

# How to Stage a Raid: Police, media and the master narrative of trafficking

Annie Hill

## Abstract:

The article analyses a UK police raid in 2005 on a West Midlands massage parlour called Cuddles. This raid to rescue victims of trafficking reflects a state approach that, despite police claims to the media, is not victim-centred. In publicising the raid, the police and media participate in discriminatory practices that reproduce a master narrative of trafficking and cause harm to the women the state purports to protect. This article examines details of the Cuddles raid and its aftermath that are obscured in the official account and offers an alternative interpretation of raid photographs circulated by the media. Findings suggest the rights of women targeted in raids are disregarded and the harm they experience dismissed in order to amplify the state's anti-trafficking agenda. Bringing a fuller story to the fore reveals that raids tell subjugated stories and create spectacles that can challenge the master narrative of trafficking disseminated to the British public.

**Keywords:** trafficking, police raids, master narrative of trafficking, right to privacy, sex work

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## Introduction

On 30 September 2005, West Midlands police raided Cuddles massage parlour, executing a warrant in human trafficking as part of a wider anti-crime campaign called Operation Strikeout. Female officers entered Cuddles first, with fifty officers in total participating in the raid to rescue victims of trafficking. Speaking to the media assembled in front of Cuddles, Detective Inspector Mark Nevitt said, 'As we anticipated that there would be a lot of half-dressed ladies in there, 25 female officers went into the building first, to ensure that the women were decent before the male officers went in'.<sup>1</sup> Complicating Nevitt's claim was the fact that male officers had already seen 'half-dressed ladies' when they entered Cuddles posing as clients.<sup>2</sup> The crucial difference on this day was that the police had invited the media to record the rescue of 'sex slaves'. Given the media presence, a scene of men storming Cuddles and putting women into vans would not produce the image of a trafficking raid the police wanted to convey. Thus, once female officers made sure the women inside Cuddles were 'decent', they walked nineteen presumed victims of trafficking outside to face the media.

The day after the raid, on 1 October 2005, headlines across British media reported a triumphant scene, including 'Sex slaves freed' (*Mirror*); 'Sex slaves freed as police smash human trafficking operation' (*Telegraph*); 'Foreign sex slaves freed in dramatic police raid' (*Scotsman*); and '19 "sex slaves" rescued in raid on massage parlour' (*Times*). These proclamations about liberating 'sex slaves' turned out to be premature. Within days, West Midlands police decided they had not discovered victims of trafficking at Cuddles. In one sense, the media got the story wrong. Police had not freed anyone from sexual slavery. But, in another sense, the media got the story 'right'. It reproduced the UK's master narrative of trafficking by publishing news articles about police saving 'sex slaves' along with photographs to authenticate that narrative. Photographs of the raid gave the British public a peek into the sex industry and the pleasure of seeing police saving white women. This dramatic scene occurred in a climate of heightened concern about trafficking. Since 2000, the British public had consumed media stories that portrayed trafficking as invading the UK at an ever-increasing rate. The media depicted Eastern European women as the quintessential trafficking victim and severe cases of violence as typical

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<sup>1</sup> M Horsnell, '19 "Sex slaves" rescued in raid on massage parlour', *The Times*, 1 October 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Male police officers posed as clients to investigate Cuddles and suspected the presence of trafficking due to the presence of migrant women.

of migrant women's experience in the sex trade. For example, the *BBC* introduced the web portal, *Slavery in Modern England*, linking to stories with headlines such as, 'They raped me again and again', 'Forced to have sex for 11 hours', 'Sex slave regrets "ruined" life', and 'Duped into selling herself for sex'.

