


# Researching Trafficked Women: On Institutional Resistance and the Limits to Feminist Reflexivity

Qualitative Inquiry  
17(9) 769–779  
© The Author(s) 2011  
Reprints and permission:  
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1077800411423192  
http://qix.sagepub.com  


Mary Bosworth<sup>1,2</sup>, Carolyn Hoyle<sup>1</sup>, and Michelle Madden Dempsey<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

This article exposes methodological barriers we encountered in a small research project on women trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation and our attempts, drawing on feminist and emergent methods, to resolve them. It critically assesses the role of institutional gatekeepers and the practical challenges faced in obtaining data directly from trafficking victims. Such difficulties, it suggests, spring at least in part from lingering disagreements within the feminist academic, legal, and advocacy communities regarding the nature, extent, and definition of trafficking. They also reveal concerns from policy makers and practitioners over the relevance and utility of academic research. Although feminist researchers have focused on building trust with vulnerable research participants, there has been far less discussion about how to persuade institutional elites to cooperate. Our experiences in this project, we suggest, reveal limitations in the emphasis on reflexivity in feminist methods, and point to the need for more strategic engagement with policy makers about the utility of academic research in general.

## Keywords

sex trafficking, feminist methods, globalisation, institutional gatekeepers

What could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what she has lived through?

Scott, 1991, p. 775.

## Introduction

In the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, politicians and practitioners have made the eradication of human trafficking a priority. At the same time, however, the British government has tightened border control (Bosworth, 2008) and criminalized a number of activities associated with prostitution (Saunders, 2009). Intrigued by the apparent dissonance between the government's commitment to "rescuing" victims of sex trafficking and the harshening rhetoric surrounding migration and prostitution, we designed a small pilot study of women's experiences of trafficking and their subsequent treatment by representatives from the criminal justice system and immigration services. How is it possible, we wondered, that a government which spoke out regularly against the "modern slave trade" of trafficking and created a new offence of paying for sex with somebody who is "controlled for another person's gain" (see, for example, Harriet Harman, in Woodward, 2007, and Travis 2008), could respond quite so harshly to the victims of this crime themselves?<sup>1</sup> We wanted to know, *from the women*

*themselves*, whether and why some were "rescued" in high-profile police actions and offered temporary admission to the United Kingdom, whereas others languished in immigration removal centers and prisons, detained and incarcerated for false documents or prostitution-related offences. How had these women survived? Who had helped them? What had they experienced?

Although the substantive findings of that study are discussed elsewhere (Hoyle, Bosworth, & Dempsey, 2011), this essay documents and analyses the considerable—and unexpected—barriers we encountered in our attempts to interview trafficked women. We offer these reflections in the spirit of paying attention to the silences of research and its power dynamics that characterizes much feminist research (Letherby, 2003; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2007; Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010). We recount our experiences for what they suggest about institutional resistance and skepticism about academic research with victims, while also somewhat

<sup>1</sup>Monash University, Victoria, Australia

<sup>2</sup>University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

<sup>3</sup>Villanova University, Pennsylvania, PA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Mary Bosworth, Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford, Manor Road Building, Manor Road, Oxford OX1 3UQ, UK  
Email: mary.bosworth@crim.ox.ac.uk

pessimistically, considering the limitations they reveal in emergent and feminist methodologies in resolving such problems (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Leary, 2008). We had, after all, anticipated difficulties. We assumed, for instance, that communication with the women would be complicated because of their limited English-language skills and low levels of literacy. We also expected complications in building trust due to their vulnerable legal status in the United Kingdom and their experiences of victimization. What we did not foresee, however, was the insurmountable barriers we would face in making *personal* contact with victims. It is not that we felt entitled to access, but rather that we were equipped for it. Access may be denied, withdrawn or difficult to obtain, and as we have written about elsewhere, university researchers are far more dependent on the good will of those whom we “study” than often we care to admit (Bosworth, Campbell, Demby, Ferranti, & Santos, 2005). Crucially, however, permission for access in this project was not denied by the women whom we wanted to meet, but by those professionals who worked with, and for, them.

### Research Design: Making Contact With Victims

At first, our research progressed relatively smoothly. Drawing on our existing contacts, we established relationships with a range of gatekeepers across a number of criminal justice institutions. Instead of looking for trafficked women in the community, by placing an advertisement in the local paper or online calling for research subjects,<sup>2</sup> we sought them in prison, in police custody, and at the main national advocacy and support group for trafficked women, the POPPY Project in London.<sup>3</sup> As well as conducting in-depth face-to-face interviews with staff at the POPPY Project, and with professionals in criminal justice and prisons, we also devised a short survey tool that we had translated into the 12 “high-frequency” languages of trafficked women (as identified by POPPY) for distribution to women. Such mixed methods have become increasingly common in emergent methods in social science research, where, in recognition of the complexity of the field, researchers seek to optimize their data gathering by deploying a range of strategies. Ideally, a well-structured survey can provide broader context in which to make sense of narrower, more focused, interviews (Irwin, 2008).

