative discursively produces gendered subjects, reinforces patriarchal binaries, and structurally marginalizes the help-seeking behaviors of trafficked men. The findings reveal that the dominant narrative performatively reinforces patriarchal binaries that equate femininity with vulnerability and masculinity with invulnerability. This discursive construction severely damages male victims’ self-perception, forcing them to internalize trauma and “perform” hegemonic masculinity to avoid social stigma. Consequently, male survivors face deep-rooted institutional blindness, severe under-resourcing, and structural barriers to support-seeking behavior.

Keywords: Ideal Victim, Gender, Power, Visibility, Human Trafficking, Masculinity, Intersectionality

บทคัดย่อ

วาทกรรมกระแสหลักเกี่ยวกับภาวะความเป็นเหยื่อในปัญหาการค้ามนุษย์ มักมุ่งเน้นไปที่ภาพตัวแทนของ “เหยื่อในอุดมคติ” (Ideal victim) ซึ่งภาพลักษณ์ดังกล่าวคือหญิงสาวจากกลุ่มประเทศซีกโลกใต้ (Global South) ผู้มีลักษณะสยบยอม ไร้ที่พึ่ง และอ่อนต่อโลก ซึ่งถูกบังคับให้เข้าสู่ขบวนการทาสกาม การทำให้ภาวะความเป็นเหยื่อกลายเป็นเรื่องของเพศหญิงเช่นนี้ (Feminization of victimhood) ส่งผลให้กลุ่มประชากรผู้ชายและเด็กชายที่ถูกค้ามนุษย์ ซึ่งมีจำนวนเพิ่มสูงขึ้นกลับต้องถูกบดบังไป โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในภาคแรงงาน บังคับและการแสวงหาประโยชน์ในรูปแบบอื่น ๆ งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ใช้การวิเคราะห์แนวคิดเชิงคุณภาพ (Qualitative conceptual analysis) โดยประยุกต์ใช้กรอบแนวคิดสตรีนิยมที่โดดเด่น 3 แนวคิด ได้แก่ ทฤษฎีการแสดงบทบาทเชิงโครงสร้างส่วนปลาย (Performativity) ของจูดิธ บัตเลอร์ (Judith Butler) การวิพากษ์แนวคิดหลังอาณานิคมว่าด้วยการทำให้เป็นเนื้อเดียวกัน (Homogenization) ของจันทรา ตัลปาเด โมฮันตี (Chandra Talpade Mohanty) และทฤษฎีอัตลักษณ์ทับซ้อนเชิงวิพากษ์ (Critical race intersectionality) ของคิมเบอร์เล่ ครินชอว์ (Kimberlé Crenshaw) เพื่อรื้อสร้างมิติทางเพศภาวะชาติพันธุ์ และโครงสร้างที่ซ่อนอยู่ในวาทกรรมการค้ามนุษย์ ข้อสรุปของงานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ได้แย้งว่าวาทกรรมกระแสหลักเกี่ยวกับภาวะความเป็นเหยื่อได้เข้ามาผลิตสร้างอัตบุคคลทางเพศภาวะ (Gendered subjects) ผ่านกระบวนการทางวาทกรรม ตอกย้ำทวิลักษณ์แบบปิตาธิปไตย (Patriarchal binaries) และสร้างความเหลื่อมล้ำเชิงโครงสร้างที่กีดกันพฤติกรรมแสวงหาความช่วยเหลือของผู้ชายที่ตกเป็นเหยื่อการค้ามนุษย์ ผลการวิจัยเผยให้เห็นว่าวาทกรรมกระแสหลักดังกล่าวได้ตอกย้ำทวิลักษณ์แบบปิตาธิปไตยผ่านการแสดงบทบาท (Performatively) โดยผูกโยงความเป็นหญิงเข้ากับความเป็นเปราะบาง และผูกโยงความเป็นชายเข้ากับความแกร่งกร้าวไม่สะทกสะท้าน การสร้างความหมายผ่านกระบวนการทางวาทกรรมนี้ได้ส่งผลกระทบอย่างรุนแรงต่อการรับรู้ตนเองของเหยื่อเพศชาย บังคับให้พวกเขาต้องเก็บกดบาดแผลทางจิตใจไว้ภายใน และต้อง “แสดงออก” ถึงความเป็นชายตามขนบกระแสหลัก (Hegemonic masculinity) เพื่อหลีกเลี่ยงการถูกตีตราทางสังคม ส่งผลให้ผู้รอดชีวิตเพศชายต้องเผชิญกับภาวะเมินเฉยของสถาบันที่มีรากเหง้าฝังลึก (Institutional blindness) ขาดแคลนทรัพยากรในการช่วยเหลืออย่างรุนแรง และต้องเผชิญกับอุปสรรคเชิงโครงสร้างในการเข้าถึงกระบวนการขอความช่วยเหลือ