The Cuddles raid also took place amid broader concerns in the UK about migration from Eastern Europe. In 2004, the European Union (EU) admitted ten countries, its largest expansion to date.<sup>3</sup> The EU is predicated on the free movement of goods, services, citizens and capital (Directive 2004/38/EC), but only Sweden, the UK and the Republic of Ireland granted Eastern EU citizens full access to their labour markets at that time. The Home Office estimated annual net migration to the UK of 13,000 people from the Accession 8, formerly communist countries with lower per capita incomes than Western EU states.<sup>4</sup> Instead, over twenty times that number migrated to the UK: from May 2004 to September 2005, 290,695 people migrated from Accession 8 states.<sup>5</sup> Migration prompted the UK to reverse its open door policy when Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007. Anti-trafficking raids carried out at this time occurred in a climate of anxiety over trafficking and the shattering of Home Office migration estimates. Within this context, the Cuddles raid served as a response to British concerns about the effects of EU expansion and as a reason to repress the sex industry.

This article analyses a police raid in 2005 on a West Midlands massage parlour called Cuddles. The raid reflects a state approach that, despite police claims to the media, is not victim-centred. In publicising the Cuddles raid, the police and media participate in discriminatory practices that reproduce a master narrative of trafficking and cause harm to the women the state purports to protect. In what follows, I examine details of the Cuddles raid and its aftermath, obscured by the official narrative of rescue, and I offer an alternative interpretation of raid photographs circulated in the media. Findings suggest that the rights of women targeted in raids are disregarded and the harm they experience dismissed in order to amplify the state's anti-trafficking agenda. Bringing a fuller story to the fore reveals that raids also tell subjugated stories and create spectacles that can challenge the master narrative of trafficking disseminated to the British public.

## Rise of the Master Narrative of Trafficking

The UK occupies a middle ground in the range of repression Megan Rivers-Moore identifies in 'Waiting for the State: Sex work and the neoliberal governance of sexuality'.<sup>6</sup> She argues that the regulation of sex work ranges from a repressive mode of control, in which the state reaches out to capture and contain all sex workers, to a neoliberal mode of management, wherein the state withdraws, leaving individual sex workers to reach out for state services, such as healthcare and police protection. Analysing Costa Rica, Rivers-Moore describes an approach in which the state generally ignores sex work, except when conducting raids specifically targeting migrant sex workers. The UK's anti-trafficking agenda ended decades of state tolerance toward indoor sex work and shifted to proactive policing. In this repressive mode, law enforcement reaches out to capture traffickers and trafficking victims, defining anti-trafficking operations as crime control measures to intercept transnational criminal networks. As Julia O'Connell Davidson observes,

This not only makes it possible for governments to present measures to prevent irregular forms of migration as though they were simultaneously anti-trafficking measures, but also means that the authorities charged with a responsibility to contain illegal migration and combat organized crime are simultaneously deemed to be frontline actors as regards rescuing [victims of trafficking].<sup>7</sup>

The most spectacular instance of the UK's repressive mode of control was the police-led, multi-agency anti-trafficking mission, Pentameter 2. Beginning in 2007, this mission coordinated 55 police forces and raided 822 premises across the UK and Republic of Ireland. But Pentameter 2, like the Cuddles raid, had a dismal result. The mission led to the conviction of 15 men and women for trafficking offences, including ten people convicted without evidence they coerced women into prostitution, and the five convicted of using force were all detected by investigations preceding Pentameter 2. In a *Guardian* exposé, journalist Nick Davies revealed Pentameter 2's outcome: 'The UK's biggest ever investigation of

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<sup>3</sup> The new EU member states included Cyprus, Malta and the Accession 8: Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and the Czech Republic. These eight states were grouped together in part because the lower per capita incomes of their citizens suggested accession would trigger their migration to wealthier states in the West.

<sup>4</sup> N Watt and P Wintour, 'How immigration came to haunt Labour: The inside story', *Guardian*, 24 March 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Home Office et al., 'Accession Monitoring Report', 22 August 2006. See also N Morris and S Castle, 'UK economy boosted by influx of workers from eastern Europe', *Independent*, 8 February 2006.

