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## 'Fighting a ghost': Collecting data and creating knowledge on sex trafficking in the League of Nations between 1921 and 1939

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### Abstract

This article analyses the understanding of sex trafficking in the League of Nations, with a focus on how the League collected data, critically dealt with its own data collection, and created a particular image of sex trafficking. I argue that a shift can be discerned in the debates within the Advisory Committee on Traffic of Women and Children, which was responsible for the study of sex trafficking in the League of Nations. Starting in 1921, the Advisory Committee focused on the mobility of women as a major factor in sex trafficking. After an 'undercover investigation' in 1927, their attention shifted to security. When the Advisory Committee researched the causes of prostitution in 1934, it finally considered prevention. The Advisory Committee was faced with different challenges and tensions that shaped the knowledge that it produced about sex trafficking. By analysing the minutes of their meetings, I lay bare that process of knowledge creation. Through the method of frame analysis and the concept of 'biopolitics', I intend to add to the existing historiographical scholarship on transnational cooperation and the League of Nations with an intersectional approach.

**Keywords:** League of Nations, sex trafficking, image of prostitution, Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children, data collection, interwar period

In 2019, a report from Save the Children described victims of sex trafficking in Europe as mostly young, poor, and emotionally deprived girls who had been taken from Eastern Europe under false pretences (Save the Children, 2019). This image of sex trafficking is similar to an image that took hold

during the interwar period. In this article, I engage with this image of sex trafficking that was produced by the League of Nations (hereafter referred to as 'League') during the 1920s and 1930s so as to uncover how this image, influenced by the international environment, changed during the interwar years (1919–1939). The focus of my study is the Advisory Committee on Traffic of Women and Children (hereafter referred to as 'TWC'), which was set up in 1921 by the League with the aim to stop sex trafficking.<sup>1</sup>

I examine how data was produced in the TWC and who was responsible for its interpretation. I also question if and how the TWC criticised its own data collection, which allows me to find out how the image of sex trafficking changed over time within the TWC. The chronological structure of this article shows those changes, based on how the delegates of the TWC learned from and responded to new data and political changes. The chronological subdivision based on reports from 1921, 1927, and 1934 underscores my argument that three great turning points show a move from mobility to security, and, finally, to prevention. These moves were influenced by challenges and tensions that shaped the knowledge produced by the TWC.

Rather than focusing on real life experiences of sex workers, the object of this study is to examine the discursive production of meaning and the negotiation of frames.<sup>2</sup> It aims to question how images of sex trafficking changed during the interwar period at the TWC and what caused these changes in perception. The TWC was made up of representatives of nation states, NGOs, and expert groups. Using an intersectional approach, I argue that because the delegates at the TWC had disparate ideas about race, gender, class, and nationality, the image of sex trafficking created by the TWC was the result of different political interests, personal motivations, and preconceived ideas about women, sex work, and migration. When sex trafficking was considered to be caused by mobility, travelling women were considered to be potential victims of trafficking. However, when sex trafficking was considered to be a consequence of poverty, lower-class women became the primary focus of the TWC. This shift is highly relevant, because the interwar images of sex trafficking still persist today (Knepper, 2014, p. 11). It is high time to question those images.

Over the last fifteen years, historians that work on transnational history have changed the historiographical image of the League. They no longer consider the League as a failed peace project but rather as part of an 'international civil society' (Jackson & O'Malley, 2018; Pedersen, 2015; Richard, 2012). A transnational approach to the history of the League has also uncovered new perspectives on the TWC. Scholars have shown that sex trafficking was addressed in the TWC by a cooperation of experts, state

representatives, and NGOs (Marsh, 2017). Still, few scholars have studied the TWC in depth. Katarina Leppänen and Barbara Metzger have demonstrated that sex trafficking underwent a process of internationalisation in the interwar period, and Liat Kozma has argued that measures taken by the TWC were aligned with colonial and sexist prejudice (Leppänen, 2007; Grant, Levine, & Trentmann, 2007; Kozma, 2017). Stephanie Limoncelli studied the roots of the movement against sex trafficking from the 1800s onwards and argues that the attempt to protect women from sex trafficking became a fertile ground for nationalists to gain control over women (Limoncelli, 2010).

