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Captured ‘Realities’ of Human Trafficking: Analysis of photographs illustrating stories on trafficking into the sex industry in Serbian media

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Abstract:

Past research has looked at how the media frames human trafficking, but has seldom included analysis of visual representations. To bridge this gap, this paper scrutinises stereotypical representations of persons trafficked into the sex industry in photographs published in Serbian online media from 2011 to 2014. To uncover characteristics of dominant tropes in this sample, a method of semiotic analysis is applied. The analysis argues that images are dominated by portrayals of trafficked persons that fit into one of two frames: powerless victim or unworthy prostitute. Male figures are rarely presented in these photographs, but when present, they are shown to hurt or control the women depicted alongside them. Chains, padlocks, barcodes, whip marks, and other symbols associated with slavery are present to a lesser extent. However, they testify to the tendency to link human trafficking to slavery and to use the moral potential of the anti-slavery rhetoric. Photographs are too easily seen as authentic, factual transcripts of reality. This paper suggests that these images tell us more about societal fear of insecurity, ideas about gender, erotic obsessions and morality than about human trafficking itself. It also argues that the meaning of trafficking is shaped by the deeply embedded codes of patriarchy and hidden misogyny present in Serbian society.

Keywords: human trafficking, trafficking into the sex industry, visual representation, media photographs, images of human trafficking, Serbia, Balkans, Eastern Europe

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Introduction

Shortly after I submitted the first draft of this paper, one of the human trafficking experts I interviewed for my PhD research told me about a recent event in Serbia that highly jeopardised the safety of a human trafficking survivor. To obtain visual illustration for an article on users of services provided by people trafficked into the sex industry, a local press team found the trafficked person’s house, waited for her to come out, and published her photograph in the most popular daily newspapers in the country. Nothing was done to protect her identity, even though she was underage and had already made an attempt to kill herself. Together with her photograph, the public was introduced to her story which included details of her age, names of people suspected of trafficking her, the name of the public figure who allegedly raped her, locations where the exploitation happened, as well as quotes from expert witness testimonies on her psychological wellbeing and intellectual capacities.¹ According to the expert I spoke to, and several others who later corroborated the story, information about where the victim lived was contained in court documentation that one of the legal representatives of the accused handed to the press.² The people I spoke with did not have any information to share about the consequences of those actions. The prosecution did not react, and no one was held responsible for endangering the victim or providing access to confidential documentation. Even though extreme instances such as this are rare,³ visual representation of human trafficking in Serbian media is highly problematic and has grave implications on how the issue is perceived and approached both socially and politically. This paper therefore scrutinises photographs published alongside stories on trafficking into the sex industry and identifies problematic symbols that appear in these illustrations.

¹ Interview, anti-trafficking expert from Serbia, Belgrade, 03 February 2016.

² *Ibid.*

³ In this analysis five photographs of real victims were published.

From a media perspective at least two major obstacles to documenting human trafficking in photographic images can be identified: (1) producing authentic and newsworthy photographs takes time and money, which is a luxury most media outlets cannot afford and (2) this task is even more difficult when trying to document clandestine criminal phenomena. Consequently, it is not surprising that the great majority of illustrations in stories on human trafficking into the sex industry in online media are selected from photo agencies, archives or stock photography (searchable online databases used to obtain photos for a lower cost). It is highly important to analyse such visualisations because the selection process of these images is culturally determined and reveals preconceptions that promote certain types of understanding of trafficking.

Academics argue that media accounts of human trafficking are too often considered to be testimonials of the nature of the crime and used to identify characteristics of trafficked persons and offenders.⁴ By ignoring the fact that not all cases reach media outlets, and those that do are not necessarily reported on, such research endeavours result in problematic generalisations. On the other hand, there are studies concerned with how media frame the issue,⁵ but they seldom include analysis of the visual representation of human trafficking.⁶ Such an approach to media reporting by the academic community has limited our understanding of the public perception and stereotyped media constructions related to trafficking in human beings. Another limitation comes from the fact that most studies focus on the representation of trafficking in the West,⁷ and fail to consider possible differences in how trafficking is framed in other regions.

As far as studies on this topic in Serbia are concerned, few attempts have been made to analyse the content of media reports, including one brief comparative study of the language used to refer to trafficked persons and traffickers by media and policy makers, and a content analysis of media articles from 2008.⁸ Key findings of this content analysis indicate that there is a general disinterest in the topic, reports are sensationalised, and stories are usually based on information fed to the media, whereas investigative and analytical pieces are extremely rare.⁹

Serbia is a small country of little over seven million inhabitants lying in the heart of the ‘infamous’ Balkans route.¹⁰ As such the country became an important transit and destination country for human trafficking in the late 1980s. People from the former Soviet republics passed through Belgrade and other migration hubs of what was then the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) on their way to the more developed Western European countries. Others were trafficked between the Near East and Western Europe via territories of Kosovo.¹¹ For some, exploitation began in the SFRY, which had a higher economic standard and, therefore, offered lucrative opportunities to traffickers operating in the region.¹² In the nineties, however, the country was first torn apart by war, and then further weakened by poor economic management. Poverty and unemployment consequently grew, and Serbia became a country of origin too.¹³ After Milosevic’s fall, democratic reforms did not prove long lasting. Serbia signed and ratified relevant international conventions and protocols in the early 2000s,¹⁴ and introduced the Crime Act of Trafficking in Human Beings under Article 388 of National Criminal Code in 2003.¹⁵ Visa liberalisation with the European Union (EU) in November 2009