<sup>6</sup> M Rivers-Moore, 'Waiting for the State: Sex work and the neoliberal governance of sexuality', *Social Politics: International studies in gender, state and society*, vol. 21, issue 3, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> J O'Connell Davidson, 'Will the Real Sex Slave Please Stand Up?', *Feminist Review*, vol. 83, 2006, p. 10.

sex trafficking failed to find a single person who had forced anybody into prostitution in spite of hundreds of raids on sex workers in a six-month campaign'.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith deemed the policing mission 'a great success'.<sup>9</sup>

The West Midlands police raid on Cuddles massage parlour foreshadowed the fanfare and failure of Pentameter 2. Police raids, and their official representation, reproduce the master narrative of trafficking, thereby reframing the discrimination and rights violations women experience under the repressive mode of control. The Cuddles raid is a pivotal moment in the rise of the UK's anti-trafficking agenda and a prime example of how the police and media spread the master narrative of trafficking in the mid-2000s.

## Establishing the Master Narrative

Stuart Hall et al. analyse the power of the state and media to produce potent narratives of crime. In *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, they argue that the relationship between mainstream media and institutional definers, such as the Home Office and police, permits 'institutional definers to establish the initial definition or *primary interpretation* of the topic in question. The interpretation then "commands the field" in all subsequent treatment and sets the terms of reference against which all further coverage or debate takes place'.<sup>10</sup> With trafficking as the topic in question, West Midlands police defined the crime by providing the public with arresting visuals and a narrative frame, establishing the primary interpretation that the Cuddles raid was a successful state action against trafficking in the sex industry. Conducting the raid and framing it, police set the terms of reference for trafficking and introduced key actors in this unfolding crime drama: state agents, victims and criminals. The primary interpretation of the Cuddles raid commanded the field, even after police decided no one had been trafficked.

Reviewing anti-trafficking awareness campaigns, Rutvica Andrijasevic details a 'representation of trafficking organized around the dichotomy of victims and criminals'.<sup>11</sup> This article extends Andrijasevic's analysis to include a third party—state agents—that mediates the dichotomy of victims and criminals. Raids personify the master narrative of trafficking by casting state agents in the role of saviours rescuing victims from criminals. In this way, raids tell a moral story that excites a desire to resolve a conflict between good and evil by establishing audience expectations that the police will stop the traffickers and save the girl(s). The UK's narrative represents Eastern European women as victims that traffickers exploit and police extract from sexual exploitation. In this triangulated relationship, victims are positioned as objects of state power, at once over-exposed and concealed through the raid's live enactment of the master narrative. Women taken up in raids cannot refuse police orders, resist arrest and detention or stop the media from taking photographs. In this profoundly disempowering situation, the police and media objectify women in order to publicise state action against trafficking. Police raids and public awareness campaigns both serve the pedagogical function of defining trafficking for the public via a dramatic display claimed to explain and exhibit evidence of this crime. The critical difference between trafficking raids and public awareness campaigns, however, is that raids use real people to stage the master narrative.

As Wendy S. Hesford writes regarding creating visibility for the issue of trafficking, 'Women and girls in the sex industry not only become instruments of pathos but also evidence—proof—of the need for antitrafficking agencies and policies'.<sup>12</sup> Raids function as a form of persuasion and a spectacular performance of state power that purport to show evidence of trafficking and the need for proactive policing. Claiming to provide proof of trafficking, police and media represent migrant women as signs of sexual oppression and state liberation. Drawing on data from India, Aziza Ahmed and Meena Seshu explain that raid narratives typically conclude when state agents capture victims, without following what happens to women after rescue:

The commonly told trope of the rescued woman ends here—she is now in the safe hands of the state or an NGO who will rehabilitate her, find her a new source of employment, and at some point release her from the rehabilitation home. In reality, this is not the way the story typically ends. Often, sex workers are taken into

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<sup>8</sup> N Davies, 'Inquiry fails to find single trafficker who forced anyone into prostitution,' *Guardian*, 19 October 2009.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> S Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the state, and law and order*, Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., New York, 1978, p. 58. Original emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> R Andrijasevic, 'Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns', *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, 2007, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> W Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human rights visions, recognitions, feminisms*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011, p. 130.

rehabilitation programmes where they are kept in jail-like conditions, may experience abuse, and then are eventually released.<sup>13</sup>