Using the insights of the aforementioned authors, I study how the image of sex trafficking in the TWC changed and which factors influenced those changes. I am therefore adding to their work with an intersectional approach that highlights the varied images of sex trafficking present amongst the different delegates of the TWC. In addition to the insightful historiographical work, I have studied the material that the TWC produced between 1921 and 1939. It is kept at the League of Nations Archives in Geneva and includes correspondence, reports, minutes, and resolutions.

### **Framing sex trafficking**

In analysing the debates in the TWC, I am methodologically inspired by Dutch historian Marlou Schrover. She argues that, through the process of problematisation, it becomes 'possible to bend rules by emphasising the vulnerability of women' (Schrover, 2011, p. 4). Schrover recognises six phases in the process of problematisation, namely defining, claiming, legitimising, expanding, sensationalising, and suggesting what the causes and consequences of the problem are. The problem of sex trafficking became expanded in the TWC by linking it to other issues. By discursively linking sex trafficking to, for instance, migration, miscegenation, and crime, the delegates of the TWC used sex trafficking to address those issues. The tactical linkage of several issues creates frames, which Schrover defines as 'series of claims, topics or themes, strung together in a more or less coherent way, whereby some features of reality are highlighted and others obscured so as to tell a consistent story about problems, causes, moral implications and remedies' (Schrover, 2011, p. 6).

Throughout the debates of the TWC, the dominant frame changed. Based on the material mentioned above, I located three different frames that can be found in the work of the TWC, namely mobility, security, and prevention. In the interwar period, mobility was a central concern to states

that were preoccupied with population policies, restrictions on migration, and increased border control (Zahra, 2016). With the increase of migratory movements after the First World War, concerns grew about international crime. During the 1920s, social scientific studies pointed to the causes and threats of international crime (Knepper, 2011, p. 3). Security, therefore, became an important issue for the League. The prevention of prostitution, finally, relates to the economic crisis in 1929.<sup>3</sup>

The delegates at the TWC believed that knowledge about sex trafficking would allow them to prevent and eradicate it, but they had different opinions about how to collect the necessary data (Rodogno, Struck, & Vogel, 2015). These three frames – mobility, security, and prevention of prostitution – lost or gained strength depending on how the TWC collected data about sex trafficking. The process of data collection was not neutral and changed over time. The data that the TWC collected about sex trafficking created a victim narrative of the trafficked woman that enabled the League and its member states to exercise power over women by creating and regulating the women they identified as victims (Legg, 2012, p. 653). As a result, concerns about trafficking were instrumentalised to judge sexual behaviour and punish sex workers under the guise of protecting them and thus using their bodies as a site of control (Camiscioli, 2019, p. 4).

Collecting data about the perceived victims of sex trafficking meant having authority over them as this knowledge justified making interventions in their lives. The different ways in which the TWC framed sex trafficking in its reports provided a rationale for exclusionary and dismissive tactics by member states. As Philippa Hetherington has convincingly demonstrated in her dissertation about sex trafficking in the Soviet Union:

States governed in part through the biopolitical project of [...] differentiating between those capable of autonomous action and those not. [...] The production of the trafficked subject, a woman who needed to be supervised, kept immobile, stopped at borders and eventually rescued, was an important site at which these biopolitics could be worked out. (Hetherington, 2014, pp. 41, 418)

This article cannot capture the breadth of the work of the TWC. I therefore limited my analysis of the different frames that were dominant in different periods to a questionnaire from 1921 and reports from 1927 and 1934. Those three documents generated a lot of debate in the TWC and therefore reflect the shifting frames. Because the analysis is about framing devices, I applied the same terminology that is used in the material produced by the TWC.

## Mobility: An old debate in a new world, 1921–1926

During the transitional period from war to peace time, women's groups such as The International Women's Suffrage Alliance and the International Council of Women lobbied to get women's rights on the agenda of the League. They hoped to further their work through international law. One of the topics they chose was prostitution, which they described as exploitation of women (Leppänen, 2007, p. 527). Eric Drummond, the first Secretary-General of the League, opposed this because he regarded the regulation of prostitution as a national matter. He did feel, however, that trafficking in women was a matter of international concern (Limoncelli, 2010, p. 73). The fight against trafficking had the power to bring states together, not only because it crossed national borders, but also because it was linked to mobility. Many states were concerned about the rise of mobility that followed the war. They feared that 'undesirable' people would enter their state, that necessary workers would leave, and that women would reproduce elsewhere. This fear allowed states to introduce invasive legislation that limited women's mobility, such as forced repatriation or denying passports wherever suspicions of trafficking arose (Camiscioli, 2019, p. 6).