⁴ For example see Y Leechaianan and M P Roth, ‘Cases of Human Trafficking in Texas during 1992 to 2006: A content analysis’, *Journal of Criminal Justice Research*, vol. 1, 2014, pp. 1—23, and E Dugan, ‘Forced Labour and Human Trafficking: Media coverage in 2012’, retrieved 14 April 2014, <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/forced-labour-media-coverage-full.pdf>

⁵ G J Gulati, ‘News Frames and Story Triggers in the Media Coverage of Human Trafficking’, *Human Rights Review*, vol. 12, issue 3, 2010, pp. 363—79; M Pajnik, ‘Media Framing of Trafficking’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 12, issue 1, 2010, pp. 45—64; M R Sobel, ‘Chronicle of a Crisis: Media framing of human trafficking in India, Thailand, and the USA’, *Asian Journal of Communication*, vol. 24, issue 4, 2014, pp. 315—332.

⁶ B L Virkus, ‘Human Trafficking and the Media: Comparing newspapers’ portrayal of victims and offenders’, Electronic Theses and Dissertations, Paper 78, University of Northern Iowa, 2014; J Ham and F Dewar, ‘Shifting Public Anti-Trafficking Discourses through Arts and Media’ in S Yea (ed.) *Human Trafficking in Asia: Forcing issues*, Routledge, 2014.

⁷ G J Gulati, 2010; Y Leechaianan and M P Roth, 2014; J Albanese, J S Donnelly, and T Kelegian, ‘Cases of Human Trafficking in the United States: A content analysis of a calendar year in 18 cities’, *International Journal of Comparative Criminology*, vol. 4, 2004, pp. 96—111; A Johnston, B Friedman and A Shafer, ‘Framing the Problem of Sex Trafficking’, *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 14, issue 3, 2014, pp. 419—36.

⁸ S Savic ‘Terminologija Vezana Za Trgovinu Ženama’, in I Radović (ed.), *Trgovina ljudima—Priručnik za novinare*, ASTRA, Beograd, 2009, pp. 137—42 and S Dekić et al., ‘Sex Slavery and Politics: Representations of trafficked women in the Serbian media’, *Canadian Women’s Studies=Les Cahiers de la Femme*, vol. 22, no. 3, June, 2003.

⁹ I Radovic (ed.), 2009, p. 136.

¹⁰ S Čopić, ‘Putevi Trgovine ljudima u Evropi i Pozicija Srbije na Njima’, *Temida*, vol. 11, issue 4, 2008, p. 56; IOM, *Changing Patterns and Trends of Trafficking in Persons in the Balkan Region*, Geneva, 2004.

¹¹ S Čopić, p. 56.

¹² V Nikolić-Ristanović, ‘Trgovina ljudima u Srbiji i Okolnim Zemljama: Obim, karakteristike i uzroci’, *Temida*, vol. 5, issue 1, 2002, p. 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Among others, UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Human Beings, Especially Women and Children (2000) and Council of Europe’s Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005).

¹⁵ Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia, Official Gazette of RS, no. 72/09

largely facilitated the movement of people from Serbia to other EU countries.¹⁶ To make this change possible, Serbia had to demonstrate strong political will to fight cross-border crime, including trafficking in persons. After visa liberalisation was achieved, political will to tackle the issue subsided.

Since the breakdown of SFRY, Serbian women have faced discrimination in the labour market and limited opportunities to migrate legally and independently, which resulted in large-scale irregular migration. At the same time, increasingly restrictive immigration policies were imposed in destination countries, contributing to higher risks of human trafficking.¹⁷ High unemployment¹⁸ and poverty¹⁹ rates in the country continue to function as push factors. In such conditions, stricter migration control is not likely to result in preventing exploitation, but rather forcing migrants to place greater reliance on potentially deceptive agencies and middlemen.²⁰ Under such conditions, a reliable media picture of human trafficking and related risks could contribute to success in prevention of the crime and protection of trafficked persons. Another reason to critically examine visual representation of human trafficking in Serbia is that the country offers an ideal case study of the racialised hierarchies that are implicit in the trafficking representation regime, which will be analysed further below.

Methodology

The photographs analysed here were published alongside articles on trafficking into the sex industry in Serbian online media in the period between 2011 and 2014. The decision not to include texts pertaining to other forms of human trafficking was made because the smaller scope allows for a more in-depth analysis, and provides insight into the moralistic judgements typically embedded in the media discourse on trafficking into the sex industry. Articles were collected through Google News Archive (GNA), which allowed a comprehensive search of Serbian online media and hence gave access to all images anyone with internet access could have encountered in trafficking news stories during this period. This search method also helped avoid poorly maintained archives and tags that impede direct search on some Serbian news websites. GNA was searched for the following terms: human trafficking, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, trafficking in women, and white slavery. The search was extended to include all these terms because journalists writing in Serbian frequently use these phrases as synonyms for human trafficking. The term ‘white slavery’ has specific historical meaning rooted in a cultural myth of white girls being tricked and sold into prostitution by foreign men.²¹ Despite numerous attempts by the government and civil society to educate journalists on the use of more appropriate language, the term has been appropriated by the local press to label trafficking in women and remains in use.