Focussing on the moment of women's liberation obscures these realities. Research indicates that raids cause fear among sex workers and can push them to work clandestinely to avoid detection. Interviewing migrant sex workers in London, Nicola Mai found that 'most feared a visit by anti-trafficking saviours more than coping with the people who enabled them to come and work in the UK, even when their relationships were far from ideal'.<sup>14</sup> Research participants in the United States told Melissa Ditmore and Juhu Thukral:

[R]aids were chaotic and often traumatic events which left them frightened and confused, with no sense of what was happening or could happen to them. They made it clear that they did not understand who was conducting the raid (other than government agents), what its purpose was (other than to arrest and deport them), or what the outcome might be.<sup>15</sup>

Sex workers captured in raids in Costa Rica are rarely deported; Rivers-Moore argues that raids therefore give the impression of 'doing something about the presence of foreigners and ... that the state is serious about securing its borders, while simultaneously allowing the sale of sex to flourish'.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, as the Cuddles case confirms, the UK deports migrant women captured in raids and detains women with UK and EU documentation. According to the x:talk project, a UK sex worker rights network, raids signal 'an unprecedented incursion into the lives and work of people employed in the indoor sex industry'.<sup>17</sup>

Research on raids in diverse countries indicates this tactic of repression causes harm and creates rights violations before, during and after the event. Sex workers fear raids, experience trauma during raids and endure myriad harms in the aftermath of raids, which can include interrogation, detention, prosecution and deportation. Media coverage exacerbates negative effects by exposing women to public scrutiny and associating them with stigmatized activities, such as prostitution, illegal migration and trafficking. Whether women are labelled sex workers or trafficking victims, this publicity constitutes considerable reputational risk and a serious violation of privacy. Yet the Cuddles raid, which aimed to show proof of 'real life sex slaves', disseminated the UK's master narrative and defined the crime as a sexual traffic in white women from Eastern Europe. In the next three sections, I focus on the Cuddles raid and its aftermath to analyse how the police and media represented the event. This analysis highlights the use of discriminatory practices against women and contends that publicised raids prioritise the spectacle of the master narrative over women's rights.

## How to Stage a Raid: Protecting victims by violating privacy

Detective Inspector Nevitt's reference to sending in female officers to shield 'half-dressed ladies' from the gaze of male officers not only overlooks the fact that the men already saw the women on earlier occasions during the undercover investigation, but ignores that millions of people in Britain and beyond would view the women via media coverage. In other words, Nevitt's claim to protect women from the gaze of male officers fails to acknowledge the problem with, and harm of, presenting women to the media's gaze. While expressing concern about exposing the women, Nevitt does not admit to the danger of media exposure or the fact that the police facilitated it by calling reporters to the event.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Nevitt disregards the harm women experience during raids that, by design, employ overwhelming numbers of police and spectacular displays of force to subdue targets.

In addition to storming the building, West Midlands police employed a tactic that resembles a much-maligned US practice: the 'perp walk'. Perp (or perpetrator) walks occur when people in police custody are forced to walk through a public space, usually to the police station or court, for the benefit of the media. American police and media coordinate to create these image events, which are made for public consumption. The 'perp walk' is not an accepted practice in the

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<sup>13</sup> A Ahmed and M Seshu, "'We Have the Right Not to be 'Rescued'...': When anti-trafficking programmes undermine the health and well-being of sex workers', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 1, 2012, p. 155—6.

<sup>14</sup> N Mai, 'Embodied Cosmopolitanisms: The subjective mobility of migrants working in the global sex industry', *Gender, Place & Culture: A journal of feminist geography*, vol. 20, issue 1, 2013, p. 108.

<sup>15</sup> M Ditmore and J Thukral, 'Accountability and the Use of Raids to Fight Trafficking', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 1, 2012, p. 141.

<sup>16</sup> Rivers-Moore, p. 421.