คำสำคัญ: เหยื่ออุดมคติ, เพศภาวะ, อำนาจ, การปรากฏร่าง, การค้ามนุษย์, ความเป็นชาย, อัตลักษณ์ทับซ้อน

Introduction

Human trafficking is a severe violation of human rights that affects millions of people worldwide; it involves the exploitation of individuals for labor, services, or commercial sex (United Nations, n.d.; U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). It often involves the recruitment, transporting, transferring, harboring, or receiving of a person for the purpose of exploiting them for labor, services, or commercial sex (UN, n.d.; DOJ, n.d.). There are two main types of human trafficking, including sex trafficking and labor trafficking; the crimes include forced labor, sexual exploitation, forced criminality, forced marriage, forced begging, and organ removal (United Nations, n.d.; U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). All of these crimes can affect individuals of any gender. However, the dominant victimhood narrative of human trafficking primarily focuses on women's experiences in sex trafficking (Cojocaru, 2015; Richards & Reid, 2015; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Wilson & O'Brien, 2016). This selective focus not only shapes public perception but also influences policy, resource allocation, and research priorities, reinforcing a narrow understanding of trafficking that neglects intersectional factors such as gender, race, migration status, and socioeconomic class (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2024; Wilson & O'Brien, 2016; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Broad, 2015; U.S. Department of State [DOS], 2023). As a result, trafficked men and boys are often overlooked, an omission that significantly affects their self-perception, help-seeking behavior, and access to appropriate support services (Hanna, 2023).

According to the U.S. Department of State (2023) and the UNODC (2024), men and boys accounted for 39 percent of all identified victims of human trafficking globally in 2022. That same year, the proportion of victims trafficked for forced labor (42 percent) exceeded those trafficked for sexual exploitation (36 percent) (UNODC, 2024). Between 2004 and 2020, the number of boys identified as trafficking victims quintupled, growing at a faster rate than

any other demographic group, including women and girls (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Men are victims of all forms of trafficking, including labor trafficking, sexual trafficking, online sexual exploitation, and child sexual exploitation (UNOCD, 2024; Davis et al., 2022). However, accurate data on male victims remains limited because men are often misidentified by authorities or fail to report their victimization due to social stigma and gendered expectations (Kiss & Zimmer, 2019). Furthermore, men's involvement in commercial sex is frequently assumed to be voluntary (U.S. Department of State, 2023). While women and girls are often labeled as prostitutes or victims, men and boys are described as gigolos or romantic entrepreneurs (Hanna, 2023), further reinforcing gendered stereotypes.

This study employs a qualitative, conceptual approach grounded in critical feminist discourse analysis. Rather than collecting empirical field data, the methodology centers on the textual and theoretical deconstruction of the dominant victimhood narrative in human trafficking, drawing on seven academic articles, including Cojocaru (2015), Richards & Reid (2015), Forringer-Beal (2022), Wilson & O'Brien (2016), Chetry & Pande (2019), Board (2015), and Hammes (2023). It also employs a tripartite theoretical framework comprising Butler's performativity, Mohanty's postcolonial critique, and Crenshaw's intersectionality to investigate the feminization of victimhood in the dominant victimhood narrative of human trafficking and how it discursively produces gendered subjects, reinforces patriarchal binaries, and structurally marginalizes the help-seeking behaviors of trafficked men.

The Dominant Victimhood Narrative

The dominant victimhood narrative in human trafficking depicts a weak, vulnerable, naïve, and young woman from low-income status in the Global South, coerced, controlled, or enslaved to sell sex abroad to unknown perpetrators or immoral men (Cojocaru, 2015; Richards & Reid, 2015; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Wilson & O'Brien, 2016; Chetry & Pande, 2019; Board,

2015; Hammes, 2023). Similar stories include girls sold into prostitution or suffering under physical labor due to debt bondage (Wilson & O'Brien, 2016). The dominant victimhood narrative creates the feminization of victimhood, where women are seen primarily as victims based on the narrative that is repeated in anti-trafficking campaigns, academic discourse, media reporting, law, international policies, and political forums (Wilson & O'Brien, 2016; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Broad, 2015). The narrative shapes debates among feminist scholars, policymakers, and government authorities on issues of choice, consent, and violence (Chetry & Pande, 2019).