In our study, the survey asked eight broadly framed questions regarding the women’s experiences: (a) Why did you come to the United Kingdom? (b) How much choice did you have in coming here? (c) How did you travel here? (d) Were you accompanied? (e) Did anything upset or frighten you during the journey? (f) What happened once you arrived in the United Kingdom? (g) Who, if anyone, has told you what to do since you’ve been in the United

Kingdom? (h) Who, if anyone, has been helpful to you since you’ve been in the United Kingdom? Our aim was to distribute this survey to a large sample of victims and from the total to recruit a smaller group of women for face-to-face interviews.

The POPPY project, which pioneered and was, until 2011, the primary source of assistance for victims of sex trafficking in the United Kingdom, was extremely helpful. We conducted a series of interviews with their caseworkers and management, which produced detailed and illuminating data on women’s experiences of victimization and government responses to it. Alongside this research, the second site, a prison for women, seemed promising; it had a high proportion of foreign national women—some of whom we met briefly on an initial “scoping visit”—and a group of staff dedicated to their welfare. Anecdotally, the staff assured us that they had encountered many victims of trafficking, even attempting, on occasion, to obtain legal representation for them to rescue them from prison. They shared with us distressing stories of particular prisoners whom they had tried to help and seemed genuinely interested in our research. As at POPPY, our contacts in the prison agreed to distribute the survey. The final site of analysis was the police-led UK Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC), based in Sheffield, which is responsible for the high-profile police initiatives aimed at disrupting trafficking and “rescuing” its victims; the most recent police operation was named “Pentameter 2.”

Contact was made with a key figure at each site (the “gatekeeper”), based on preexisting relationships, well ahead of time. We spoke informally and at length to the key contacts at each site prior to interviewing them, and developed the survey for the women in response to their suggestions as well as in light of our systematic review of the literature. So far, so good; we were following tried and true qualitative methods that, in all of our prior research experiences, had worked successfully.

When we were ready to conduct the elite interviews, POPPY allowed us access to eight of their staff, representing a good cross-section of expertise and experience within the organization. We conducted semi-structured interviews of Support Workers and Senior Support Workers for both the Acute Services Team (the team working directly with trafficking victims living in POPPY’s short-term shelter housing facility) and the Outreach Team (the team focused on assessing potential victims who are referred to POPPY by their lawyers, the police, or medical personnel—or, less often, by way of self-referral). Furthermore, we interviewed both the Acute Services team leader and the Outreach team leader, as well as one POPPY worker whose area of focus lay in research and development. The average length of each interview was slightly more than 1 hour, and covered topics including biographical data of the interviewees, conventions regarding terminology used to describe victims

and their experiences, experiences of being trafficked as reported by women who access POPPY's services, women's experiences of exiting or escaping from trafficking, the types of services provided by POPPY to victims, and the workers' evaluations of the UK government's response to trafficking. Each POPPY worker was exceptionally cooperative and informative during the interview process.

From that high point, however, it rapidly became a project of diminishing returns. Despite having facilitated informal, unrecorded discussions with three key staff members on a scoping visit, the prison ultimately put forward just one employee to be officially interviewed. We faced a similarly bleak experience in our efforts to interview police working on trafficking cases. The operational lead on "Pentameter 2" agreed only to one interview and refused to assist in any further capacity, effectively barring access to other professionals working within "his team" as well as to victims of trafficking. Indeed, even our request to be provided an opportunity to view the physical environment of the UKHTC administrative offices was denied, despite our willingness to be guided by an official chaperone.

All of the interviews followed a similar semistructured questionnaire and were digitally recorded and fully transcribed for later analysis. On completion, we reminded the participants about our surveys for the women. Somewhat disappointingly, the police declined to distribute them, citing resource constraints, the vulnerability of the women, and concerns about "data protection."<sup>4</sup> Yet, we remained optimistic, as both the POPPY Project and the prison agreed to hand out the surveys and to help identify potential women to complete them. We left a total of 100 surveys between these two organizations, each complete with a stamped, self-addressed envelope, and while we began to transcribe the elite interviews, we waited for the mail.

Six months passed; no surveys were returned. Follow-up phone calls established that staff changes at the prison had meant that the surveys had gone missing, so we sent another batch. Caseworkers at the POPPY Project told us that they were distributing them and helping women to complete them but we received none back. We sent numerous, increasingly desperate, emails and left telephone messages asking for an update on progress. Finally, just when we were about to give up altogether, we obtained 10 completed surveys from POPPY, nine of which were written in English and one in Mandarin. Of the 10 completed surveys we obtained, all had been administered by POPPY workers and nine of the 10 had been filled out by POPPY employees, who had taken the time to go through the surveys with the trafficked women and record the women's responses to the survey questions. In comparison, the officials at the prison simply made the surveys available to the women to complete themselves. Despite repeated requests, no surveys were returned by the prison.