<sup>17</sup> x:talk project, 'Human Rights, Sex Work and the Challenge of Trafficking: Human rights impact assessment of anti-trafficking policy in the UK', 2010, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> I interpret DI Nevitt's claim as expressing concern about the women's privacy. His comment, however, could be read the other way: that is, as expressing concern about the effects on male officers of seeing 'half-dressed ladies'.

UK or Europe because it violates the right to privacy, threatens the presumption of innocence and humiliates people accused, but not convicted, of a crime. In the now infamous example, France roundly condemned Dominique Strauss-Kahn's 'perp walk' after his arrest in 2011 on charges of sexually assaulting a hotel maid in New York.<sup>19</sup> Police moving women from Cuddles in front of the media can be said to differ from a 'perp walk' because the women are framed as 'sex slaves'. But this point underscores the porous borders between people suspected of being traffickers or of being trafficking victims and how both are subjected to state power once captured through police raids.

That police thought the women were trafficking victims raises questions about the rationale for presenting them to the media. Publicly associating women with criminalised prostitution, as sex workers or as trafficking victims, threatens reputational 'innocence' as well as violating the right to privacy. If they are trafficking victims, forcing them to face the media is an unconscionable state action. If they are sex workers working illegally in a brothel, then the UK, under the guise of its anti-trafficking agenda, is in fact conducting 'perp walks'. By contrast, people accused of crimes were protected from the media's gaze—no images circulated of police apprehending the owner or managers of Cuddles—yet police enabled publication of victim photographs. Coverage of the Cuddles raid in media outlets such as the *BBC*, *Telegraph* and *Guardian*, both in print and online, guarantees global circulation of these images and makes women's exposure a continuous threat. What can be termed 'victim walks', or 'prostitute walks', occur in the UK because British police and media are producing these image events. We therefore have a situation in which law enforcement respects the privacy rights of people suspected of trafficking as it presents women thought to be trafficking victims to the media.<sup>20</sup>

The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CEC), which opened for signature before the Cuddles raid in 2005, contains Article 11, Protection of Private Life. It specifies that countries should encourage the media to protect victim privacy and identity. The CEC states:

Each party shall consider adopting, in accordance with Article 10 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms as interpreted by the European Court of Human Rights, measures aimed at encouraging the media to protect the private life and identity of victims through self-regulation or through regulatory or co-regulatory measures.<sup>21</sup>

In 2009, the UK brought the CEC into force. In 2013, however, the Metropolitan police invited the media to a series of raids on Soho. Writing a *Guardian* opinion piece under the pseudonym Molly Smith, a sex worker and activist recounts,

Sex workers in London's Soho had their doors kicked in by riot police last week. The cops brought along journalists to photograph covering women who were desperately trying to cover their faces. These images were splashed across the press.<sup>22</sup>

Smith also details the raid's aftermath, which did not appear elsewhere in mainstream media:

Working flats have now been closed, throwing women out on to the street. Some, who were migrant workers, were taken away by police for compulsory 'counselling,' detention at Heathrow, and enforced removal from the UK, despite protesting that they were not trafficked victims: they are migrant sex workers—indeed, several of the women currently incarcerated at Heathrow are active within the English Collective of Prostitutes, a sex-worker rights organisation that, along with the Sex Worker Open University, is protesting against the raids.<sup>23</sup>

As these raids suggest, police continue to solicit the media to promote the repressive mode of controlling sex work and, in so doing, continue to violate women's rights, including to privacy. The master narrative frames this state action positively, but its story of good versus evil crumbles under scrutiny of both the humiliation of women and their subsequent treatment by the state.

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<sup>19</sup> S Sayare, M de La Baume and R Mackey, 'French Shocked by I.M.F. chief's "perp walk"', *The New York Times*, 16 May 2011.

<sup>20</sup> I am not arguing that the police should correct the double standard I have identified by enacting 'perp walks' of persons accused of crimes, but contending that victims' right to privacy be likewise respected.

<sup>21</sup> Council of Europe, Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, No. 197, Warsaw, 16.05.2005, Article 11.3.