Articles that focus on other forms of human trafficking (e.g. trafficking for exploitation in other sectors, forced criminality, etc.) were excluded from the sample. Texts that mention trafficking into the sex industry but focus on some other issue, e.g. irregular migration, were also disregarded. The search resulted in 217 relevant texts on trafficking into the sex industry, but pieces that did not contain photographic illustration were eliminated from the sample. Finally, images from collected articles were coded in NVivo based on what they represent (victims, objects, places, experts interviewed, traffickers). This analysis focused only on the most prevalent motif—images that represent trafficked persons (alone or with others). Thus, a total of 123 photographs originating from 108 sources (media texts) were analysed for this paper. Media in which these photographs were published include Večernje novosti, Alo!, Blic, B92.net, Press, Vesti Online, RSE, and others.²²

¹⁶ Citizens of Serbia are allowed to travel within the Schengen zone without a visa, but they do not have the right to stay more than three months or work. To enter the territory of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, citizens of Serbia need to obtain a visa.

¹⁷ M Wijers and L Lap-Chew, *Trafficking in Women Forced Labour and Slavery-like Practices in Marriage, Domestic Labour and Prostitution*, Foundation Against Trafficking in Women, Utrecht, 1999; GAATW, *Beyond Borders: Exploring links between trafficking and migration*, GAATW, Bangkok, 2009.

¹⁸ The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia report shows 45% unemployment rate among the young population in the last quarter of 2015. Rates are also high for the general working population (ages 15-64), ranging from 17% to 25.5% in the period between 2008 and 2015. Some economic experts and analysts in the country have raised questions of authenticity of this data, labelling official reports as optimistic (see G V, ‘Sumnja u Zvaničnu Statistiku’, *Danas*, 5 August 2015, retrieved 27 May 2016, http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/ekonomija/sumnja_u_zvanicnu_statistiku.4.html?news_id=305951).

¹⁹ B Mijatovic, ‘Siromaštvo u Srbiji u 2014 Godini’, *Tim za socijalno uključivanje i smanjenje siromaštva*, Vlada Republike Srbije.

²⁰ M Wijers and L Lap-Chew, 1999, p. 55. See also case study: C Parizot, ‘Tightening Closure, Securing Disorder: Israeli closure policies and informal border economy during the second Intifada (2000-2006)’, *RefugeeWatch*, 2008, pp. 54–74.

²¹ For critique see: J Doezema, ‘Loose Women or Lost Women? The re-emergence of the myth of “white slavery” in contemporary discourses on trafficking in women’, *Gender Issues*, vol. 18, issue 1, 2000, pp. 23–50.

²² The category ‘Other’ was used for media that had only one or two relevant texts in the analysed period. These include online platforms of daily newspapers such as Politika and 24 Sata and online news media such as Mondo, E Novine, Telegraf, and Srbija Danas.

Semiotic analysis was chosen as a suitable method of inspection of news photographs because it has proved useful for researching different phenomena of mass and popular culture.²³ The approach to semiotic analysis in this paper is based on Chandlers' suggestion that a text analysed (in this case a photograph) is a complex semiotic sign that contains other signs.²⁴ A strong semiotic analysis explores the relations between denotative and connotative meanings of signs and hegemonic ideologies.²⁵ Therefore, this analysis scrutinises re-occurring signs and their links to the patriarchal code that dominates Serbian culture and media.²⁶ Semiotic analysis was first applied to identify and examine dominant ways of representing people trafficked into the sex industry, with a photograph as a unit of analysis. Two major categories—those of the powerless victim and the unworthy prostitute—emanate from concepts of innocent victims and 'fallen women' present in the critical human trafficking literature.²⁷ These concepts were borne out as dominant in the media's selection of photographs. The third category, however, emerged inductively, as a significant number of photographs showed trafficked persons represented as slaves. The three categories are scrutinised below.

Powerless Victim

In portraying trafficked persons there were two seemingly opposing representations—one that strips women of their agency and shows their desperation and hopelessness, and one that is based on eroticisation of the female body. This binary opposition is not new to scholars interested in human trafficking,²⁸ and as Snajdr explains, it discourages deeper analysis and more nuanced understandings of the complexity of human trafficking.²⁹ When shown as victims, women are either portrayed alone, which accentuates their dead-end position of despair, or as facing a violent attack from a male figure. In the first case, what comes to attention is their body posture. Victims in the photographs are almost always seated in an indoor confined location (only 3 of 27 women are shown standing, none of them outside). This suggests their movement is restricted to gloomy bedrooms or dungeon-like empty rooms that constitute their surroundings in the analysed images. Shadows and dark or unsaturated, cold colours match the miserable world trafficked persons are portrayed as being stuck in. In several photographs ropes around their wrists and tapes on their mouths remove any suspicion that they may be free to leave. Not only seated, many of these women are assuming a foetal position, which further highlights their powerlessness. Body language studies have shown that the foetal position is a typical response to fear. By taking this position, people are turning away from the danger and protecting the ventral area of the body, thus making themselves appear smaller and harder to spot.³⁰ Seeing people curled up like little children evokes feelings of empathy and a wish to offer support. Thus, these representations draw a clear distinction between the viewer in power, who is positioned as the one called to help, and the portrayed women devoid of all agency. This hierarchical vision of agency between the viewer and the depicted was also problematised by Hua and Ray in their analysis of the UN awareness raising video *Cleaning Lady*, in which a white woman employed as a cleaner helps women of colour to get out of the sexual exploitation ring.³¹