In 1921, the League organised the International Conference on Traffic in Women and Children. During this conference, the so-called 'white slave trade' was redefined by the League by replacing the term with 'traffic in women and children'. Another important outcome was that the delegates set up the TWC. The TWC was part of the section for 'Humanitarian and Social Questions' and was to be composed of five member states and three NGOs, with 'no authority nor direct powers' (League of Nations, 1921a, p. 82). It quickly grew in delegates, as many states and NGOs wanted to be involved.<sup>4</sup> The TWC centralised efforts to gather data regarding trafficking, write regulations, and raise awareness, but it did not make NGOs superfluous. The TWC depended on NGOs for receiving and disseminating information.

While most delegates in the League were male, the inclusion of women's organisations in the TWC made it the committee with the highest percentage of women. Seven out of fifteen attendants to its first meeting were women – be it mostly white, educated, European women (Dykman, 2015). They were, for instance, Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix, a journalist and activist who represented several women's organisations, and Annie Baker, representing the International Bureau for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children, which was created in 1899 and financially supported by European governments for their policies of limiting immigration and





*Advisory Committee on Traffic in Women and Children. United Nations Archives at Geneva. Retrieved from LONTAD (<https://lontad-project.unog.ch/idurl/1/9934>).*

preventing foreign women from working in brothels. These activists had to adapt to their new role within the League and cooperate alongside state representatives. Some state representatives came from a similar background, such as doctor Estrid Hein from Denmark, who had participated in national debates about raising the legal age of marriage, and Paulina Luisi for Uruguay, who became its first female doctor. The secretary of the TWC was Dame Rachel Crowdy from the UK. She headed the Social Questions section of the League, making her the highest-ranking woman in the League.

The delegates took a variety of standpoints. The British delegate, for instance, was a firm abolitionist, who opposed all forms of 'regulated vice'. The Japanese delegate, on the other hand, argued for regulated national prostitution while expatriating foreign prostitutes. This shows that, to some delegates, the nationality of prostitutes was the most important topic, whereas others were mainly interested in the occupation of prostitutes. Gender was also central, with Baker asking for strict limits on the migration of girls, and Luisi opposing such gender-specific regulations (Rodríguez García, 2012, p. 105). Furthermore, by stating that 'experienced' prostitutes chose to move abroad, the French delegate made the age of migrants a central concern.

## Collecting data in the post-war reality

The TWC wanted to override national prejudice and rivalries by collecting information in a scientific way and relying on 'neutral' experts. This was complicated by new scientific disciplines that contradicted each other, such as sexology, epidemiology, and psychiatry. Furthermore, while the NGOs in the TWC provided the transnational network that was necessary to conduct international studies, they did not have access to sufficient data. Hoping to uncover how widespread the issue of trafficking was, the Secretariat of the League, in 1921, sent out a questionnaire to various states worldwide with questions that focused on migration.

Many states were concerned with the uncontrolled mobility of individuals that followed the war, so in order to gain their cooperation in the fight against trafficking, the League framed trafficking as an issue of mobility by asking states how they 'checked' women at ports and railway stations, or 'controlled' agencies that provided employment abroad (League of Nations, 1921b, pp. 4–5). Further questions referred to the protection of 'emigrants', the repatriation of 'aliens', and expatriation of 'souteneurs' (League of Nations, 1922, p. 70).

With this focus on mobility, the Secretariat of the League tried to prove that it was a legitimate body that served a relevant purpose. At the same time, it allowed them to demonstrate that states would be unable to solve the issue of trafficking without transnational cooperation. For states, the connection between trafficking and mobility justified legislation that increased border control by claiming to protect women. By using broad and vague terms such as women who travelled under 'suspicious circumstances', 'unaccompanied', or for work in 'immoral industries', the TWC could single out unmarried, lower-class women who states saw as undesirable migrants (League of Nations, 1923, p. 12). Some delegates wanted to prevent women from travelling at all, arguing that the end of traffic in women should be achieved 'by means of immigration regulations' (League of Nations, 1923, p. 22).