## Making Sense of a "Failed" Project

Putting aside the considerable academic pressures to remain silent about the difficulties we encountered, we think it is worthwhile to reflect on our experiences in light of Gail Letherby's (2003, p. 109) view that, "[s]ilences are as important as noise in research and the interpretation of silence is as important as the interpretation of what is being said." Indeed, in this field of inquiry, Letherby's assertion takes on a particular relevance for the simple fact that there are so few qualitative academic studies of women's experiences of trafficking. Instead, the vast majority of academic scholarship addresses trafficking at the legal, policy, or theoretical level (see, *inter alia*, Dozema, 2002; Gozdzik & Collett, 2005; Lee, 2007, 2011; Munro, 2006), or otherwise estimates the numbers of victims of trafficking without seeking their account of their own experiences.<sup>5</sup> Those few extant studies recounting personal testimonies of forced migration for the purpose of prostitution or other sex work typically draw on material gathered by NGOs rather than on interviews conducted by the academic researchers themselves (see, for example, Miller, Decker, Silverman, & Raj, 2007). There is, in other words, a gap, in the academic literature. Access and trust, without which research cannot proceed, are difficult to secure due to a range of methodological, epistemological, and ideological factors.

Some of the questions raised by our project are familiar ones of scale that often preoccupy the social sciences and all too frequently are used to undermine qualitative methodologies. How many interviews would suffice? Are 10 surveys plus the elite interviews "enough?" If not, how many surveys would have been adequate? Other issues relate more generally to research with vulnerable populations, yet, take on a new form when applied to trafficking victims in particular. Do we (sociologists, criminologists, legal scholars) have the right tools to understand transnational victimization like trafficking; do customary models deployed to explain domestic harms suffice? Can the violence and abuse experienced by trafficked women be understood adequately with concepts, methods, and theories criminologists draw on to understand violence and abuse against women who are UK nationals? Or, is their victimization of a different order—somehow more or less severe—as a result of other factors such as global inequality? Finally, what role, if any, does the customary set of disagreements over agency, choice, and prostitution play in obtaining access to interview those who have been trafficked for sex?

Notwithstanding our considerable experience of conducting interviews with victims of rape and domestic violence, none of the three agencies we approached permitted us to speak to the women themselves. Whereas others have pointed to an alarming retraction across a range of jurisdictions of research access from state authorities

(Hannah-Moffat, 2011; Hope & Walters, 2008), we faced skepticism not just from criminal justice employees but also from the voluntary sector. Perhaps most confounding of all, those with whom politically we felt most aligned were wary. Feminist activist research, in this context, had little purchase. Rather, case workers and advocates were clearly anxious that we would revictimize the women they were assisting. In their view, the women were simply too vulnerable:

I think their stories are *their* stories and a lot of times they don't even want to tell it unless to benefit their own asylum claim, you know, to keep them in the country because it is just something they want to forget, that when they talk about, brings back flashbacks and things like that. I think it is hard for them to talk about and that is probably why there is not so much research done. (POPPY caseworker)

For others, the women had already told their stories too many times:

The way things are done requires women to say their story very often to a lot of people. So that would be the police . . . Then it would be a criminal solicitor and if that solicitor is not properly representing them they will see another solicitor and they will have to say the story again. And then they will have to explain to the Home Office who might be doing a screening interview or substantive interview, again what happened, and then we are assessing them and we want to hear the story. And then if there is going to be a police investigation, they have to go through all the details again and again and again. And they are asking, they are saying "I have already told my solicitor, why do I have to tell you again?" (POPPY caseworker)

Going over their narrative again, we were told, would remind the women of previous official interviews during which many had faced a "culture of disbelief" from immigration authorities:

[The immigration] interviews are really, really long. . . [T]he whole point of doing a personal statement with a solicitor was that you would avoid having women having to go through everything in lots of detail in the interview, but it seems like they really want to push women on every sort of detail. It's a very, very thorough interview and the problem can be that there will be kind of inconsistencies in women's statements . . . and all those bits are used in the refusal, like, "you said that this, at this point and this at this point" . . . (POPPY Counter Trafficking Development Worker)

All of these qualms would have been easier to overcome had we been able to persuade the gatekeepers of the utility of academic research. At times, particularly in the feminist methods literature, it seems almost as though participatory action research has become a kind of orthodoxy, yet, few of the personnel we interviewed had much faith in academic study whether motivated by a shared commitment to social justice and gender equality or not. They claimed not only that the women would not believe that our project would benefit them individually, but, more problematically, that the lack of clarity over the impact of an academic study could actually revictimize them by taking their story from them for no (good) reason.

The effects might be long-term good for trafficking cases who are presently trying to access some support of benefits and other ones as well. But the thing is that these women have been in situations that things are taken from them and were not given back. So they will need to understand why what they're saying can make a difference and how it's going to make a difference to their lives. (POPPY Caseworker)

When asked directly what they thought academic research could contribute to the debate over trafficking, practitioners struggled to find an answer. Although one noted that, "academic research into country of origin, . . . trafficking routes and history and risk on return has been really useful when it comes to immigration cases" others failed to come up with any specific example of when academic research had been useful to them in their work. At best, the majority thought academic studies might "raise awareness" or "provide evidence" to back up the research and experience of their organization. Even then, however, the impact of such an account was held to be minimal. Thus, although one case worker asserted that "improving people's understanding of lived experiences is really important because . . . when you know what a woman goes through every day, and has gone through the years, and people can understand a bit better I think what . . . what people are going through and what kind of society we live in," she did not see how qualitative academic research might be able to help.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, our academic credentials were considered a liability. As the prison officer grimly informed us, in contrast to prison staff or NGOs working with prisoners, we would always and forever be outsiders and, as a result, untrustworthy:

I think one of the difficulties . . . doing academic research, is getting into prisons and actually, you know, making the contact, gaining the trust. (Prison Officer)

In stark contrast to all our previous research experience, the implication from all the gatekeepers was clear: the women would not trust us. We cannot know whether they were correct or whether instead the strategies which pepper

feminist research methods textbooks (Hesse-Biber, 2007), and all the evidence from research with victims of sexual abuse (Campbell, 2002; Campbell & Adams, 2009), would have held with this population as with others. We could not earn the trust of the professionals.

### Vulnerability, Utility, and Trust

There is a well-established feminist literature on the principled approach to academic research on female victims of abuse, whether domestic abuse, sexual violence, or sex trafficking. Research should be committed to the epistemic and practical emancipation of women (Maynard & Purvis, 1994). Giving women a voice is “crucial to the feminist enterprise” (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p. 167). It follows that if women are to overcome abuse, control or oppression, whether at the hands of individual men or of the state, feminist academics must create knowledge of *their* experiences and *their* viewpoints, not simply report the voices of those charged either with supporting or punishing them. In-depth, qualitative research is seen as essential to this endeavor because it allows “individual women’s understandings, emotions, and actions in the world [to] be explored in those women’s own terms” (Jayaratne & Stewart, 1995, p. 217).

As researchers, we were fully committed to giving trafficked women a voice to describe their experiences in an interview that was explicitly not aimed at challenging their understanding of those experiences; that sought to give women the space to define themselves and their own role in their recent past. We were interested in whether the women saw themselves only in terms of victimization if they wished to assert their own agency during at least part of their journey, as other studies have suggested (Buckland, 2008). Indeed, we considered whether narratives of vulnerability and powerlessness were being encouraged by the criminal justice response in ways that were detrimental to trafficked women, either specific women who seek help or the wider trafficked population (Chapkis, 2003; Goodey, 2008). We saw this as crucial to our understanding of trafficking and to the wider project of understanding victimization. There is a clear tension in the academic literature between interpreting and labeling female victims of male violence as “victims” or “survivors,” as determined by their experiences and position in society or in the family or as agents with some control over their lives, as passive or as actively participating in the social relations around them (Rock, 2002). We hoped to contribute to this debate.

Although being alive to the risk that our interviews could further damage vulnerable women, we were also aware of evidence in the academic literature that victims of even serious violence want their voices heard, even though they themselves acknowledge that telling their stories might be painful. Paul Rock found this to be true in his research on

families of homicide victims. He was told by the relatives of murder victims that, on one hand, they resented media attention but, on the other, they did not want to be ignored by the media or by academic researchers. The inference he drew is that they believed (quite rightly) that what they had gone through was too momentous to be dismissed. Furthermore, although they wanted to be heard, they held that *they* were the true experts on their condition and that outsiders—such as academics, counselors, and psychiatrists—could not fully understand what they had undergone without listening to and reporting *their* words. Hence, although they wanted others to convey to the world the depths of their suffering, the medium they preferred was case histories, not analysis. They wanted their own interpretations of their experiences to be found on the page (Rock, 1998, 2010). We had anticipated that the same would be true of victims of trafficking.

The question that remains then is whether there is anything substantially different or distinctive about the kind of victimization that trafficked women have endured that renders them unable to be interviewed. Is it a question of degree, in which trafficked women experience a qualitatively worse level or kind of violence that renders them too vulnerable? Unfortunately, we cannot know the answer to that question since so little evidence exists about their personal experiences, and our surveys did not succeed in capturing much. In any case, accounts of domestic violence and rape can vary in intensity and brutality, with extreme examples of suffering distressingly easy to find, as academic literature as well as media reports have shown us since Susan Brownmiller’s powerful polemic, *Against Our Will*, was published in 1975 (Dutton, 2006; Hoyle, 1998; Kelly, 1988; Websdale, 1999).

So, too, the suggestion that the problem with this population might relate to their treatment by the British state is not sufficient, on its own, to differentiate them from other victims. For example, the majority of women in prison have been victims of domestic and other sexual abuse, and research has shown how such factors play important roles in their pathways to crime (Richie, 1994). Such women may be asked to relate their experiences of victimization as mitigating factors in their trials, and once they are incarcerated, in their screening interviews on arrival. It is true that such interviews are unlikely to be as extensive as those required by the Home Office to establish the credibility of a woman’s claim to having been trafficked, yet any woman reporting a rape will have to endure lengthy interview by the police and further questioning in court (Temkin, 2002).

