

Preface

Many people had never heard of QAnon until the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol when Trump loyalists, spurred on by their president, invaded Congress in a spectacular and deadly display that killed five people. Enigmatic images were seared into the national psyche of a bare-chested, tattooed man known as the “Q Shaman” wearing horns and furs as he stood triumphantly inside the chamber. Despite the attack, QAnon conspiracy theorists can even be found among the ranks of elected Republican leaders in Congress. Its ideology has increasingly seeped into the mainstream. Believers claim that there is a cabal of Democratic politicians and liberal celebrities who sex traffic children and then harvest adrenaline from them to create a psychoactive drug called adrenochrome. Their information comes from an anonymous source, Q, who posted cryptic messages on 4chan and 8chan message boards, claiming that Trump had come to save the United States from this threat and would one day reveal himself in a great purge called The Storm. And yet, according to reporting from the *New York Times*, just a year before the insurrection QAnon had been “on the ropes.”¹ Having been largely deplatformed by social media, its members were running out of steam, becoming disconnected, and growing bored.

Then came QAnon’s “Save the Children” movement, in which QAnon members began hundreds of groups on Facebook and other social media platforms to raise awareness about supposed child sex trafficking. Their membership swelled 3,000 percent in just three months. As the *Times*

reports, “It created a kind of ‘QAnon Lite’ on-ramp—an issue QAnon believers could talk about openly without scaring off potential recruits with bizarre claims about Hillary Clinton eating babies, and one that could pass nearly unnoticed in groups devoted to parenting, natural health and other nonpolitical topics. Typical of the new, understated QAnon style are Facebook videos in which parents sound the alarm about pedophiles brainwashing and preying on children.”² During the siege on the Capitol, QAnon believers stole laptops of congressional leaders, believing they would contain evidence of their involvement in child sex trafficking.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, wearing masks not only became politicized but co-opted into a moral panic. *USA Today* felt obligated to run a story assuring the public that mask wearing does not make children more at risk for child sex trafficking. This was deemed necessary after the proliferation of viral posts on social media with headlines like, “Did you KNOW That a Child in AMERICA Is over 66,000 X More Likely to Be Human Trafficked than to Get COVID-19?”³ QAnon supporters and the anti-child sex trafficking social media groups would have members believe that liberals support mask wearing as part of the Democratic cabal’s efforts to sex traffic children.

Scholars have long observed how powerfully the rhetoric of sex trafficking can be instrumentalized by those with ulterior motives. This book is filled with examples of corrupt politicians, duplicitous evangelical Christian organizations, anti-prostitution feminist groups, charismatic fraudsters, and profit-mongering corporations who all use exaggerated statistics and sensational claims to spur a moral panic about the supposed proliferation of a vast but invisible tidal wave of sex trafficking engulfing the world. In all of these cases, the people in question—whether they believe their own falsehoods about sex trafficking or not—have other financial motives or are pushing various other policy agendas. The anti-trafficking movement was rotting from the inside out long before QAnon got its hooks into it.

There are now so many anti-trafficking organizations profiting off their own endless “awareness raising campaigns” that social scientists have widely adopted Laura María Agustín’s term *the rescue industry* to refer to the way employees and anti-trafficking executives capitalize on the powerful feelings surrounding “sex trafficking” in order to spur private donations, government grants, and corporate sponsorships.⁴ Many of these organizations exist purely in the realm of the spectacular—within online campaigns, social media endeavors, “documentary” films,

and campus speaking tours—but some attempt to “rescue and rehabilitate” actual people in the sex industry, often against their will. Because the rescue industry relies on sensationalism and uses only the most melodramatic examples rather than deal with the more realistic and nuanced forms that actual sexual exploitation takes, its leaders and their organizations are much more effective at lining their own pockets than at ameliorating the suffering of the exploited women and children who certainly do exist. This phenomenon is an example of what the sociologist Kimberly Kay Hoang has called “perverse humanitarianism,” in which the consequences of the “collusion of compassion (the desire to help those in need) and repression (unnecessarily harsh state penalties) and the problems that arise when NGOs, states, and individualize mobilize empathy rather than the recognition of rights.”⁵