Fifty-five countries replied to the 1921 questionnaire, of which nineteen were European, replying on behalf of 26 colonial territories in Africa and Asia. Three replies came from South-America and four from Asia. The remainders came from Canada, Haiti, and South Africa. The replies varied greatly. Former parts of the Ottoman Empire explained that they were working on national jurisdictions, while others replied that their records had been destroyed during the war (League of Nations, 1922, p. 4). The delegates of the TWC were not content with these replies and adapted the questionnaire several times to obtain more information. The focus remained on mobility and migrants, with a questionnaire from 1924 asking states to distinguish



between 'foreign prostitutes' and 'women and children who have been victims of the offences' (League of Nations, 1924, p. 2). The disproportionate penalties that were put on foreign women reflect the national and imperial attempts to control migration (Kozma, 2017, p. 26).

The replies to the questionnaires were not only limited but also difficult to compare. This led the TWC to suggest that there should be clearer guidelines for national legislation and that all data about trafficking should be gathered by national central authorities. However, even on the topic of central authorities, delegates were unable to agree. Some argued that the central authorities should consist of prosecutors or police officers, whereas others preferred to ask the Minister of Foreign Affairs, or those responsible for the care of refugees or public health. In colonial areas, colonial secretaries were appointed (League of Nations, 1923, p. 29).

In conclusion, concerns about mobility in the post-war turmoil shaped both the questions and replies to these early questionnaires. On the one hand, the debates within the TWC about the 1921 questionnaire showed that the delegates believed that refugees and widows were at risk to be enticed by traffickers, framing traffic in women as a consequence of mobility that followed war. On the other hand, the TWC stressed the role of mobility to motivate cooperation by states and the need to discuss it on a transnational platform. To NGOs, mobility may have been less of a concern, but the TWC offered new opportunities to influence legislation, as the TWC produced resolutions with guidelines for national legislators. Therefore, representatives of NGOs had accepted that the TWC defined traffic in women as a consequence of mobility. However, when the TWC suggested stricter border regulations as a solution, it led to resistance from NGOs. They questioned the data that the states provided, which created the need to gain a better understanding of how trafficking took place.

### **Security: New methods, new data, 1927**

As the legitimacy of the League grew, states became more cooperative and hoped to present a positive national image in the TWC. States, however, had very different approaches to collecting data on sex trafficking, depending on whether they had policies aimed at regulating or abolishing prostitution. The TWC tried to provide objectivity in this highly sensitive matter by setting up an investigation into the traffic in women. Such an investigation was proposed by the American delegate Grace Abbot, who argued for the need 'to obtain official and accurate information regarding the

existence and nature of traffic in women and children' (League of Nations, 1923, p. 16). Although the United States were not a member to the League, many American organisations were active in the fight against trafficking in women. In order to make use of their expertise and data, the TWC had invited an American delegate to join their ranks. A similar invitation had been sent to Germany, but the first German delegate did not join until 1927.

After debates in the TWC about objectivity and new approaches, money had ultimately been the decisive factor in the TWC's choice of methodology. The League had not made funds available for an investigation. It was financed by American philanthropist John Rockefeller Jr., who was a firm abolitionist and who selected American investigators (Rodríguez García, Chaumont, & Servais, 2017, p. 10). Although the TWC chose several of its delegates to join the investigative committee, the work on the ground was done by American investigators. They travelled as 'undercover agents', pretending to be traffickers in order to collect data from what they called 'the underworld'.

The American investigators brought a new frame to the forefront, namely one about security. According to their investigation, the problem was not so much mobility but rather the criminal networks that managed to escape border control. They claimed to 'have definite evidence that licensed houses create a steady demand for new women and that this demand [...] causes both national and international traffic' (League of Nations, 1927a, p. 14). In other words, regardless of limits on mobility, as long as prostitution was regulated in some countries, traffickers would risk moving women across borders. This widened the definition of trafficking to include movement within nations (Limoncelli, 2010, p. 77).