Forringer-Beal (2022) argues that this perfect narrative creates an 'Ideal Victim,' a term coined by Nils Christie, in which a weak, blameless victim is portrayed as oppressed by a powerful, overbearing offender to gain public sympathy (Christie, 1986; Wilson & O'Brien, 2016). The construction of the Ideal Victim can help mobilize resources and public support, but it ignores other victims who do not conform to this concept and erodes their agency (Wilson & O'Brien, 2016; Hammes, 2023).

When discussing human trafficking, feminist perspectives are often divided between two main opposing viewpoints: the neo-abolitionist (a branch of radical feminism) and the pro-rights (liberal feminist) positions on prostitution and sex trafficking. Neo-abolitionist feminists argue that all women engaged in commercial sex are trafficked and exploited, framing sex work and sex trafficking as forms of violence against women (Chetry & Pande, 2019; Kamler, 2019). Consequently, they call for the abolition of commercial sex, asserting that any form of forced labor undermines individuals' bodily autonomy and perpetuates existing hierarchies of consent and self-determination (Chetry & Pande, 2019; Kamler, 2019; Hammes, 2023). The neo-abolitionist feminists also use new media and literature to shape the narrative of the 'victims' in brothels, claiming that the narrative is accurate, and even go further to use a lower standard of evidence and analysis to generate scholarly policy literature to fit their narrative (Cojocaru, 2015). In contrast, pro-rights feminists

argue that not all women in commercial sex are trafficked (Chetry & Pande, 2019). They advocate for the legalization and regulation of sex work, arguing that improving working conditions and labor protections for sex workers can reduce the dangers and vulnerabilities associated with the industry (Chetry & Pande, 2019). The views of both feminists feed into the feminization of victimhood that negatively affects women and trafficked victims of other genders by overly focusing on victimized, helpless women and creating women as the Ideal Victim.

Historically, attention on human trafficking can be traced back to the social and moral panic on white slavery in the late 19th century in Europe and America (Chetry & Pande, 2019). White slavery focuses on the narrative of women or girls being abducted and forced into prostitution in South America, Africa, or ‘the Orient’ by non-Western men or other subalterns; this also constitutes an Ideal Victim, and it created outrage between 1907 and 1913 to advocate on this issue (Chetry & Pande, 2019). The discourse of white slavery was based on prostitution, which set a stage for a moral panic about ‘white slave trade’; this has created a need to protect white women from seduction and abduction by the ‘Other’ (Chetry & Pande, 2019).

The narrative redefines human trafficking as a specific threat to women as well as feminized victimhood to women, which contributes to how policymakers conceptualize the issue of human trafficking, where most interest is on women and girls (Wilson & O’Brien, 2016; Hanna, 2023; Forringer-Beal, 2022). The trafficking narratives privilege a feminine ‘Ideal Victim,’ marginalizing male victims and reinforcing patriarchal ideas (Blume, 2015). An example of this is that most policies and resources are allocated to female trafficked victims (USAID Thailand Counter Trafficking in Persons & Winrock International, 2019). For example, the Palermo Protocol is an international treaty that combats and punishes human trafficking and provides a universal definition of human trafficking (Chetry & Pande, 2019). While the treaties claim they apply to all genders, their language focuses on women

and children (Chetry & Pande, 2019).

Moreover, the dominant victimhood narrative oversimplifies the complexity and diversity of human trafficking experiences, reducing them to a single, linear story that strips victims and survivors of their agency (Broad, 2015; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Hammes, 2023). In reality, the lives of trafficked individuals are far more complex, marked by overlapping social, economic, and structural vulnerabilities that remain untold and unseen by the public (Hanna, 2023). This narrow depiction not only silences women's agency but also erases the visibility of male victims, reinforcing gendered assumptions about who can be recognized as a victim (Broad, 2015; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Hammes, 2023).