There are many tropes and motifs in the mythologies of sex trafficking, but one of the most common is the erroneous belief that mega-events such as the Super Bowl, World Cup, Olympics, or other large conventions or gatherings cause major increases in sex trafficking. The most common estimate is that 40,000 women and girls are trafficked at each World Cup, but this is an example of what social scientists call a “zombie statistic”: an unsourced number that is recycled by the media, passed along, and retold, like a rumor that just won’t die. As I demonstrate throughout this book, there is no correlation between sex trafficking and mega-events. Indeed, the moral panic about sex trafficking and prostitution happening at these events is so pervasive, and so frequently and easily disproven, that it even has its own entry on Snopes.com debunking it.⁶ However, when I myself first encountered these claims over a decade ago, I remember thinking that it might make intuitive sense that demand for paid sex during large events would increase, and that this could create incentives for coercion and exploitation. And yet the victims never materialized despite millions of extra dollars being spent on extra police, consultants, and awareness-raising ad campaigns. In the introductory chapter, I reveal the economic reasons behind why sex trafficking does not increase during mega-events, but more importantly I demonstrate that what *does* happen during these events is that all the extra policing and attention result in the prosecution of consensual sex work. Even worse, mega-events correlate not with sexual exploitation but with brutal physical and sexual violence against the sex workers perpetrated by police.

Still, the media cannot seem to help themselves.

Wandering through Moscow, I come upon children playing in a park and sit down. A pack of football (i.e., soccer) fans, many of them

from Latin America, barrel through the park, chanting and singing on their way to a World Cup match. I realize that I have just followed the Moskva River down to Gorky Park. With a smirk, I pull out my phone to open Spotify and listen to The Scorpions sing “Wind of Change” (because, come on, how could you not?). Glancing at my phone, though, I see my Google Alerts spewing news headlines proclaiming: “A Stage for Human Trafficking: The World Cup in Russia” and “Sex Trafficking Made Easier, Thanks to the World Cup in Russia.”⁷ A British tabloid warns that “an army of seductive women, often working with gangs” will be ready to ensnare English fans “in fake Russian bride scams at the FIFA World Cup.”⁸

This struck me as odd. I had just spent the day with sex worker rights advocates, who had told me that the government had shut down almost the entire sex industry before the Cup. There was practically nowhere for women to work even if they wanted to. Instead, what women were afraid of was being rounded up and sent to camps for undesirables that they had heard were located outside of cities, where the homeless, drug addicts, and prostitutes were supposedly being sent. Some journalists did maintain that such internment camps existed, though I couldn’t verify how many sex workers may have been forcibly relocated to them. The reality on the ground during the World Cup in Russia was women living in very real fear of the state abducting them, not sex traffickers doing so.

Such sensationalistic headlines reminded me of similar news coverage I had seen when I was beginning research for this book in my longtime field site of Brazil. During the 2014 World Cup there, tabloid-mongers like Perez Hilton claimed without any actual evidence: “World Cup Expected to Cause Rise in Prostitution and Sexual Assault in Brazil.”⁹ For more than ten years, I’ve been followed by headlines and claims such as these. This book documents my own investigative journey as I tried to map the many hands of the state and how sex workers became collateral damage for the anti-trafficking movement’s more sweeping agenda to stamp out sexual exploitation, which for many of the powerful organizations in that movement means the total eradication of all sex work. Using multisited ethnography from my time spent in Brazil, Russia, South Africa, Qatar, Japan, and England, I examine the role of *obsessive quantification* and the media’s fetishization of statistics in producing the perverse relationship of the state to nongovernmental organization (NGOs) and religious organizations. These partner groups use bad data science and sensationalistic rhetoric to produce sex trafficking imagery and discourse that is spectacular but fallacious.

The consequences of such fallacious spectacles of sex trafficking are heightened surveillance, the impunity of the police, the further entrenching of a coercive state apparatus, and greater vulnerability of non-white women. Because of their international nature, sporting events act as an amplifier for these effects, expanding these same patterns of state-produced violence across the globe into a variety of political and economic circumstances. Consequently, the confluence of moral panics, global sporting events, and the spectacularization of sex trafficking by moral entrepreneurs and celebrity spokespeople in the rescue industry has morphed into a powerful and deadly force for those working in sexual economies. This book examines the dangerous shifts within the anti-sex trafficking movement to reveal how the changing nature of governance and the increasingly strong bonds of peculiar alliances between groups once divided by politics and ideology (such as evangelicals, radical feminists, corporations, and the police) ultimately perpetuate harm against vulnerable populations despite these actors coming cloaked in the guise of human rights.