The investigators also introduced a new vocabulary. They falsely construed different types of female mobility as trafficking, referring to women as 'victims' even when those women had consented to both travelling and working as prostitutes (League of Nations, 1927a, p. 19). The report described trafficking in terms of trade, although it followed earlier documents of the TWC in not considering prostitution as work. By connecting sex trafficking to the movement of drugs and arms, they elevated prostitution to an international crime. In an attempt to connect traffic to regulation, the investigators explicitly linked traffickers to brothels rather than unregistered forms of prostitution. They concluded that traffic in women was caused by 'vice districts', where alcohol, drugs, and sex were sold. As a consequence, the newly defined criminal networks could only be stopped if states would work together in the League to put an end to the registration of prostitution (League of Nations, 1927a, p. 24).

It is also telling which places the investigators visited. Travelling almost exclusively in Europe and South America, the examples of traffic in women



*Special Body of Experts on the Traffic in Women and Children, who wrote the 1927 report. United Nations Archives at Geneva. Retrieved from LONTAD (<https://lontad-project.unog.ch/idurl/1/9972>).*

fitted well with the nineteenth-century conception of 'white slavery' (Gorman, 2008, p. 209). The image in the report is one of sex as a criminal business that can be halted by stronger security measures. Grateful for such a clear solution, Estrid Hein, the TWC delegate representing Denmark, felt that the TWC was no longer 'fighting a ghost', because '[t]he enemy had now become tangible' (League of Nations, 1928, p. 21).

### **Responses to the report**

The research report that summed up the results of the investigation was finished in 1927 and divided into two parts. The first part of the report contained general remarks about the definition of sex trafficking, the people involved in it, and the suggested solutions by the investigative committee. In order to support the claims made in the first part, the investigators referred to data and interviews in the second part. The Council of the League decided to publish the first part instantly (League of Nations, 1927d, p. 1). The report was made available on the commercial market to promote the findings. According

to Mme Curchod-Secretan, delegate for the *Fédération des unions nationales des amies de la jeune fille*, this 'helped to create a powerful current in public opinion which [...] would exert so much pressure on the Governments that they would be obliged to shut all licensed houses' (League of Nations, 1929, p. 22). The report sold over 6000 copies and its readers immediately demanded more information (League of Nations, 1927b, p. 13).

The second part remained unpublished, however, and such secrecy reflected badly on the TWC, which had strived for transparency. In the press, the TWC was attacked for hiding data in order to protect states (Knepper, 2014, p. 410). Seeing as cooperation and data collection had been going smoothly, the TWC feared alienating member states by making the sensitive information in the second part public. Hoping to please both the states and the public, the TWC decided to publish the second part only after governments had commented on it. This solution only led to more discussions about the prestige of the TWC, discussions that hijacked the message of the 1927 investigation, not only publicly but also within the TWC. While war-torn states had accepted American money, they were less eager to accept American criticism. The French delegate argued for instance that information received from persons of 'dubious morals' should not be published. The Romanian delegate further criticised the report for favouring abolition, which, according to him, was a matter of national legislation (League of Nations, 1927c, p. 10).

When the TWC had focused on mobility, states were able to prevent interference in their national conditions. The American grassroots approach in the 1927 investigation interfered with national policies and as such marked a turning point in how the TWC collected data, how it understood trafficking, and what solutions it proposed. The shift from mobility to security also changed the image of prostitutes. Rather than victims of mobility, the 1927 report framed prostitutes as victims of an international underworld that could be stopped by a vigilant state. The hesitance to publish the 1927 report was a result of the conclusions of the report, which were too strong to accept for states that pursued a regulatory approach to prostitution. The aim of finding a compromise between abolition and regulation was missed. The TWC was faced with the challenge of how to continue its work from there.

### Prevention: 'More sinned against than sinning',<sup>5</sup> 1928–1939

The cooperation between the TWC and member states of the League became more strained after the 1927 report. Regulationist states felt unjustly attacked by the TWC and became increasingly unwilling to share data.

