

Self-education and Collective Learning: Forming a critical ‘modern slavery’ study group

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Anti-trafficking research and activism inherently involve contested ideas, hard choices, and unknown figures. Moreover, the situation on the ground for anti-traffickers often exposes contradictions in theory and practice, leading to challenges of existing theories—mainstream or critical. Therefore, for scholars and students critical of trafficking and ‘modern slavery’, it is essential to question the established underpinnings of theories and wrangle with the ways of framing research questions to better reflect real-world complexities in our work. With this critical stance in mind, in March 2020, we (the two authors) formed an informal online study group to bring together scholars and practitioners in the field of trafficking and ‘modern slavery’ across a range of geographical locations and academic disciplines. To form the group, we did not rely on existing connections but instead invited members through an open invitation on social networks. Most members are academics in different stages of their careers (research students, early career researchers, and professors), and two are practitioners. Members represent different locations in their work (Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe) and disciplines (Anthropology, Gender Studies, Geography, Law, Political Science, and Sociology). At the time of writing this piece in June 2021, we were meeting regularly for more than a year. Without the pandemic, we would not have thought of forming an online group. Prior to the pandemic, physical presence was common for gatherings, making in-person connections and demands on our time difficult. Therefore, the opportunity to convene online opened up a different kind of connection for our members.

In this paper, we elaborate on the guiding principles that were central to our discussions, all of which emanated from grappling with complex and even uncomfortable questions. Our guiding principles included: 1) creating an online

space that was safe and inspiring; and 2) starting with the big questions that incite debates and dilemmas, arising from the discomfort of engaging with contrasting convictions. Each session had a facilitator who shared several questions related to the session topic in advance, one background reading (which could be an academic text, a non-academic text, or a combination of both) and, in some cases, optional further reading. The facilitator chose readings based on their knowledge of the topic and the papers they had access to, and always shared the materials by email to ensure they were accessible to all members. The two of us, as group coordinators, led the first few sessions, and other group members took over as facilitators afterwards. In this way, the group belonged to its participants, not just the coordinators.

Online Organisation of a Critical Study Group

We had three types of sessions. The first raised issues with existing theories, ideas, and debates. We asked, for example, why people who were identified as ‘trafficked persons’ returned to exploitative working conditions. We also explored the role of objectivity and subjectivity in responding to research participants’ narratives, and dissected concepts such as agency, personhood, exploitation, citizenship, resistance, rehabilitation, and work.¹ As many of us conduct empirical work in different places, how varying localities and transnational contexts understand, deploy, and translate such terms was a recurring aspect of our discussions. For example, Sharmila Parmanand noted that there was no equivalent to the term ‘sex work’ in the Filipino language. Judith Onwubiko identified the language of ‘the body as property’² as building on Western concepts that are not particularly

¹ A few selected texts used to begin the discussion on these topics included: S Henriksen, ‘Consuming Life after Anti-Trafficking’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 14-33, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218102>; C Mills, ‘The Political Economy of Personhood’, *On the Human: A Project of the National Humanities Centre*, 2011; KM Millar, ‘Toward a Critical Politics of Precarity’, *Sociology Compass*, vol. 11, issue 6, 2017, p. e12483; GM Zulfiqar, ‘Dirt, Foreignness, and Surveillance: The shifting relations of domestic work in Pakistan’, *Organization*, vol. 26, 2019, pp. 321–336, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508418812579>; K Cruz, ‘The Work of Sex Work: Prostitution, unfreedom and criminality at work’, in A Bogg *et al.* (eds.), *Criminality at Work*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020, pp. 192–209, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198836995.003.0010>; M Stern, ‘Racism, Sexism, Classism and Much More: Reading security-identity in marginalized sites’, in BA Ackerly, M Stern and J True (eds.), *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 174–194; b hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, Routledge, London, 2014; ET Achiume, ‘Migration as Decolonization’, *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 71, 2019, pp. 1509-1574.

² Following a discussion of A Phillips, ‘It’s My Body and I’ll Do What I Like with It: Bodies as objects and property’, *Political Theory*, vol. 39, issue 6, 2011, pp. 724–748, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00905917111419322>.

relevant for South-Eastern Nigeria. The terms ‘trafficking’ and ‘slavery’ were themselves often flagged as not relevant for the language used by our research participants.