<sup>22</sup> M Smith, 'Soho police raids show why sex workers live in fear of being "rescued"', *Guardian*, 11 December 2013.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

## Challenging the Master Narrative

Media photographs of the Cuddles raid reveal a striking resemblance between policing tactics and the crime of trafficking. The raid photographs show police officers flanking the women from Cuddles. The master narrative depicts this physical arrangement as police protection, but reading the raid against the official interpretation suggests that officers are physically barring the women from escaping police custody. In one photograph, a female officer, wearing a black uniform and blue latex gloves, has her arms around the woman she moves toward the police vans. The women are close enough to be in physical contact, yet the master narrative positions them as worlds apart. Analysing the trafficking victim stereotype, Andrijašević avers, ‘while Eastern European women are likely to be white and hence racially not immediately distinguishable from Western European women, it is precisely the stereotype’s separating function that draws a line between these two groupings’.<sup>24</sup> The master narrative represents Eastern European women as exploited and then extracted from sexual exploitation; in contrast, British women are represented as anti-trafficking saviours that the state empowers to save Eastern European victims.

Undermining this stark dichotomy is the fact that the ‘trafficking victims’ and female officers look like each other: all are young, most are white. Given the physical resemblance, clothes are the main visual signifiers differentiating these two groupings. Black uniforms and blue gloves identify some women as police officers, while ‘trafficking victims’ wear casual clothes: black shirt, pink jacket, blue top. The distinction between ‘trafficking victims’ and female officers would disappear if the latter group were dressed in plainclothes. The raid photographs at once enhance and erase difference by revealing that, without the distinction of dress, policewoman and prostitute are indistinguishable. Given that dangerously close proximity, the master narrative reproduces the separating function and dichotomous relation between state agents and migrant women while the state’s repressive mode of control enacts the subordination of sex workers.

Despite the police interpretation that they discovered trafficking victims in Cuddles because they detected migrant women working there, the women are not identifiable as victims at first glance. This point is important in relation to anti-trafficking public awareness campaigns, such as Blue Blindfold from 2008, which instruct Britons to ‘Open Your Eyes to Human Trafficking’ in the UK. Unlike migration from Britain’s former colonies, in which the UK racialised difference on black/white and coloured/white binaries, with the arrival of migrants resembling white Britons, the state steps in to teach the public whom it should be watching and reporting to the police. As discussed above, police raids and public awareness campaigns share the pedagogical function of explaining and exhibiting the key actors in the crime of human trafficking.

Although police raids operate on the premise that they make the invisible visible—exposing the hidden world of trafficking—the Cuddles raid in effect renders the *visible invisible*. That is, the police raid hides the repression of sex workers in plain sight by showing it, but framing it as the rescue of ‘sex slaves’. Raids appear to produce happy endings, displaying the climactic moment of women’s liberation, but it is through narrative closure that they cloak discrimination against sex workers and the repressive mode of control. Through representational foreclosure, women’s experiences of harm and rights violations vanish from view.

## Rescue Aftermath: The victims of operation shootout

Most of the women captured in the Cuddles raid held EU passports and were legally residing in the UK. Six of the women had migrated from outside the EU. All of the women were working illegally because British law permits the sale of sex only when women work indoors and alone, making street solicitation and brothel work illegal.<sup>25</sup> After the raid, thirteen EU women were held in prison cells for two nights, but the six non-EU women were separated from them and taken to Yarl’s Wood detention centre.<sup>26</sup> As O’Connell Davidson notes, ‘The six who could not prove they were legally present in the country were detained and asked, in interviews conducted by male officers and lasting in some cases a mere 17 minutes, how they had travelled to the UK and how they came to be working in Cuddles’.<sup>27</sup> A BBC article

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<sup>24</sup> R Andrijašević, ‘The Figure of the Trafficked Victim: Gender, rights and representation’, *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory*, M Evans et al. (eds.), Sage Publications, London, 2014, p. 366.