Raghavan (2020) investigates the “victim-agent” binary in the context of sexual violence in India. She argues that the dominant legal framework, the state, and feminist discourses produce women as either passive victims or capable agents, but never both simultaneously (Raghavan, 2020). This divide allows the state to treat women or subaltern groups as powerless victims in order to justify strict control and punishment of marginalized groups through greater monitoring (Raghavan, 2020). At the same time, subaltern subjects who exhibit agency are often denied the status of victims as their resistance is reinterpreted as their own fault (Raghavan, 2020). Raghavan (2020) challenges these official views and shows that agency often grows out of experiences of harm, not apart from them. Raghavan's work speaks to the complexity of the reality of human trafficking as the narrative often reduces to the “victim-agent” binary, but as Raghavan investigates further, the line is not clear. She also highlighted the feminization of victimhood and the complexity Indian women have to navigate by being seen as either a victim or an agent.

The narrative for male trafficked victims does not reflect the complexity and diversity of their experiences (Broad, 2015; Forringer-Beal, 2022). The narrative for male victims is often associated with young boys who are coerced or enslaved into being a child soldier, or forced begging, or men being exploited

for their labor (Wilson & O'Brien, 2016). Their victimhood is associated with hegemonic masculinity traits, such as using their strength. The narrative of young boys, like the dominant victimhood narrative of young girls, does not show the complexity and threat that male trafficked victims faced; instead, it creates an image of victimization of children, which further pushes the agenda of the urgency of human trafficking as a political problem, not an underlying structural violence problem (Wilson & O'Brien, 2016).

Adult men, on the other hand, do not make an Ideal Victim, as they do not fit into Christie's theory of a weak and blameless victim (Christie, 1986; Wilson & O'Brien, 2016). This may stem from a societal belief as well as social and cultural norms that men are the perpetrators or that men and boys are strong and invulnerable to sexual exploitation (U.S. Department of State, 2023; Davis, Glotfelty, & Miles, 2017). Additionally, gender stereotypes hinder the identification process of male victims because society does not perceive men as weak (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Because of this belief, sexual violence against men and boys is often ignored in policy and programs, and organizations that provide support for male victims are frequently left under-supported (Davis, Glotfelty, & Miles, 2017). For instance, in the USAID Thailand Counter Trafficking in Persons & Winrock International's report (2019), it states that government officials often disregard men as trafficked victims and only see women as trafficked victims, as they think men are tough enough to handle difficult work conditions. In addition, this has affected men's ability to identify themselves as victims and receive protection and support (USAID Thailand Counter Trafficking in Persons & Winrock International, 2019; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

According to ECPAT International (2021), several factors heighten the risk of trafficking among male victims, including extreme poverty, cultural norms that permit adults to touch or play with boys' genitals during infancy or early childhood, exposure to pornography and the Internet, and social taboos around sex and sexuality. Additional vulnerabilities include belonging

to an ethnic minority, living with disabilities, economic hardship, substance or alcohol misuse, peer involvement in sexual exploitation, and residing in areas where sex services are evident (ECPAT International, 2021).

Trafficked Male Self-Perception and Support-Seeking Behaviors

Men and boys face greater challenges in disclosing their vulnerabilities or experiences of abuse and exploitation compared to women and girls (ECPAT International, 2021; Davis et al., 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2023). Gender norms and cultural expectations play a central role in this reluctance to disclose (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Deep-rooted taboos surrounding sex and sexuality make it difficult for men and boys to open up to service providers, whom they may perceive as unsympathetic or dismissive (Davis et al., 2022). Moreover, men identified as sex trafficking victims face multiple layers of stigma, including (1) being labeled as LGBTQIA+, (2) being perceived as feminine, (3) feeling guilty for experiencing pleasure, (4) feeling shame for failing to prevent abuse, and (5) fearing others' attitudes and the broader taboo around male sexual violence (ECPAT International, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2023). This stigma is reinforced by gender stereotypes that dictate men must be strong, stoic, and in control (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Consequently, many men internalize their experiences as “bad luck” or believe they are at fault for being exploited. These self-perceptions, combined with shame, guilt, and fear of judgment, further restrict their willingness to seek help (ECPAT International, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

When men do attempt to seek support, they often express a strong preference for privacy and anonymity, noting that the option to report confidentially would make disclosure easier (Davis et al., 2022). However, many feel judged by service providers, believe staff do not care about them, or assume they are ineligible for services (Davis et al., 2022). Even when identified by authorities, men often do not receive adequate psychosocial support due to systemic biases that frame men primarily as economic migrants rather than

victims of trafficking (USAID Thailand Counter Trafficking in Persons & Winrock International, 2019). This imbalance reflects a broader victimhood narrative that casts women as weak, vulnerable, and deserving of protection, while excluding men from this framework (Cojocar, 2015; Richards & Reid, 2015). As a result, male survivors of trafficking remain largely invisible within anti-trafficking and support systems.