Some delegates hoped to move forward by circumventing the debate about abolition and focus on prevention of prostitution instead. As a consequence of the economic crisis in 1929, the TWC saw a rise in clandestine prostitution that was concurrent with the rise of poverty and unemployment (League of Nations, 1932a, p. 4). Based on the advance of scientific knowledge, the TWC acknowledged the complexity of the causes of prostitution and trafficking, such as displacement, poverty, and mental health.

Luisi, for instance, pointed out 'the dangers involved by the present unemployment and economic depression' and Sainte-Croix added that low wages and the 'wholesale dismissal of women' had caused a rise in prostitution (League of Nations, 1933, p. 4, 1928, p. 8). The TWC recognised further factors that pushed women towards prostitution, such as housing shortage and lack of education, but also 'idleness, coquetry, greed and bad company' as well as 'the diminution of spiritual feeling, religious indifference and the effects of alcohol' (League of Nations, 1929, pp. 37, 116). The TWC published an inquiry into 'licensed houses' – their term for legal brothels – in 1934, which included the observation that '[m]any of the inmates of brothels are known to be mentally defective or otherwise abnormal' (League of Nations, 1934, p. 11). In 1936, the TWC identified the causes of prostitution as related to social and economic difficulties, as well as feeble-mindedness and insanity (League of Nations, 1936, p. 5).

These investigations located causes in early youth, which lent credence to the claims of female activists such as Sainte-Croix, who 'was convinced that it was necessary that the voluntary organisations should take the place of the family of these unfortunate children, who were more sinned against than sinning' (League of Nations, 1928, p. 17). Such a mindset allowed the TWC to closely monitor the behaviour of women to prevent prostitution, as well as 'rehabilitate' prostitutes. For instance, in France, women who left prison received 'moral supervision' and their wages from the work in prison was paid in small amounts '[i]n order that it should not be wasted when the prisoner was liberated' (League of Nations, 1928, p. 17). The shift to prevention meant that the image of sex trafficking again changed. The TWC focused more on children as potential victims, as well as the ages of consent for travelling and prostitution. In 1937, the TWC was united with the Child Welfare Committee.

The focus on the causes of prostitution also meant that the TWC had to cooperate more closely with other committees of the League, for instance about labour conditions and health. As the overall budget of the League decreased and states became less willing to share data, the TWC struggled to prove its usefulness. The public attention that the 1927 report had received made the TWC eager to set up another investigation. The delegates hoped

that the production of new sensational information would improve the prestige of the TWC. This time they decided to investigate sex trafficking in the 'Far East', which had not been researched in the 1927 report due to 'differences of race, religion, and custom' (League of Nations, 1927a, p. 48). The TWC again secured funds from the Bureau of Social Hygiene, but this time they preferred investigators with 'a wide knowledge and experience of Eastern conditions'. In the end, however, the Japanese delegate of the TWC was the only Asian delegate amongst those tasked to write the report (League of Nations, 1929, p. 66).

The TWC had drawn its lessons from the criticism in 1927. In order to safeguard cooperation from states, the new investigators only considered the international aspect of the trade and retrieved information from official government sources. This pressure came both from Asian states and colonial powers, as NGOs had been pushed aside in the TWC (Pliley, 2010, p. 103). It also resolved the European investigators' lack of knowledge of Asian languages (Martínez, 2016, p. 244). It is clear that the TWC was afraid of alienating powerful nations and was willing to accept restrictions if it would lead to their cooperation (Goto-Shibata, 2020, p. 115).

The study of 'the East' questioned the assumed universality of traffic in women, because it had to come to terms with the positions of *mui tsai*, *geisha*, and concubines. In addition to age and class, this meant that race was a determinant in deciding who was a victim. It was no longer the 'white slave' but 'oriental' prostitutes who were 'subordinate', 'impoverished', and 'traditional' (League of Nations, 1932b, p. 39). By framing trafficking in 'the East' as a consequence of poverty, backwardness, and lack of opportunities, the report reinforced the idea that trafficking could be stopped by preventing prostitution (Paddle, 2003). While the TWC tried to collect more data, the Chinese army was defeated by the Japanese forces in 1937 and the Second World War broke out. With the rise of fascism, nationalism, and growing tensions between states worldwide, the eagerness of states to protect their own image diminished the influence of the TWC.