Two key areas in which trafficked victims are distinctive, though perhaps not unique, lie in their immigration status and their home country. Accounts of transnational sex trafficking typically distinguish source countries from destination countries (Bertone, 2000). “Source” countries are significantly less economically developed as compared

to “destination” countries (Aghatise, 2002; Flamm, 2003). This finding should come as no surprise, for it is precisely these patterns of global inequality that creates the context in which traffickers are able to exploit their victims: offering hope for a better life in a destination country to women who face relatively few options for survival, let alone economic advancement in their countries of origin (Turner & Kelly, 2009). The question for us, is does it alter (worsen) what victims experience?

Does the existence of global inequality simply add another layer of harm to their victimization—making their treatment in the United Kingdom that much *more* serious than it otherwise would be if the women came from countries which provided them with an adequate range of valuable options? These women, after all, may well have suffered considerable economic privations. They are unlikely to have received much formal education and, depending on their country of origin, more likely to have come from an entrenched patriarchal culture where violence against women is rarely policed or is ingrained in the culture and history of a jurisdiction (Long, 2004), or to have fled civil war or conflicts characterized by gross human rights violations (Corrin, 2005).<sup>7</sup>

However, could the fact that the victims came from desperate circumstances in their countries of origin somehow be seen as reducing the seriousness of the abuse they suffer on arrival in the United Kingdom? What is the proper comparator for understanding their suffering? Should we understand their experiences of suffering as victims of international trafficking as compared to the experiences they *would* have lived had they been UK nationals or to the experiences they would have likely had if they had continued to live in their countries of origin? Or is there some Archimedean point at which researchers can stand to properly account for their suffering as compared to the experiences of the abstracted woman (or person?) without a nation, living outside systems of global inequality?

To be sure, research with trafficked victims must start from a belief in our shared common bonds of humanity, as well as their entitlement to protection under international human rights. However, as with any transnational population, criminologists must acknowledge cultural, economic, and other differences. The implications of the “foreignness” of those who have been trafficked for sex, as well as their legal status as noncitizens is, frustratingly, most difficult to establish without access to the women themselves. Presumably, practical concerns, such as language, could indeed make the experience of victimization that much harder to bear, as women who are unable to communicate in the dominant language of the destination country are typically less able to secure assistance. Interviews would have been difficult, and may well have required an interpreter, preferably from the woman’s country. So, too, if their passport had been confiscated or destroyed, they may have been

fearful to identify themselves. Depending on their source country, they may also have had little trust for state authorities to help them, or not known where to turn. Unfortunately, without direct access to the voices of the women themselves, we cannot know about any of these issues for certain.

Instead, what does seem clear is that, despite the fact that legally speaking, trafficking does not have to involve a border crossing,<sup>8</sup> in practical terms, most police attention and public and political rhetoric has focused on the exploitation of foreign women.<sup>9</sup> Although such women may indeed be subjected to familiar forms of sexualized violence that criminologists have studied for many years, their own particular experiences will be shaped by the voyage they endure to arrive in the United Kingdom, and thus, their point of origin is important. To understand their victimization, and how they came to be trafficked in the first instance, scholars need to build on what we already know about prostitution, rape, and domestic violence, while learning more about other jurisdictions, in particular their social and economic conditions and their justice systems. Such factors may be particularly important in appreciating how women cope with the harms they experience. Do trafficked women use drugs or alcohol to cope? Are they religious? Do they support one another? How, if at all, do they maintain contact with family members at home?

Addressing these issues directly could contribute new insights to the literature on sexual violence and, in particular, to our understanding of why, when, and how, women self-identify as victims. Particularly in instances where there is a cost associated with disclosure, either in terms of increased risk of harm from perpetrators, risk of alienation from the victim’s family or community, or simply the cost of reliving the emotional trauma of the experience, women often do not wish to share their experiences of being sexually violated. Women sometimes fail to disclose these experiences for the simple reason that they do not perceive their own experience as fitting the category under examination. Women often redefine their experiences in ways that both enhance their ability to survive while, ironically, making their own self-identification as a survivor of sexual violence less likely (see, for example, Kelly, 1988).

For trafficked women, it also seems likely that their interpretation of their victimization—how it shapes their sense of self—would reflect their cultural and religious beliefs and their prior experiences in their home country. For example, we were told by a Chinese research assistant that women trafficked from South East Asia would be highly unlikely to talk to us about their victimization and even to complete our survey as they would feel so ashamed of their experiences. One Chinese woman did complete the survey but gave fewer qualitative comments than the women from other jurisdictions. Given the small numbers, however, we cannot know what to make of that. We cannot

know if in fact women refused to complete our surveys or were simply not told about them, and if they did decide not to participate, if this was because they could not see the use of such research, for them or for others. Furthermore, we cannot know if those who completed our survey chose not to be interviewed by us because they simply could not see the point or if in fact they were not told of our desire to speak with them face-to-face. Likewise, given the lack of support to facilitate completion of the surveys by women in prison, it is not surprising that the data yield from the prison was nil. Women in prison, and, we would, assume particularly those who may have been trafficked, have low levels of literacy. Yet, of course, we cannot know this for sure. Maybe there simply were no trafficking victims in that prison at that time.