<sup>25</sup> As I argue elsewhere, the UK permits only the least visible form of sex work. A Hill, ‘Demanding Victims: The sympathetic shift in British prostitution policy’, in C R Showden and S Majic (eds.), *Negotiating Sex Work*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2014, p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> Yarl’s Wood detains women and children and the UK has no set time limit on detention. There have been allegations that guards sexually abused detainees and repeated calls to close the detention centre. D Taylor, ‘Dossier calling for Yarl’s Wood closure chronicles decade of abuse complaints’, *Guardian*, 15 June 2015.

<sup>27</sup> O’Connell Davidson, p. 16.

reported, ‘Thirteen of the women freed from Cuddles on Thursday night were released without charge by police’.<sup>28</sup> The blurred narratives of liberation (‘freed from Cuddles’) and criminalisation (‘released without charge’) indicate the confusion about whether the police raid was a prostitution bust or an anti-trafficking operation. Human rights and sex worker rights groups secured for the women the thirty-day ‘recovery and reflection’ period usually reserved for trafficking victims. The *BBC* article quotes the Home Office confirming the deportation postponement ‘does not mean that the Immigration Service will not pursue the removal of individuals in the future when it is deemed appropriate to do so’.<sup>29</sup> The women were eventually deported.

Once police decide women without EU citizenship are not trafficking victims, the UK Border Agency can initiate deportation proceedings. Police made the determination of victim status in this case, but the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for identifying trafficking victims is also rife with problems in process and discretion. The Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group (ATMG), which formed in 2009 to coincide with the CEC’s entry into force, assesses the implementation of the treaty because the British government refused to have independent audits or a rapporteur. The ATMG reviewed NRM decisions by the UK Border Agency and the UK Human Trafficking Centre and found that the distribution of positive conclusive decisions and nationality showed a skew: non-EU claimants were less likely to be recognised as trafficking victims.<sup>30</sup> Also analysing the NRM, Abigail Stepnitz concludes, ‘Within the overall UK approach to human trafficking lies a stratified and often discriminatory system, largely reliant on rhetoric and practice taken from responses to immigration’.<sup>31</sup>

In the Cuddles case, deportations would have occurred without media attention except that the ‘sex slaves’ story had alerted human rights and sex worker rights groups to the police raid. These groups challenged the master narrative of trafficking by criticising official representations of the raid and demanding coverage after the moment of rescue. Speaking for Amnesty International UK, Sarah Green told the *Birmingham Post*:

The police undoubtedly designed this story as antitrafficking. But if that is the case why are these women with the immigration service because it has nothing at all to do with trafficking. As these women are now out of the hands of police, they have no status in law because they are classed as purely illegal immigrants.<sup>32</sup>

The English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) argued the women were victims of overzealous policing and accused police of conducting the raid to create a media-friendly trafficking bust. The ECP resisted the master narrative of trafficking by giving the media an alternative account of the event: this liberation story was ending with the forced removal of women from the UK.

In *Policing the Crisis*, Hall et al. state, ‘arguments *against* a primary interpretation are forced to insert themselves into *its* definition of “what is at issue”—they must begin from this framework of interpretation as their starting-point’.<sup>33</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that NGO attempts to reframe the Cuddles raid failed to replace the master narrative of trafficking with accounts of the state’s capture, detention and deportation of women. Moreover, the media never addressed the part it played in violating women’s privacy by publishing photographs with erroneous and triumphalist headlines. Women who do not conform to the master narrative rarely appear in media accounts (unlike those featured in the *BBC*’s web portal, *Slavery in Modern England*). Thus the public was less informed about the raid’s aftermath, and the initial splash of raid coverage created the most widespread impression. Finally, while police court publicity for raids, the state does not publicise what happens after the enforcement action. Coverage of the Cuddles raid aftermath occurred due to human rights and sex worker rights groups advocating for the detained women.

It is evident that a gap exists between the practice of labelling women ‘sex slaves’ in the media and the narrow parameters through which state agencies actually accord that status. On the one hand, publicising anti-trafficking raids persuades the public that trafficking is a huge, hidden problem and police are tackling it. On the other hand, the UK Border Agency and UK Human Trafficking Centre do not grant victim status without first investigating because that designation comes with rights and protections that the state is legally bound to honour. The police and media can

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<sup>28</sup> *BBC*, ‘“Brothel” workers to remain in UK’, 4 October 2005.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, ‘Wrong Kind of Victim? One year on: An analysis of UK measures to protect trafficked persons’, June 2010.