The analysed images rarely show women who are looking back at the camera. As a rule, trafficked persons are looking away or covering their crying faces with their palms. By displaying shame and desperation, portrayed figures plead their innocence to an audience that is framed implicitly as morally judgemental. In addition, looking back is a form of interaction between subjects and it is unimaginable for 'them', the trafficked persons, to be able to directly communicate with us, the free. I will argue that visual representations of trafficking in Serbian media serve the function of distancing readers from the horrors of the crime. The horror element might be further invalidated through the eroticisation of women's suffering. Namely, in many of the images that fit into the powerless victim trope, depicted women are dressed provocatively or posed in such a way that their legs are elongated and dominate the frame. Contemporary depictions of suffering, therefore, meet the commercial expectations of attractiveness. These photographs show a bizarre symbiosis of suffering and beauty, offering a dose of pleasure for those looking at the image of others in distress. By accentuating newsworthy elements of violence and sex, these images have a significant titillating potential. More problematically,

²³ J Vasiljević, 'Semioološka Analiza Reklame: Metodološka razmatranja', *Etno-antropološki Problemi*, vol. 2, issue 1, 2007, pp. 41—54.

²⁴ D Chandler, *Semiotics for Beginners*, Aberystwyth University, 1994.

²⁵ S Hall, 'The Work of Representation', in S Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*, Sage, London, 1997, pp. 13—74; J Schroeder, *Visual Consumption*, Routledge, London, 2002.

²⁶ S Miliivojević, 'Žene i Mediji—Strategije isključivanja', *Časopis za feminističku teoriju Genero, specijalno izdanje*, Beograd, 2004.

²⁷ J Doezema, pp. 28—30; H R Hallgrímsson, R Phillips, and C Enoi, 'Fallen Women and Rescued Girls: Social stigma and media narratives of the sex industry in Victoria, B.C., from 1980 to 2005', *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie*, vol. 43, issue 3, 2006, pp. 265—280.

²⁸ R Andrijasevic, 'Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns', *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, 2007, pp. 24—44.

²⁹ E Snajdr, 'Beneath the Master Narrative: Human trafficking, myths of sexual slavery and ethnographic realities', *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2013, pp. 238—239.

³⁰ M H Ford, *Body Language and Behavioral Profiling*, Authorhouse, Bloomington, 2010, p. 95

³¹ J Hua and K Ray, 'Practice of Humanity', *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 10, issue 3, 2010, p. 255.

representations of beautified misery and their frequent repetition can enforce an idea of a natural connection between femininity, sex, and desperation, and neutralise the viewer's reactions to it. Visual representation of harm raises important ethical questions concerning the spectator's relationship to the person who is being victimised. By turning another's suffering into a spectacle, and then recycling that same imagery over and over again, the media may be nullifying the shock effect and with it our feelings of empathy. Susan Sontag argued that images of suffering do not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. Rather, such images anaesthetise us and corrupt these abilities.³² What this sample seems to be indicative of is the perverse desire to violate one's own sense of security, and to then regain the feeling of being privileged and safe—be it because we are not naïve enough to engage with suspicious criminal-looking men like those masculine giants portrayed next to persons who have been trafficked, or because we conform to gender norms defined in our society. Thus, trafficked persons are easily presumed to be different from us, and even deserving of their doomed fates. This interpretation builds upon the stereotype of the naïve victim that is deeply ingrained in Serbian society,³³ and is illustrative of the tendency to question the integrity of victims of violence, explored by American psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman.³⁴ Similar propensity to re-establish the feeling of one's own security is echoed in the language of the articles that boldly proclaim 'anybody can become a victim' and then list sets of extremely negative socio-economic circumstances affecting people in known cases of trafficking. In her analysis of modern and historical anti-slavery discourses, Brace too concludes that the current social order presupposes that only some of us can be secure and that the process of exclusion from citizenship serves to preserve the binary between ourselves as human subjects, and slaves that are reduced to disposable bodies.³⁵

When represented in a situation where they are attacked by a male figure, helplessness remains the prevailing motif in portrayals of the powerless victims. We see them held in the firm grip of men's muscular arms. We see clenched fists and belts in the hands of their traffickers that are ready to inflict pain. And we see scared women, some of whom are trying to protect themselves by covering their head and bowing down, while others are looking back with eyes wide open and make-up smeared by their tears. Their assailants are large, strong, and white men, carefully placed closer to the camera to appear even bigger than the women under attack. Even though this analysis focused on representation of trafficked persons, it is important to mention that illustrations of trafficking stories in Serbian media do not show criminals being brought to justice. Therefore, while readers are scared by the image of an omnipotent, untouchable, brutal trafficker, the fact that the state has failed in protecting its citizens from criminals is obscured. The pattern by which the inefficacy of the State is hidden behind a powerful enemy (e.g. the West, the ethnic other) is well recorded in Serbian political history and is manifested in the visual narrative of human trafficking as well.



Image 1: Večernje novosti. Title translation: HORROR IN ZAGREB! Underage daughter sold! He locked her in his house and raped her!

³² S Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin, New York, 1977, p. 15

³³ Medium Gallup, 'Istraživanje Javnog Mnenja o Problemu Trgovine Ljudima', in I Radović (ed.), *Trgovina Ljudima—Priručnik za novinare*, ASTRA, Belgrade, 2009, pp. 49—72.