Research by Davis et al. (2022) on the online and offline sexual exploitation of males in Northern Thailand found that most men choose to do nothing after a negative incident, while only a small number report their experiences, either to friends or family, or to authorities such as the police and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In Thailand, masculinity is shaped by hegemonic masculinity and emerging modern interpretations. The hegemonic masculinity ideal in Thailand traditionally values strength, dominance, social resilience, sexual virility, and the role of the family provider; this is called *luk pu chai* (“real man,” as a direct translation) (Sukumary & Felix, 2026; Davis & Fiss, 2016; Pack, 2011). Traditionally, bonds are created in spaces that excluded women, such as monkhood or Muay Thai, and there are practices that solidified manhood by having a ‘minor wife’ (*mia noi*) or visiting brothels as a rite of passage (Sukumary & Felix, 2026). Contemporary Thai masculinity among Gen Z (people born between 1997 and 2012) is neither entirely traditional nor entirely progressive (Sukumary & Felix, 2026). Young men are embracing soft-masculinity traits, such as warmth, empathy, and emotional openness, heavily influenced by the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*), which emphasizes a polished, emotional male aesthetic (Sukumary & Felix, 2026). They also reject the toxic traits such as bigamy/polygamy and overt aggression and lean towards mutual respect and gender equality (Sukumary & Felix, 2026).

Traditional Thai masculinity traits assume that men and boys are strong and capable of protecting themselves; as a result, these norms obscure the reality of male victimization, in which self-identification is viewed as a sign of weakness (Davis & Fiss, 2016; Miles et al., 2024). In the sex trade, some men

perform ‘exaggerated masculinity’ such as maintaining a ‘top only’ sexual position to reclaim their authority and distance themselves from feminine connotations (Duval et al., 2026; Jirattikorn & Tangmunkongvorakul, 2023).

Analysis

Post-structuralist Feminist View (*Butler*)

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993), Butler argues that gender is performative, a process sustained through repeated social acts and discourses that produce and reproduce gender norms (1990; 1993). When applied to human trafficking, this concept reveals how the feminization of victimhood in the narrative itself performs gender. Both neo-abolitionist (a branch of radical feminism) and pro-rights (liberal feminism) perspectives have unconsciously centered human trafficking around femininity by placing women, particularly “innocent” and “pure” women, at the heart of the narrative while overlooking victims of other genders (Chetry & Pande, 2019). This framing not only constructs the “feminine woman” as the face of victimhood but also discursively assigns her traits of passivity, vulnerability, and purity, thereby producing gendered women under the discourse.

Such narratives perpetuate the conflation of trafficking with sex trafficking and sex trafficking with “women’s issues,” even though trafficking is a transnational crime that exploits individuals of any gender for labor, services, or commercial sex across local, national, and global contexts (Butler, 1993). By feminizing the issue, society and institutions inadvertently make it more difficult for victims of other genders, particularly men and boys, to seek help or be recognized when they do not fit into the prescribed image of the Ideal Victim (Wilson & O’Brien, 2016).

Christie’s (1986) concept of the Ideal Victim further reinforces this performative construction of femininity. Within this discourse, femininity is

equated with weakness, passivity, and dependence, traits repeatedly inscribed onto women until they appear “natural” (Wilson & O’Brien, 2016). Policymakers, NGOs, and media actors, by adopting and reproducing this framework, inadvertently participate in the performative reproduction of gender norms that define who can be recognized as a “legitimate” victim (Wilson & O’Brien, 2016; Hanna, 2023; Forringer-Beal, 2022). As a result, both female and male victims who deviate from this narrative become socially unintelligible, while men are rendered invisible because masculinity is socially constructed as incompatible with victimhood (Butler, 1993; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Through these discursive processes, language does not merely describe gender but actively produces it (Butler, 1993), reinforcing the association of femininity with vulnerability and victimhood (Hammes, 2023).

Historically, this gendered construction of trafficking narratives can be traced back to the 19th-century “white slavery” panic, which centered on the abduction of white women by foreign men (Chetry & Pande, 2019). These stories framed men as predatory agents and women as passive victims, reiterating gendered and racialized hierarchies of power (Chetry & Pande, 2019). The persistence of such linguistic performances reflects how deeply these binaries remain reaffirmed, shaping both public imagination and policy responses to trafficking (Butler, 1993). This explains why men and boys are often ignored in policies and programs (Davis, Glotfelty, & Miles, 2017).