To some extent, of course, questions about the utility of academic research, like those concerning the impact of victimization, are not new. Although these debates are not limited to criminology, criminologists have recently engaged in fairly heated dispute over the role and purpose of their discipline, in a manner that is instructive. For some, like Lawrence Sherman (2009), the goal of criminological research should be to produce effective responses to crime. For others (Hope, 2009), we should be more circumspect. Ian Loader and Richard Sparks (2010) would have us be more optimistic: we can work together in the academy and with policy makers to bring out change and social justice.

As a discipline fundamentally concerned with agencies of state power and governance, criminology has always occupied a particular—if sometimes uneasy—position vis-à-vis the state; acting variously to legitimate its power, to challenge it, or simply to reform it. The challenge posed by populations like trafficked women is whether criminology can understand and explain the experiences and treatment of those from elsewhere. Although some, like Janet Chan (2005, p. 340) argue that “criminology has always been global in its orientation,” others are skeptical, arguing instead that criminology has largely been tied to the nation state (Morrison, 2005). For Katja Franko Aas (2007), “criminology seems to be, theoretically and methodologically, somewhat ill-equipped for analysing and researching the relevance of the emerging ‘space of flows.’ There is therefore a need to develop concepts and methodologies that are sensitive to the complexities of the global.” (p. 296).

Although in other social sciences (Kenway & Fahey, 2009; Urry, 2000), scholars have discussed the impact of globalization, on both their methods and their conceptual framework, criminologists have yet to say much on this matter. Such disengagement with the impact of globalization not only makes it difficult to make sense of mobile populations, like victims of trafficking, but also, increasingly, to understand the local as well. In a world perpetually in motion (Aas, 2007), even those who stay within the confines of their native locale are not untouched by the broader

context. Part of the contention about trafficking victims, after all, is simply the familiar question of consent and coercion in the commercial sex industry. Understanding the experiences of those forced in from abroad, may, therefore shed light on others who have not gone so far.

Likewise, as institutions of the nation state, the prison and the police as well as the immigration authorities, are set to work to deal with those from elsewhere; the United Kingdom invests not only financially but also symbolically in securing and defining its own institutional limits. The kinds of issues that confront an academic study of forced prostitution—whether of vulnerability, efficacy, trust, or merely recognition and comprehension—must also be relevant to the state agencies dealing with this population. The analytic and definitional categories with which we are all working must expand to include those from elsewhere who are always already present among us.

## Conclusion: Understanding Transnational Victimization

The difficulties we encountered in this project are, to some extent, present in all empirical research with vulnerable populations. Securing access is always contingent on gaining trust from gatekeepers and victims. Likewise, the utility of scholarly research is not always self-evident. There will always be competing reasons why some participants may wish to speak and others to remain silent (Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010).

The particularity of our experience, however, relates to the inherent difficulties a vulnerable mobile population has in speaking and being heard. Though forces of globalization are indeed, forcing open borders so, too, these borders are becoming more heavily regulated and policed. Under these conditions, the demands for recognition, inherent in claiming the status as a victim of trafficking, are harder to sustain. The agencies working with them may have been right to worry about the risk of revictimization and query whether the value of academic research is worth the risk—but ironically, in so doing, they themselves may have further silenced the very women whose stories need to be understood.

As others have observed, particularly in transnational arenas, NGOs like POPPY play a significant role these days in the production of knowledge, and they guard this part of their job closely (Mendez & Woolf, 2007). Unlike much academic research, that conducted by NGOs speaks directly to policy makers and the public. In so doing, they both construct and justify particular narratives. When the population in question is vulnerable, advocates shape and structure the communication of their experiences, effectively controlling the way in which their stories are represented to the wider public. In terms of trafficking, the stakes are high. If the articulation of the victim’s experience fails to resonate with the legal and political culture’s understanding of what

counts as trafficking, the victim will be denied the legal protections and social welfare provisions to which trafficking victims are entitled. As such, one aspect of effective victim advocacy involves working with victims to assist them in communicating their experiences both truthfully *and* in a way that will offer victims the greatest legal and social protections.<sup>10</sup>

If academics are to obtain access to victims of trafficking, then they need to persuade victim advocates to trust them. Whereas once, this might have been a straightforward feminist matter, one that women scholars and policy makers could agree on, the decades of dispute over consent and coercion in prostitution and victims services, have taken a heavy toll. Part of the work that needs doing, in other words, is a political one: a more open discussion from all sides over the nature, causes, and effect of sexual violence and prostitution. So, too, our experiences on this project suggest that it may be necessary in some research to devise a series of publications, some of which are not purely academic. Perhaps, we could have been more persuasive if we had been able to offer the organizations something more useful than a set of scholarly articles.