The second type of session was dedicated to reading group members’ drafts and works-in-progress (e.g., theses, book chapters, and papers) and providing meaningful feedback. These sessions took a different form of feedback-driven conversations that contrasted with other forms of academic feedback, such as that from examiners, reviewers, or conference audiences. The peer feedback on writing-in-progress during our sessions allowed members of the reading group to think together, identify common challenges, listen to ideas, and offer reading recommendations from people interested in similar questions across different contexts and disciplines. This feedback helped members garner a sense of the relevance and importance of their work as well as the workability of their arguments. The feedback sessions facilitated an opportunity for the group to discuss questions beyond the respective papers and were often followed by discussions of texts on related themes.

The third type of session focused on current events, such as reports of the offices of the UN Special Rapporteurs on Trafficking in Persons, and on Contemporary Forms of Slavery. These helped us take a step back from our research and consider the role of academics and the potential of critical scholarship in practice and international policy advocacy. Our critical perspective on ‘modern slavery’ means that we consider slavery and trafficking not as isolated and unique phenomena, but as the extreme end of broader social problems, reflecting social, political, and legal structures.³ This critical understanding means that issues such as racism, exclusion, precarity, and law enforcement should be part of how we discuss and understand slavery and trafficking.

Discussions or developments of ideas concerning such issues were part of our discussions of current events. Thus, our working group discussed the impact of COVID-19 on our research participants, the protests for racial justice and police reforms in the United States following the murder of George Floyd, and the QAnon conspiracy theory and the relationship between misinformation and trafficking. As a group focused on critical study and discussion, we addressed these broader themes as part of our collective learning. However, we believe that attention to broader themes and political and legal structures is necessary for

³ See, among others: K Skrivankova, *Between Decent Work and Forced Labour: Examining the continuum of exploitation*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York, 2010; J O’Connell Davidson, *Modern Slavery: The margins of freedom*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2015; P Kotiswaran, ‘Trafficking: A development approach’, *Current Legal Problems*, vol. 72, issue 1, 2019, pp. 375–416, <https://doi.org/10.1093/clp/cuz012>; N Howard, J Quirk and C Thibos (eds.), *Palermo Protocol 20th Anniversary Special: What is exploitation?*, Beyond Trafficking and Slavery/openDemocracy, 2021.

other situations of educating about trafficking, educating ourselves, and educating others: learning about trafficking cannot be limited to situations explicitly labelled ‘trafficking’, to the definitions of trafficking, or the experiences of trafficked persons, because trafficking cannot be understood in isolation from broader social and political contexts. For instance, to better understand the role of law enforcement in responding to trafficking, we need to better understand law enforcement in general by analysing its political drivers and differential impacts. To understand extreme forms of labour exploitation, we need to understand work in general by analysing power relations, economic precarity, and the significance people attach to their labour or work, or to work in general.

Reflexivity and intellectual rigor were central to our collective process. We often asked ourselves, what are the key concepts used in literature and policies discussing trafficking; what phenomena or ideas these concepts aim to capture; and how theories and frameworks used by anti-traffickers and researchers shape the ways in which these concepts are understood and applied. Here, we offer a specific example of how our collective learning process led to the discussion of labour exploitation, which plays a central part in our work and the trafficking framework in general. We discussed the following questions: What do we talk about when we talk about ‘work’? What makes work a vital category, what activities are considered to be work, and why are these categories used in specific ways legally, politically, and socially? What are the types of work and regulations of work impacting trafficked people? This theme formed the basis of three sessions titled, respectively, ‘What Is Work?’; ‘Exploitation, Work, and Anti-trafficking Interventions’; and ‘Informal, Gendered, Contested: Surrogacy and sex work’. We chose the broad conceptual question about work to help us set a common ground for future discussions. The texts we read addressed different aspects of work, highlighting reproductive labour and drawing broader parallels with work in general.⁴ We began by asking how we defined ‘work’ and whether it represented a helpful category. We considered binary divisions such as formal/informal, regular/irregular, paid/unpaid, and productive/reproductive work, as well as the separation between ‘trafficking for sexual exploitation’ and ‘trafficking for

⁴ Our background readings for this theme included: SY Rahman ‘Choosing Begging Over Paid Labour’, *The India Forum*, 30 November 2019, retrieved 28 December 2020, <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/choosing-begging-over-paid-labour>; Phillips; SP Shah, *Street Corner Secrets: Sex, work, and migration in the City of Mumbai*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014; M Eichler and A Matthews, ‘What Is Work? Looking at all work through the lens of unpaid housework’, University of Toronto, 25 April 2004, <http://wall.oise.utoronto.ca/events/WhatisWork.pdf>. Eichler and Matthews used the example of housework to consider what constitutes work in general—our discussions, drawing from examples of domestic work, sex work, and surrogacy, enabled us to follow a similar approach, though we considered examples beyond reproductive work. We thank Sharmila Parmanand and Sylvie Armstrong for identifying some of the reading and questions for these sessions.

labour exploitation'. We also discussed who can access which forms of work and the relationship between work and identity; whether different frameworks (e.g., 'livelihood', 'property', or 'compensation') are helpful in understanding work, and the links between the (local or global) terminology chosen and potential interventions, such as collective action and mobilisation.