Extending Butler’s framework (1993) to male victims of trafficking further illuminates how gender norms shape men’s behavior and self-perception. Societal expectations that equate masculinity with strength, stoicism, and control discourage men from acknowledging vulnerability or seeking assistance (U.S. Department of State, 2023). These gender stereotypes and norms are discursively sustained when men hesitate to identify as victims and when institutions, including law enforcement and service providers, expect men to “perform” resilience (Butler, 1993; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

On a subconscious level, men may internalize these expectations

and perform masculinity by rejecting victimhood, fearing that admitting vulnerability would signify weakness, as seen in the example of ‘top only’ sexual position of Thai men in the Thai sex trade (Butler, 1993; ECPAT International, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2023; Duval et al., 2026; Jirattikorn & Tangmunkongvorakul, 2023). This behavior demonstrates how gender performativity operates through self-regulation: men reproduce hegemonic masculinity by aligning with social norms that discourage emotional expression and vulnerability (Butler, 1993; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Consequently, these performances not only limit men’s access to services and protection but also uphold a gendered social order that privileges heteronormative ideals of strength, dominance, and control (Butler, 1993).

Postcolonial and Third World Feminist View (*Mohanty*)

Mohanty’s (1984) *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* challenges Western feminist scholarship’s view of Third World women as a singular group and categorizes them by their victimization and powerlessness. In the dominant victimhood narrative of human trafficking, both neo-abolitionist and pro-rights feminist approaches universalized the experiences of “Third World women” by portraying them as a homogenous and victimized group, defined primarily through oppression and sexual exploitation. Within the dominant human trafficking narrative, these women are constructed as passive subjects in need of rescue, their complexity and agency erased under a singular label of victimhood (Mohanty, 1984). By collapsing all trafficked victims into the category of sex trafficking, such frameworks not only obscure the diverse realities of trafficking but also harm victims who do not fit this narrative, whether women engaged in non-sexual forms of labor exploitation or men who remain unseen within it (Mohanty, 1984; Broad, 2015; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Hammes, 2023). This narrow representation silences women’s agency while simultaneously erasing male victims, reinforcing the gendered assumption that only women can be victims and only men can

be perpetrators (Broad, 2015; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Hammes, 2023). It also reaffirmed the feminization of victimhood.

In this narrative, the trafficked woman exists almost exclusively as an object of suffering, her body representing pain and purity, rather than as a speaking, political subject (Mohanty, 1984). This framing reproduces patriarchal ideals that deny women's agency and reproduce binary gender roles: women as victims and men as active, dominant agents (Mohanty, 1984). Mohanty (1984) highlights the importance of contextualizing women's lived experiences across diverse cultural, social, and economic settings rather than treating them as interchangeable. This is a critical point that Butler (1990, 1993) tends to overlook. While Butler illuminates how gender is performed and produced through discourse, she gives less attention to how these performances are situated within particular social and geopolitical contexts that shape women's everyday realities (Mohanty, 1984).

Repetition of the same victimhood imagery across media, literature, and advocacy campaigns has further entrenched the archetype of the "naïve, innocent Third World woman" who is trafficked for sex (Mohanty, 1984; Wilson & O'Brien, 2016). Such portrayals not only reinforce colonial and racial hierarchies but also contribute to the construction of "the Other," a generalized image of victimhood that homogenizes the experiences of all trafficked people as that of a singular, sexually exploited woman from the Global South (Mohanty, 1984). This alienates victims who fall outside this archetype, particularly men and boys, making it difficult for them to be recognized or receive appropriate support and protection.

Mohanty (1984) would urge actors involved in shaping anti-trafficking discourse, including policymakers, academics, NGOs, and media, to acknowledge both male and female experiences of trafficking. Research demonstrates that male victims often face heightened barriers to disclosing their experiences due to stigma, shame, and gendered expectations of strength and control (ECPAT International, 2021; Davis et al., 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

These examples underscore the necessity of understanding trafficking through an intersectional and contextual lens, differentiating victims' experiences by gender, race, class, and type of trafficking, since individuals possess distinct needs, challenges, and forms of agency (Mohanty, 1984).