³⁴ J L Herman, *Trauma i Pporavak – Struktura traumatskog doživljaja*, Psihopolis Institut, Novi Sad, 2012, p. 383

³⁵ L Brace, 'Bodies in Abolition: Broken hearts and open wounds', *Citizenship Studies*, 2014, vol. 18, issue 5, p. 496.

Trafficked persons are rarely depicted as minors in photographs even though in the majority of cases described in the analysed articles exploited people are in fact underage. This absence of images of minors is striking and goes against the news value placed on stories on children suffering.³⁶ This can be seen as a manifestation of a taboo—an unimaginable atrocity that pertains to children forced into prostitution. Concerning the race, only two depicted persons have darker skin, one of whom features alongside a story about trafficking in India. The face of a trafficked person is therefore predominantly the face of a young white woman. The almost exclusive portrayal of white people can perhaps be explained by the relatively homogeneous demographics of Serbia.³⁷ However, Roma women are represented in neither photographs nor stories featured in Serbian press in the analysed period despite indications that Roma women are exposed to greater risks of trafficking due to higher rates of poverty, discrimination, economic dependence and unemployment.³⁸ It is important to raise the question of whether Roma women are not likely to be represented as trafficked persons because of their ethnicity, and if so, why, or whether there are other reasons why these cases are not reported on. Although studying ethnicity in relation to human trafficking is ethically challenging and much caution is needed to avoid stigmatisation and moral entrepreneurship, this knowledge is necessary for an adequate understanding of the phenomenon.³⁹

In her research, Jovanović shows that policy makers in Serbia tend to treat the issue of Roma trafficking and its prevention as a separate issue to the trafficking of other citizens of Serbia.⁴⁰ She also points out that she had to exclude sexual exploitation and focus on forced begging and forced marriages in her research, due to the fact that policy makers she spoke to referred to human trafficking of Roma exclusively in terms of these two forms of exploitation.⁴¹ This is surprising when one takes into account research findings that show a high percentage of women of Roma ethnicity among sex workers.⁴² In this respect it would be interesting to see which ethnicity dominates imagery of forced begging and forced marriage stories in Serbian press. The frequent use of the term *white slavery*, which is used by local journalists to refer to women trafficked into prostitution can be seen as providing further grounds for such an investigation and as supporting Jovanović's hypothesis that the anti-trafficking system in Serbia is highly selective and racist in choosing which cases of trafficking to problematise. As current representations tend to focus on white women, the system is more likely to develop biased responses that will not adequately protect non-white women and men who experience exploitation.

While the images of powerless victims examined here indeed carry symbols that could evoke empathy and maybe even provoke the viewer to react, what seems more likely is that they will strengthen cultural attitudes about behaviours women should not display if they wish to stay safe (e.g. migrate, accept lucrative job offers, work in the sex industry). Previous studies on discourses and approaches addressing trafficking in Western countries have put forward two arguments that were confirmed in this analysis as well. The first signalled that anti-trafficking discourse calls for the control of women.⁴³ Doezema, for example, concludes that: 'the myth of *white slavery/trafficking in women* is ostensibly about protecting women, yet the underlying moral concerns are with controlling them'.⁴⁴ The second argument suggests that the representation of trafficking and responses to it are in fact attempts to preserve neoliberal divisions between those who are privileged and those who are not, hidden under the veil of benevolent crusades waged by white saviours.⁴⁵

³⁶ Y Jewkes, *Media and Crime*, Sage, London, 2011.

³⁷ According to Serbian census from 2011, only Roma people, i.e. 2% of the population, are not white. The percentage is probably somewhat higher due to 4% of people whose ethnicity is unknown, undeclared or classified as 'other'.

³⁸ ODIHR, *Awareness Raising for Roma Activists on the Issue of Trafficking in Human Beings in South-Eastern Europe*, Warsaw, April 2006. Also, high numbers of Roma victims are reported in S Milivojevic et al, *Trafficking in People in Serbia*, OSCE, 2004, p. 55.

³⁹ D Siegel, 'Ethnicity, Crime and Sex Work: A triple taboo', in D Siegel and R de Wildt, *Ethical Concerns in Research on Human Trafficking*, Springer, London, 2016, pp. 71—83.

⁴⁰ J Jovanović, 'Vulnerability of Roma' and Anti-Human Trafficking Policies in Serbia: Recommendations to the national policy network', CEU Center for Policy Studies, retrieved 7 March 2016, <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/default/files/publications/cps-policy-brief-osi-ttf-vulnerability-of-roma-2015.pdf>

⁴¹ Interview, academics/researchers, Serbia, 11 February 2016.

⁴² G Stojaković, 'Unutar Oglashene Ravnopravnosti Polova: Istraživanje o prostituciji u Novom Sadu (2010-2012)' in J Zlatković (ed.), *Prostitucija u Srbiji—jedno od mogućih lica*, S.T.R.I.K.E., Novi Sad, 2013, pp. 24—107.

⁴³ J Doezema, pp. 23—50; L M Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books, London, 2007.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47

⁴⁵ K Kempadoo, 'The Modern-Day White (Wo)Man's Burden: Trends in anti-trafficking and anti-slavery campaigns', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 1, issue 1, 2015, pp. 8—20; L B Reinares, *Sex Trafficking in Postcolonial Literature—Transnational narratives from Joyce to Bolaño*, Routledge, London, 2015.