Although the TWC continued its work throughout the Second World War, it did not produce more sensational reports. Due to the loss of interest from member states, experts and NGOs were able to debate more freely, but they could not effectively influence public opinion. When the United Nations took over the anti-trafficking efforts with a convention in 1949, most of the states that had initially been active had lost interest. Although socialist and post-colonial states carried these efforts for a while, it was not until the 1990s that the debate about sex trafficking prominently returned to the transnational agenda.



## Conclusion

The work undertaken by the TWC formed a novel approach, one that is still relevant today as it shaped current stereotypes and images. This makes it important to understand and question the frames that were prominent in the TWC. When the TWC was created in 1921, activists used the international stage to bring attention to the fate of white women. They constructed a victim narrative with these women as victims of the increased mobility that followed the First World War. The early focus on mobility united different groups and stressed the importance of international cooperation.

Financially supported by Rockefeller Jr., the TWC experimented with a new approach to data collection. The result was presented in the 1927 report, but the use of undercover work and the focus on abolition proved controversial. After states criticised this report, the TWC had to tread more carefully and use the provided data with caution, particularly since states became more protective of their information. When the economic crisis hit in 1929, the TWC recognised the complexity of sex trafficking and shifted its attention to the causes of prostitution. As the debates shifted from mobility to security, and, finally, to prevention, the image that the TWC created no longer presented women as dangerously mobile or naively tricked, but as victims of their social and economic circumstances. When the TWC acknowledged the complexity of these issues, it had to seek cooperation with other committees in a time that saw the roles of the TWC and the League increasingly diminishing.

The changes in data collection are reflected in the three reports that shaped the image of sex trafficking in the TWC. The delegates of the TWC wanted to provide neutral data and they hoped that science could objectify a debate that was instilled with prejudice and political competition. However, the causes and solutions that the delegates identified depended on their background and their motives, as well as on the changes happening within and outside of the League. Depending on how trafficking was framed, the TWC used different definitions, recognised different groups of victims, and suggested different solutions. This also depended on whose voice was taken seriously and who was ignored, as NGOs and their interviewees lost ground to the growing influence of states, and sex workers were almost completely ignored.

The TWC was a transnational body that worked with states, experts, NGOs, and activists. In their debates, discursive strategies and the production of specific knowledge obscured the differences between women and presented sex trafficking as a uniform crime. Rather than addressing the choices and

agency of women migrating, the TWC framed sex trafficking as an issue to be countered with invasive legislation. Such international and national laws were aimed at specific classes of women, who were seen as passive victims who needed to be made immobile, kept away from criminals, or saved from poverty.

The TWC is an example of how issues that required transnational cooperation underwent changes in the interwar period, revealing the complexities of international cooperation in an era of nationalism. Today's international organisations face similar challenges. This research can lay bare the difficulties of transnational cooperation, as well as the assumptions that shape contemporary debates. The current victim narrative on sex workers in parliamentary and supranational debates closely resembles that of the interwar period, as the causes mentioned in the 1934 report are still topical today (Andrijasevic, 2007). If that image is shaped by interwar anxieties, it becomes all the more relevant to reveal and untangle them so that we can nuance current debates by uncovering the varied interests that are driving them.

## Notes

1. The title of this article is cited from League of Nations, 1928, p. 21.
2. The term 'frames' is borrowed from the work of historian Marlou Schrover, whose work is referenced in the theoretical part of this article.
3. The use of 'prostitution' is based on the sources. Throughout this article, the terminology of the primary material is used when referring to that material, except for the term 'sex trafficking'. The delegates used different terms to refer to the migration of women for sex work, so 'sex trafficking' is used for the sake of clarity. The author does not necessarily share the opinions and reflections found in these sources.
4. A complete overview of the delegates of the TWC can be found in Annex 1 of the thesis that this article is based on (<https://hdl.handle.net/1887/137015>). The TWC consisted of delegates representing: the British Empire, Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, Poland, Romania, Spain, Uruguay, the Federation of National Unions for the Protection of Girls, the International Bureau for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children, the International Catholic Organisations for the Protection of Girls, the International Women's Organisations, and the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women. They were later joined by delegates representing, for instance, the United States of America, Belgium, Germany, India, Chile, and Turkey.
5. Cited from League of Nations, 1928, p. 17.

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