This is also where pro-rights (liberal) feminism falls short. While its advocacy for legalized sex work and improved labor conditions has been instrumental in challenging moralistic narratives, it often assumes that legal protections based on Western frameworks can be universally applied (Chetry & Pande, 2019). Such assumptions overlook how laws can be misused or fail to protect marginalized groups, especially male trafficked victims, who are frequently misidentified even when legal frameworks exist (Chetry & Pande, 2019; ECPAT International, 2021). Mohanty (1984) reminds us that without grounding advocacy in the lived realities and agency of diverse victims, feminist interventions risk reproducing the same colonial and patriarchal hierarchies they seek to dismantle.

Critical Race Feminist View (*Crenshaw*)

In *Mapping the Margins*, Crenshaw (1991) explores how race and gender intersect to shape the multifaceted dimensions of violence against women of color and examines three types of intersectionality: structural, political, and representational. When neo-abolitionist feminists portray trafficked women exclusively through the lens of helplessness and innocence, they engage in what Crenshaw (1991) defines as representational intersectionality, the failure to capture the multidimensional realities of those affected by overlapping systems of oppression. This one-dimensional portrayal not only silences women's agency but also renders male victims invisible, reinforcing the gendered assumption that victimhood is inherently feminine (Broad, 2015; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Hammes, 2023).

Similarly, pro-rights (liberal) feminists, while advocating for legislative reform and improved working conditions, often overlook the intersecting

factors of class, race, gender, and economic inequality that shape individuals' vulnerability to trafficking (Chetry & Pande, 2019). By focusing narrowly on sex work as the site of exploitation, these frameworks risk ignoring how structural inequalities, such as poverty, migration, and racial discrimination, intersect with gender to produce different forms of precarity. Crenshaw's (1991) framework reminds us that these intersecting dimensions of oppression must be considered collectively to understand how systems of power marginalize people differently across contexts.

Men, too, experience representational intersectionality in the human trafficking narrative. Crenshaw (1991) discusses how race, gender, and sexuality intersect to produce and reinforce harmful cultural stereotypes. Historically, men have been depicted primarily as perpetrators rather than as potential victims, a stereotype dating back to the 19th-century "white slavery" discourse (Chetry & Pande, 2019). This historical narrative continues to shape modern understandings of trafficking, positioning men outside the realm of victimhood and contributing to their ongoing misidentification by both society and authorities (U.S. Department of State, 2023; USAID Thailand Counter Trafficking in Persons & Winrock International, 2019). As a result, men who experience trafficking, whether for labor, forced begging, or sexual exploitation, are often excluded from recognition, support services, and justice.

Men's experiences also reveal another layer of structural intersectionality, a complex interplay of race, language, gender, hegemonic masculinity, societal expectations, and economic background (Crenshaw, 1991). These intersecting forces not only increase their vulnerability to trafficking but also limit their capacity to seek help or express distress, as they are pressured to conform to dominant masculine ideals of strength and control. The social construction of masculinity operates as both a protective mask and a mechanism of silencing, shaping men's self-perception and behavior within systems that deny them recognition as victims (Crenshaw, 1991; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The help-seeking behaviors of trafficked men illustrate how hegemonic

masculinity intersects with other structural forces to form a distinct configuration of oppression, one that differs from the gendered, racial, and economic inequalities often analyzed in women's experiences (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Crenshaw, 1991). While Butler (1990, 1993) highlights how men perform masculinity through discourse, she gives limited attention to the material and cultural factors that compel this performance. Societal expectations that men must appear strong and dominant, cultural norms that normalize early sexualization of boys, and the pervasive influence of pornography and digital media all contribute to the reproduction of masculinity as a performative ideal (U.S. Department of State, 2023; ECPAT International, 2021).

Together, these insights demonstrate how the intersection of gender performance and structural inequality shapes male vulnerability and invisibility in human trafficking discourses. Crenshaw's framework allows us to see how power operates not only through gender binaries but also through the very structures, legal, cultural, and representational, that determine whose suffering is legible and whose remains unseen.

Conclusion and Discussion

The analysis of key feminist theorists, consisting of Butler, Mohanty, and Crenshaw, from three feminist schools of thought (post-structuralist, postcolonial, and critical race feminist theories) reveals that the dominant victimhood narrative in human trafficking is both reductive and exclusionary, as well as creates the feminization of victimhood that actively harms victims who do not fit into the feminine traits, or the Ideal Victim archetype.