Unworthy Prostitute

From the media perspective, depicting provocatively dressed women is newsworthy, and so are crimes involving sexual violence.⁴⁶ The observation that human trafficking visualisations often come down to eroticised spectacles of female bodies is not new.⁴⁷ This frame was the second most commonly used in the Serbian online media in the analysed period. There were twenty-five photographs depicting highly sexualised female bodies in bars and brothel-like environments and another thirty images that show underdressed women waiting on a street corner or approaching cars to solicit customers on the streets. What we see in these photographs is a particular kind of femininity, one that is highly sexualised and therefore deviates from what is perceived to be appropriate. However, there is a fine difference between the sexualised image of a woman that fits the victim trope and the sexualised representation belonging to the unworthy prostitute trope. Victims are shown as beauties that suffer greatly, whereas prostitutes seduce and titillate, which does not indicate suffering, coercion or exploitation. The frequent use of such images alongside news reports on trafficking creates the impression that this kind of tainted femininity is at risk of being victimised by men. Furthermore, one can argue that violence suffered by women doing sex work is normalised through repetition and exclusivity of gender-stereotype portrayals—men as inherently violent, and ‘loose women’ as their natural victims. This is possible because stereotypes of female inferiority and subordination to men have been long cultivated and fostered in the Serbian media.⁴⁸



Image 2: Večernje novosti. Title translation: Montenegro: Filling the budget from sex.

In pictures showing women in bars and private rooms, they are posed in such a way that the viewer is left with the impression that he/she is the one being led to bed by the woman, or the one to whom she is showing her seductive lingerie. Morally charged captions like ‘prostitute’ are placed under some of the photographs. This makes it easier for the reader to reduce the woman depicted to the negatively charged stereotype of the unworthy prostitute, blame her and distance her/himself from her experience and suffering described in the text. Scrutinising photographs of sex workers, author of the Whoretography blog writes: ‘all of the stereotyping is a kind of blindfold that enables many to ignore the fact that sex workers are first and foremost people, individual human beings like everyone else’.⁴⁹ What was once very much part of the trafficking narrative—the idea that it happens to naïve and ‘loose’ girls—is slowly being pushed out of the textual component of the articles, but survives in photographs, resurrecting an old biblical myth of the fallen woman. As Eve took the apple, her greedy, naïve daughters portrayed in trafficking stories keep accepting lucrative and unrealistic job offers, and their exploitation comes as a logical consequence of not assuming gender-appropriate roles that keep women safe. Interestingly, when represented as prostitutes rather than trafficked persons, women are either

⁴⁶ Y Jewkes, 2011.

⁴⁷ R Andrijasevic, 2007, p. 39

⁴⁸ S Milivojević, 2004.

⁴⁹ Elusive Abstractions, retrieved 22 July 2016, <http://www.whoretography.com/new-blog/>

photographed from behind or in such a way that one cannot see their faces. Traffickers are similarly represented in images in which they are hurting the women. The implicit message seems to be that when something ‘wrong’ is being done, Stock guarantees anonymity.

Whereas black and gloomy colours dominate victimisation frames, colours in images representing unworthy prostitutes are saturated and warm tones. Red, traditionally associated with sin, fire, blood and bodily pleasures in Judaeo-Christian cultures, dominates these images, with shades of yellow and orange variations complementing the red tones in some depictions.

Lack of political will to tackle human trafficking in Serbia creates a climate in which it is normal to represent trafficking as a trivial issue.⁵⁰ Visual symbols in trafficking stories signal that trafficking either happens to immoral women who deserve it or to naïve victims who suffer such an outrageous violence from such omnipotent criminals that very little can be done about it. Conflicting representations of trafficked persons send a confusing message that trafficking is horrid, but at the same time not enough of a reason to make a concerted effort to address it. This is due to the fact that in the ‘unworthy prostitute’ scenario trafficked persons are seen as possibly deserving of and responsible for the situation they are in—an attitude confirmed in a 2009 nation-wide poll, where 52% of the Serbian population indicated they think that trafficked persons are to be blamed or they are not sure about trafficked persons’ culpability.⁵¹ Negative attitudes towards persons who have been trafficked were recognised in other research projects in Serbia as well, including Savic’s study on the language used in the media to refer to trafficked persons.⁵² The belief that exploited women are suffering consequences of their own bad behaviour is widely spread in Serbia and arises from still dominant patriarchal codes accompanied by misogyny and xenophobia.⁵³

The fact that images of unworthy prostitutes are so frequently used in Serbian media to illustrate stories of trafficking into the sex industry is incongruent with scholarly knowledge on trafficking discourse. For example, Snajdr writes that persons who have been trafficked are typically represented as helpless and unsuspecting in the master narrative of human trafficking. He explains that deviations from the ideal innocent victim might depend on the culture, but are rarely present in the trafficking discourse.⁵⁴ Such significant incongruity of the visual symbols analysed here calls for further questioning of the perception of women coerced into sex work in Serbian society and challenging deeply rooted patriarchal constructions that cling so firmly to the idea of ‘fallen women’ and the right to objectify, consume and discard their bodies. The following section turns to examine how oppression of women is further achieved through symbols of slavery, and what other socio-political concerns arise from such aesthetics.