Finally, our experiences in this project stand as a useful reminder that empirical research is difficult and that to overcome barriers scholars must not only fulfill all the institutional requirements beforehand (IRB committees, making contact with gatekeepers, and so on) but also to be prepared to innovate. In this task, that of innovation, the more recent field of “emergent methods” as well as the more established one of feminist methods may have ideas to contribute, yet, we suggest, only if they take more seriously the political and institutional factors that may restrict access, a consideration that would require a shift away, at least in the feminist literature, from the focus on vulnerable participants. In criminology, strategies for negotiating institutional barriers to research are multiple. Some academics bypass the gatekeepers by hanging out directly with victims and offenders on the street. Others seek out participants through other means: advertisements in newspapers, calling brothels, leaving cards in telephone boxes. Still others conduct their research entirely by correspondence. Some of these strategies could work with some victims of trafficking, and may be worth pursuing in more detail in the future. What we must not lose, however, as public and voluntary institutions narrow their access, is our commitment to seeking out the direct experiences of those we wish to understand. It is not that we are in thrall to the “authenticity” of experience, as critiqued by Joan Scott (1991) so many years ago now. There may, indeed, be perfectly sound and rational reasons for research participants to be silent. The issue, however, remains, that unless victims have the opportunity to speak, in their own voice, of their own volition, then they will remain shadowy, figures, who, particularly if they are non-nationals, as in the case of those who have been trafficked, will be all too easily excluded and forgotten.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier drafts of this article.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authors would also like to acknowledge the financial assistance from the Hulme University Fund, Brasenose College, Oxford which funded the majority of this study. Mary Bosworth would also like to acknowledge the British Academy who funded her Immigration Detention study, through a British Academy Research Development Award from 2010 to 2012.

## Notes

1. One example of such harsh response is the case of a victim who was kidnapped and trafficked from Moldova at the age of 14. UK police and immigration officers arrested her in a London brothel in 2003 and imprisoned her for three months before sending her back to Moldova. After being re-trafficked to the UK, she was arrested in 2007 and held at Yarl's Wood immigration detention centre, before finally being assisted by the POPPY project (11 April, 2011, *The Guardian*).
2. For accounts of alternative methodologies see Cwikel and Hoban, 2005 and Tyldum, 2010.
3. Established in 2003 the Poppy Project was funded by the Ministry of Justice until April 2011 to offer housing and support to women who had been trafficked into prostitution or domestic servitude. In addition to its advocacy and support work it produced regular research reports on trafficking and is a key player in policy making in this area. In April 2011, the UK government decided not to renew its contract with Poppy, selecting the Salvation Army as the primary service provider instead.
4. In the UK the Data Protection Act 1998 governs dissemination and retention of research data and information held by government employees, companies and individual researchers.
5. See Brunovskis and Tyldum (2005) for a critique of such studies.
6. While, for the most part, it was academic research *per se* that was found lacking in utility, for at least one POPPY employee, the problem was broader still. “I find it hard to see,” this respondent pessimistically claimed, “. . . even if there was this great report that highlighted all these things that were wrong and all the service flaws, the prison and police and all, I really don't think that still anything would be done. . . . I mean there are so many things . . . that actually are in place that the police themselves don't even follow you know and . . . I don't know how we are going to infiltrate and educate really, I find it very frustrating.”

7. See various reports by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, New York (Young, 2006; Young & Pyne, 2006).
8. Sexual Offences Act (2003; as amended) §§57-59.
9. This balance may be shifting a little. In 2011 there have been a series of high-profile cases involving 'grooming' and trafficking of young girls within Britain. Those cases which have been reported in the media, however, have emphasized the 'foreign' nature of the traffickers, however, stressing their ethnic minority status. In one particularly inflaming statement, former Home Secretary Jack Straw claimed that 'some Pakistani men saw white girls as "easy meat"' (Straw, quoted in Topping, 2011, p. 3).
10. So, too, in the voluntary sector, gatekeepers must also consider the implications of research for potential funders. It is, in other words, in their institutional interest, to demonstrate that trafficking is both widespread and an extremely harmful experience for its victims. Though our research uncovered no evidence that this set of considerations played any significant role in motivating the actions of the gatekeepers we encountered, it stands to reason that anti-trafficking advocates have a strong motivation to communicate victims' experiences in ways that highlight the serious human rights violations victims experience. Indeed, funding for support services for victims of trafficking is extremely vulnerable. The founder of the main national organization, the POPPY Project, spoke out publicly in February 2011 about the difficulty her organization was facing in continuing to offer services to vulnerable women. Indeed, Denise Marshall handed back her OBE, which she had been awarded for her advocacy work in 2007, over cuts in government funding. (15 February, 2011, *Guardian*, p. 1.).