By repeatedly centering the image of a powerless woman coerced into sexual slavery, the narrative constructs the Ideal Victim of a weak, innocent, and blameless person (Christie, 1986; Wilson & O'Brien, 2016). While this figure may generate sympathy and mobilize public and political support, it simultaneously reinforces patriarchal and colonial hierarchies of gender and

race that define who can be recognized as a legitimate victim (Forringer-Beal, 2022; Broad, 2015; Hammes, 2023). The result is a narrow portrayal that erases the diversity and complexity of human trafficking experiences, particularly for male victims, whose realities do not fit this socially constructed mold (Hanna, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

From a post-structuralist feminist perspective, Butler (1990, 1993) would argue that the dominant victimhood narrative is performative; it reproduces and naturalizes gender norms through discourse. By continually associating victimhood with femininity, society produces and sustains the idea that women are inherently vulnerable and men are inherently invulnerable (Butler, 1993). This performativity is evident not only in policy and media representations but also in how victims perceive themselves. Men internalize these discursively produced norms, believing that expressing vulnerability contradicts masculinity (U.S. Department of State, 2023; Davis et al., 2022). Consequently, their reluctance to report exploitation or seek help becomes a reiteration of the very gendered expectations that oppress them. Thus, gender in trafficking discourse is not merely descriptive but constitutive; it creates and sustains the conditions under which certain bodies are rendered visible as victims while others remain invisible (Butler, 1993; Wilson & O'Brien, 2016).

From a postcolonial and Third World feminist perspective, Mohanty (1984) critiques the homogenization of “Third World women” in Western feminist discourse, arguing that it strips them of agency and flattens their experiences into a single narrative of oppression. This same critique applies to the dominant victimhood narrative, which portrays trafficked women, especially from the Global South, as passive, voiceless, and in need of Western rescue (Chetry & Pande, 2019; Wilson & O'Brien, 2016). Such depictions not only reproduce colonial power relations but also erase the experiences of men, boys, and nonbinary individuals who are affected by trafficking in different but equally harmful ways (Broad, 2015; Forringer-Beal, 2022). Mohanty’s (1984) framework calls for a contextual understanding of lived experience, urging

scholars and policymakers to examine how intersecting systems, such as class, race, gender, and geography, shape vulnerability. As seen in the case of male victims, societal taboos, cultural norms, and structural inequalities intersect to silence their suffering and obscure their visibility in anti-trafficking frameworks (ECPAT International, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

From a critical race feminist perspective, Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality provides a crucial lens to understand how multiple forms of oppression, race, class, and gender, interlock to shape victims' experiences. Representational intersectionality is evident in how both women and men are portrayed in trafficking discourse: women are feminized as helpless victims, while men are masculinized as perpetrators or complicit actors (Chetry & Pande, 2019; Blume, 2015). This not only marginalizes male survivors but also reinforces racialized and gendered stereotypes that originated from colonial imaginaries such as the "white slavery" panic of the 19th century (Chetry & Pande, 2019). Moreover, male victims experience structural intersectionality, where hegemonic masculinity, gender stereotypes, and economic precarity combine to make them more vulnerable to exploitation while simultaneously excluding them from recognition and support (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Crenshaw, 1991; USAID Thailand Counter Trafficking in Persons & Winrock International, 2019). As Butler (1993) suggests, men perform masculinity through the repetition of societal expectations. However, as ECPAT International (2021) and the U.S. Department of State (2023) highlight, this performance also conceals their victimization, reinforcing a cycle of silence and invisibility. Overall, human trafficking must be understood not only as a gendered issue but as an intersectional and structural one. The dominant narrative, while intended to elicit empathy and action, inadvertently sustains systems of power that silence those who do not conform to the "Ideal Victim" archetype. Women's experiences are oversimplified, and men's are erased altogether, leaving significant gaps in protection, policy, and advocacy (Broad, 2015; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Hanna, 2023). To address this, anti-trafficking discourse,

research, and policies must move beyond the binary of male perpetrator and female victim, recognizing instead the multiplicity of experiences shaped by intersecting identities and social contexts.

In reimagining human trafficking through post-structuralist, postcolonial, and critical race feminist lenses, we begin to see that discourse and representation are not neutral; they produce and sustain inequality. Therefore, deconstructing the dominant victimhood narrative is not simply an academic exercise but a moral and political imperative. By integrating intersectional, gender-inclusive, and context-sensitive frameworks, we can move toward more equitable approaches that recognize the agency, complexity, and humanity of all survivors: women, men, and those beyond the gender binary, who have long been silenced on the margins of visibility.

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