Slave

The term ‘white slavery’ is often used in the media to refer to trafficking of women for prostitution, and trafficked persons are frequently labelled as ‘white slaves’. In addition, images illustrating stories on trafficking into the sex industry in Serbian media in the analysed period are almost exclusive in presenting trafficked persons as white women. For this reason, this section investigates historical concerns over the ‘white slavery’ phenomenon in Serbia, and then turns to analyse symbols of slavery used in the studied photographs. Turning to national folklore in search of similar themes offers an explanation of why this trope is so deeply embedded in Serbian culture. The term ‘white slavery’ was possibly first mentioned in Serbia in the book under the same title, written by Miljković in 1901, who emphasised the dangers of this new phenomenon including the threat of venereal diseases.⁵⁵ Yet, the fear of foreign men taking young innocent girls and ‘spoiling’ their virginity can be traced back to the times of Ottoman occupation, a period often referred to in Serbian language as *Slavery under Turks*. Such depictions are frequent in Serbian folk poetry and tales, which are still widely known and are part of mandatory readings in primary and secondary schools in the country. It is difficult to track the exact time in which these pieces were created, but some of them portray people and events from the 14th century (e.g. the song *Banović Strahinja*⁵⁶ about a hero whose wife was abducted by a Turk, or the songs *Bolani Dojčin*⁵⁷ and *Marko Kraljević Ukida*

⁵⁰ In the interviews I did for PhD research both anti-trafficking actors providing information to the media and journalists reporting on human trafficking in Serbia asserted that this topic is not interesting to the press in the country.

⁵¹ Medium Gallup, 2009, pp. 63–4.

⁵² S Savic, 2009, p. 141.

⁵³ M Anđelković et al., *Human Trafficking in Serbia—Report for the Period 2000-2010*, ASTRA, Belgrade, 2011.

⁵⁴ E Snajdr, p. 238.

⁵⁵ M Miljković, *Belo Roblje (sociološko-kriminalna rasprava)*, Državna Štamparija, Beograd, 1901, as described in D Radulović, *Prostitucija u Jugoslaviji*, Filip Višnjić, Beograd, 1986, p. 21.

⁵⁶ D Lakićević (ed.), *Srpske Narodne Epske Pesme*, Bookland, Beograd, 2006, pp. 61–82.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 131–139.

*Svadbarinu*⁵⁸ in which the culprits are black Arabs who demand one Serbian virgin girl per night from the conquered people). Thus, the fear of Serbian women being taken away by the evil foreigner is deeply rooted in the national consciousness of Serbs, and this might be the reason why images of white women are predominantly selected to illustrate stories of sexual exploitation. What is more, such folklore is very closely linked with the notion of national honour that has to be restored by a male hero who saves the girl from the foreign villain. Some of these women would rather die than accept sharing a bed with the foreign occupier, whereas others willingly ‘betray’ their husbands. This reinforces the idea that women are weak, inclined to sin and in need of a male guardian who will protect both them and the national honour.



Image 3: Večernje novosti. Title translation: State Department: Serbs – victims of forced labour

With the rise of modern slavery discourse in anti-trafficking circles, trafficking has been increasingly equated with the contemporary version of the slave trade throughout the world. Visual representations of human trafficking abound with signs associated with slavery. Trodd identifies models of trafficking representation that arise from the historical memory of 18th and 19th century antislavery visual culture.⁵⁹ In the analysed sample of photographs, symbols of slavery are recognisable as well: filthy surroundings, chains, shackles and padlocks, whip marks, wounds and bruises, and, inevitably signs that mark people as goods—barcodes, price tags, and a variety of packaging. Some of the people represented in slavery aesthetics are depicted tied up in ropes, with their wrists, eyes, mouths or whole bodies immobilised. A number of them are wearing ragged clothes, and others are marked with barcodes or jailed behind cage bars. Because slaves are

understood to have been reduced to non-agential objects, portraying trafficked persons as slaves strips them of their agency and hence removes responsibility for being in a situation in which they must sell sex. In addition, these images use the moral potential of anti-slavery endeavours, which may be interpreted as an attempt to provoke empathic reactions. However, they can also be read as directing the debate back to moral questions of right and wrong.⁶⁰ As a result, any response not urging a grand rescue mission is deemed immoral, as is any argument that sex work is a legitimate source of income. By sticking to the binaries of victim and perpetrator, enslaved and free, people and goods, good and evil, nuances between different cases of human trafficking are blurred. Such oversimplification in representing trafficking into the sex industry is particularly dangerous because it may promote inadequate responses to the criminal act, limit support and assistance to trafficked persons who do not fit the stereotype of a helpless white girl, and adversely affect the rights of sex workers and migrant women.

Apart from visual signs reminiscent of the historical trans-Atlantic slave trade, there are images characterised by different kinds of slavery aesthetics that transcend into the world of sadistic fetishes and ‘sex slaves’. Namely, taken to the extreme in several images, a sexualised female body is represented as a toy, a depersonalised object of lust to be used in any way desired. In one of the photographs, for example, we see a woman wearing high heels, lingerie and fishnet stockings. She is on her knees and the front of her body is bent over a low table. Her head and the upper part of her body are not included in the photo frame. In this way, she is depersonalised and her pelvic region is pronounced as the only relevant part for the illustration. On the edge of the table one can spot different sadomasochistic props—whips, floggers, and

⁵⁸ D Mitrovic and S Jovanovic (eds.), *Srpske Narodne Epske Pesme i Balade*, Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, Beograd, 2001, pp. 134—141.