These thematic discussions demonstrate why our sessions were necessary. First, the sessions drew attention to how people's perspectives may differ from categories recognised in law and literature. For example, several group members noted that 'livelihood strategies' may better capture some people's experiences, particularly those relying on sex work and other forms of labour. Listening to different accounts and paying attention to the language and framework people use to describe their own experience, or listening to researchers sharing these accounts, is a crucial praxis in critical research and teaching. Second, the sessions demonstrated the trade-offs when adopting more or less inclusive definitions for analysis and practice. Last, the sessions reiterated that studying 'trafficking' cannot be limited to cases labelled as 'trafficking'. Labour exploitation is a key element of trafficking, but it is not a feature confined only to trafficking. A discussion of whether 'trafficking for labour exploitation' and 'trafficking for sexual exploitation' should even be considered separate categories is advanced by thinking of labour, sex work, and exploitation *outside* the trafficking framework.

Reflections on Theories and Positionality

One recurring concern in the group was about adopting a 'critical orthodoxy' that no longer questions the accuracy or usefulness of specific positions, as long as they are critical of the mainstream. The discussions of recurring themes in our meetings, such as exploitation, agency, and choice, reflected that while we can often formulate which approaches and interpretations we think are harmful, identifying an approach we support is much more complicated. For instance, in the session on objectivity and subjectivity in research methods and practice, the group discussed balancing the particular nature of conclusions drawn from a specific context with the demand from academics to make generalisable conclusions applicable to other contexts or different circumstances. We recognised the tension between what we, as researchers, know or believe, and what our research participants know or tell us about their experiences, and the need to continually consider our positionality, scrutinise what led us to certain ideas or conclusions, and actively look for alternative framing. Although abandoning our pre-existing ideological or theoretical preferences might be difficult, the group recognised the need not only to question our pre-existing notions as researchers, but also the narratives of the participants in our research. An example is the tension mentioned above, between using the framework of 'work' or 'labour' that some of us may adopt as labour lawyers concerned with people's labour rights and protections, and using the framework of 'livelihood strategies' that may better reflect how some

participants describe their choices and experiences. The need to practise ‘conscious partiality’ towards groups that have been historically silenced raised new questions about the meanings of being critical in critical ‘modern slavery’ scholarship itself.

While our weekly discussions occurred amidst childcare responsibilities, online teaching, distance from loved ones, and personal loss, members of the online study group welcomed each other every week with enthusiasm. The group itself was the point in a week that helped us to slow down⁵ and take the time to ask questions without worries about appearing productive or experts in our fields, which helped us to build relationships across disciplines, regions, and career levels. To date, we have completed a year of studying together, and we are currently planning sessions around the themes of workers’ experiences and how they frame their claims, the link between wage theft and the trafficking framework, the body as a site of intervention, and the concept of citizenship.

Various educational anti-trafficking initiatives are framed as ‘raising awareness’ or preventing exploitation. Some of these initiatives are part of social movements embedded in addressing labour exploitation. They are important and worthy if done correctly. For us, as critical scholars, it is also worth being mindful that we too have much to learn, and many of the definitions, theories, and frameworks are ongoing contested terrains for anti-trafficking activists and scholars. It is therefore important to slow down and build space for critical thinking where the work, positions, and underlying assumptions of anti-trafficking work can be challenged in a reflexive and constructive way. Self-reflection and self-learning are based on recognising that our work—as researchers, practitioners, or activists—is ongoing and that we should challenge ourselves to ask, discuss, and consider ideas and arguments outside our comfort zone. A critical study group, online or in person, is not the only way, but it is a good place to start.

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⁵ A Mountz *et al.*, ‘For Slow Scholarship: A feminist politics of resistance through collective action in the neoliberal university’, *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, vol. 14, issue 4, 2015, pp. 1235-1259.

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