<sup>31</sup> A Stepnitz, ‘“A Lie More Disastrous than the Truth”: Asylum and the identification of trafficked women in the UK’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 1, 2012, p. 105.

<sup>32</sup> N Connor, ‘Cuddles “victims” held’, *Birmingham Post*, 6 October 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Hall et al., p. 58. Original emphasis.

quickly disseminate a trafficking story that reaches the public, but the slower machinations of victim identification may arrive at a different conclusion.

Varying levels of publicity, wherein raids garner copious media coverage but legal processes and victim outcomes are often hidden from view, allow the master narrative of trafficking to stand as the public record. The *Guardian* exposé about Pentameter 2 depended on Nick Davies' pursuit of a confidential government report acquired after what he describes as 'a lengthy legal struggle'.<sup>34</sup> The report contradicted government representations of Pentameter 2 as a successful mission and put into question claims about trafficking invading the UK. Official claims and their publication in the media suggest a troubling tendency: women are publicly presented as trafficking victims when it benefits the state, but when that status empowers women by affording them rights and protections, the designation is much harder to obtain.

## Conclusion

After media reports announcing a successful raid, the criminal case against Cuddles' owner and the two managers received less attention. The criminal charges are significant, however, because indoor sex work had been largely tolerated before the rise of the anti-trafficking agenda. In fact, Cuddles' owner was charged with running a brothel from 1998 to 2005, indicating his business operated for seven years before the raid. Police left it alone until the state approach to sex work shifted to reaching out in a repressive mode. In the end, the Cuddles case resulted in multiple deportations and brothel-keeping convictions, but nothing like the capture of traffickers in a sex slave story. The owner was imprisoned for less than a year and Cuddles reopened in 2006.<sup>35</sup> These significant details were likewise underreported.

As the raid on Cuddles and its aftermath show, West Midlands police publicised the UK's anti-trafficking agenda at the expense of vulnerable women, and the women were clearly vulnerable to police repression and media invasion of privacy, as well as to anti-trafficking policy. Reacting to the Soho raids eight years after Cuddles, a sex worker and activist using the pseudonym Mitzi Poesener argues,

Sex workers are vulnerable because their work is not afforded the same respect and access to safe working spaces that others are. By punishing them for working together in brothels to ensure their safety, and taking them into custody on the off chance they might be trafficked (presumably in order to make a large scale police operation seem more effective), the police show that their concerns over safety may not be as altruistic as first stated.<sup>36</sup>

Through Cuddles, the media got a 'sex slave' story and police received ample publicity to frame the problem of trafficking. That framing located rights violations in the trafficking scenario only, effectively shielding state agents from accusations of coercion, entrapment, detention and forced movement. One conclusion that can be drawn from the Cuddles raid is that presenting women to the media against their will exposes not the horror of trafficking, but a horrifying disregard for their rights. The media and public should not simply accept that police raids demonstrate victim protection. Raids are dramatic, and traumatic, events that incite a cascade of consequences that cause serious and sustained harm to people they purport to rescue. Raids serve the interests of the state, rather than the victims they produce.

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**Annie Hill** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies at the University of Minnesota. Her research focusses on sex work, trafficking, sexual violence, migration and law. She is currently writing a book on the UK's response to trafficking in the context of EU migration. Email: [hilla@umn.edu](mailto:hilla@umn.edu)

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<sup>34</sup> Davies, 2009. Nick Davies' report demonstrates the ability of the media to investigate, rather than simply repeat, government and police claims about crime.

<sup>35</sup> G Marks, 'Cuddles in comeback: Massage parlour reopens one year on', *Birmingham Mail*, 16 October 2006.

<sup>36</sup> M Poesener, 'What Motivated the Raids on Sex Workers in Soho?', *Feministing*, 10 December 2013.