⁵⁹ Z Trodd, ‘Am I Still Not a Man and a Brother? Protest memory in contemporary antislavery visual culture’, *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 34, issue 2, 2013, pp. 338—52

⁶⁰ J Berman, ‘(Un)Popular Strangers and Crises (Un)Bounded: Discourses of sex-trafficking, the European political community and the panicked state of the modern state’, *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2003, pp. 37—86.

Devojke kao robovi

J. ILIĆ | 07. februar 2013, 16:48 > 20:12 | Kategorije: 9

Krivične prijave protiv 13 osoba zbog trgovine ljudima. Plaćali za seks, iako su znali da su maloletnice



Image 4: Večernje novosti. Title translation: Girls as slaves

ropes. Another photograph shows a woman standing in a latex skirt, with various undergarments hung on the wall behind her. With her head out of the frame, she is also depersonalised, but we do see her breasts and lower body, with her hands folded behind her back in a typical submissive pose.

Building upon Freud's concept of deriving sexual pleasure from looking, Hall claims that cultural representations of the taboo objects of forbidden desires provide the observers with an alibi and allow them to keep looking while disavowing the sexual nature of that gaze.⁶¹ This argument supports the claim made in this paper, that images of trafficked persons have titillating potential that is often abused by media outlets. Slavery aesthetics bring forward a dehumanising way of representation of trafficked persons. As Trodd concludes

in her analysis, adaptations of the abolitionist iconography in current trafficking representations have reinforced paternalism, dehumanisation, depersonalisation, and sensationalism, leading to a visual culture that 'heroises the abolitionist liberator, minimalizes slave agency, pornifies violence and indulges in voyeurism'.⁶²

Conclusion

Like all other stereotypes, those related to human trafficking should be considered in their historical context and as subject to power relations. Their role is to make sense of the world and reduce our anxiety over the intangible and unimaginable.⁶³ As Lippmann, who coined the term, stresses 'stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defences we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy'.⁶⁴ Andrijasevic has already shown the relevance of these considerations in terms of narratives and images representing victims of trafficking into the sex industry in Europe.⁶⁵ The analysis in this paper extends to consider visual stereotypical representations of victims of human trafficking into the sex industry in Serbian online media. Paying attention to what mediated photographs are saying about human trafficking is of great importance because the media have a significant role to play in preventing the crime, mobilising public support for action against it, and shaping the environment in which trafficked persons are able to exercise their rights and recover. Furthermore, in order to represent the risks of exploitation in a credible way, stereotypes need to be deconstructed, and moral panics replaced by realistic depictions of the trafficking phenomenon.

Photographs are too easily seen as transparent, unmediated, mechanical transcripts of reality. The analysis of victims' representation suggests that these images tell us more about societal fears regarding security, ideas about gender, erotic obsessions and morality than about the phenomenon of human trafficking itself. Two competing depictions stood out from the analysis—one that shows powerless victims and the other showing the objectified unworthy prostitutes. The analysed trafficking representations signal that issues of oppression and objectification of women, normalisation of violence against them, and societal indifference towards brutality and exploitation are present in Serbian culture. It is from the deeply embedded codes of patriarchy and hidden misogyny that the meaning of trafficking is being produced. Such a matrix of understanding promotes the idea that women who sell sex are trading in their pride, dignity, and humanity too. To prove she is still a human worthy of our attention, the victim needs to be shown as coerced, subjected to brutal violence and control. In other words, reduced to a slave without agency, a child-like creature stuck in a helpless situation. This analysis suggests that the conflicting representations of powerless victims and unworthy prostitutes obscure the complexity of the trafficking phenomenon. Furthermore, frequent repetition of the unworthy prostitute trope seems to be both symptom and cause of negative attitudes towards women trafficked in the sex industry. Spreading

⁶¹ S Hall, 'The Spectacle of the "Other"', in S Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*, Sage, London, 1997, p. 268

⁶² Z Trodd, p. 339.

⁶³ R Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on representations*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 16.

⁶⁴ W Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, Macmillan, New York, 1956, p. 96, quoted in R Dyer, 1993.

⁶⁵ R Andrijasevic, 'The Figure of the Trafficked Victim: Gender, rights and representation', in M Evans (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, Sage, London, 2015, pp. 359—373.

the belief that women who end up in trafficking situations are to be blamed for what happened to them can further justify Serbia's insufficient efforts and the lack of political will to tackle the crime of trafficking.

Symbols of slavery in photographs testify to the tendency to link human trafficking to slavery with the aim of harnessing the moral potential of the anti-slavery movement. The enslavement of Serbian women by foreign men is a common motif in Serbian folklore, and the fear of it is deeply rooted in the national consciousness. Folklore poems reinforce the belief that women have inherent vulnerability to harms, are morally inferior, and are inclined to sin, as well as the idea that they need a male protector who will restore their and the national honour by saving them from the hands of the foreign abductor. In contemporary trafficking representations linked to slavery aesthetics, the issue of human trafficking is reduced to simplistic binaries of the free and the enslaved, us and them, the human and the slaves, which further contributes to victims' dehumanisation. It is, therefore, possible that images of trafficking victims lead readers to re-establish their privileged position in terms of safety and agency, and reduce trafficked persons to helpless figures or fallen women responsible for their own misfortune. This paper also shows that in the process of selecting visual illustrations, online media in Serbia refuse to represent anybody but white women as victims of sexual exploitation. Not recognising that non-white women and men can also be possible victims could severely limit their chances of successfully exiting and recovering from situations of exploitation.

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