## References

- Aas, K. (2007). Analysing a world in motion: Global flows meet criminology of the other. *Theoretical Criminology*, 11, 283-303
- Aghatise, J. E. (2002). Debt, globalisation and women trafficking. *Violence Watch*, 4(2), 12-13.
- Bertone, A. M. (2000). Sexual trafficking in women: International political economy and the politics of sex. *Gender Issues*, 19(1), 4-22.
- Bosworth, M. (2008). Border control and the limits of the sovereign state. *Social and Legal Studies*, 17, 199-215.
- Bosworth, M., Campbell, D., Demby, B., Ferranti, S. M., & Santos, M. (2005). Doing prison research: Views from inside. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11, 249-264.
- Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against our will: Men, women and rape* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Brunovskis, A., & Tyldum, G. (2005). Describing the unobserved: Methodological challenges in empirical studies on human trafficking. *International Migration*, 43(1/2), 17-33.
- Buckland, B. S. (2008). More than just victims: The truth about human trafficking. *Public Policy Research*, 15(1), 42-47.
- Campbell, R. (2002). *Emotionally involved: The impact of researching rape*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Campbell, R., & Adams, A. (2009). Why do rape survivors volunteer for face-to-face interviews? A meta study of victims' reasons for and concerns about research participation. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 24, 395-405.
- Chan, J. (2005). Globalisation, reflexivity and the practice of criminology. In J. Sheptycki and A. Wardak, (Eds.), *Transnational & comparative criminology* (pp. 337-354). London, UK: GlassHouse.
- Chapkis, W. (2003). Trafficking, migration and the law. *Gender and Society*, 17, 923-937.
- Corrin, C. (2005). Transitional road for traffic: Analysing trafficking in women from and through central and eastern Europe. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 57, 543-560.
- Cwikel, J., & Hoban, E. (2005). Contentious issues in research on trafficked women working in the sex industry: Study design, ethics, and methodology. *Journal of Sex Research*, 42, 306-316.
- Dozema, J. (2002). Who gets to choose? Coercion, consent and the UN trafficking protocol. *Gender & Development*, 10(1), 20-27.
- Dutton, D. (2006). *Rethinking domestic violence*. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: University of British Columbia Press.
- Flamm, M. (2003). Exploited, not educated: The trafficking of women and children in Southeast Asia. *UN Chronicle*, 40(2), 34-36.
- Goodey, J. (2008). Human trafficking: Sketchy data and policy responses. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 8, 421-442.
- Gozdziak, E., & Collett, E. (2005). Research on human trafficking in North America: A review of literature. *International Migration*, 43(1/2), 99-128.
- Hannah-Moffat, K. (2011). Criminological cliques: Narrowing dialogues, institutional protectionism, and the next generation. In M. Bosworth & C. Hoyle (Eds.), *What is criminology?* (pp. 440-455). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. (Ed.). (2007). *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and practice*. London, UK: SAGE.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leary, P. (Eds.). (2008). *Handbook of emergent methods*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Hope, T. (2009). The illusion of control: A response to Professor Sherman. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 9(2), 125-134.
- Hope, T., & Walters, R. (2008). *Critical thinking about the uses of research*. London, UK: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.
- Hoyle, C. (1998). *Negotiating domestic violence: Police, criminal justice and victims*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Hoyle, C., Bosworth, M., & Dempsey, M. (2011) "Victims" of sex trafficking: Exploring the borderland between rhetoric and reality. *Social & Legal Studies*, 20(4), 313-29.
- Irwin, S. (2008). Data analysis and interpretation: Emergent issues in linking qualitative and quantitative evidence. In S. N. Hesse-Biber & P. Leary (Eds.), *Handbook of emergent methods* (pp. 415-435). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Jayarathne, T. E., & Stewart, A. J. (1995). Quantitative and qualitative methods in the social sciences: Feminist issues and practical strategies. In J. Holland & M. Blair (Eds.), *Debates and*

- issues in feminist research and pedagogy (pp. 217-234). Clevedon, UK: Open University Press.
- Kelly, L. (1988). *Surviving sexual violence*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Kenway, J., & Fahey, J. (Eds.). (2009). *Globalizing the research imagination*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Lee, M. (Ed.). (2007). *Human trafficking*. Collumpton, UK: Willan.
- Lee, M. (2011). *Trafficking and global crime control*. London, UK: SAGE.
- Letherby, G. (2003). *Feminist research in theory and practice*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Loader, I., & Sparks, R. (2010). *Public criminology*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Long, L. D. (2004). Anthropological perspectives on the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation. *International Migration*, 42(1), 5-31.
- Maynard, M., & Purvis, J. (1994). *Researching women's lives from a feminist perspective*. London, UK: Taylor and Francis.
- Mendez J. B., & Wolf, D. L. (2007). Feminizing global research/globalizing feminist research: Methods and practice under globalization. In S. N. H-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and practice* (Chapter 38). London, UK: SAGE.
- Miller, E., Decker, M., Silverman, J., & Raj, A. (2007). Migration, sexual exploitation, and women's health: A case study from a community health centre. *Violence Against Women*, 13, 486-497.
- Morrison, W. (2005). Rethinking narratives of penal change in global context. In: J. Pratt, D. Brown, M. Brown, S. Hallsworth & W. Morrison (Eds), *The new punitiveness. Trends, theories, perspectives* (pp. 290-307). Cullompton: Willan Publishing.
- Munro, V. (2006). Stopping traffick: A comparative study of responses to the trafficking in women for prostitution. *British Journal of Criminology*, 46, 318-333.
- Ramazanoglu, C with Holland, J. (2007). *Feminist methodology: Challenges and choices*. London, UK: SAGE.
- Raymond, J., & Marcovich, M. (2000). *Victory in Vienna. Coalition against trafficking in women*. Retrieved from <http://www.utopia.pcn.net/puta3-i.html>
- Richie, B. (1994). *Compelled to crime*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rock, P. (1998) *After homicide: Practical and political responses to bereavement*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Rock, P. (2002). On becoming a victim. In C. Hoyle & R. Young (Eds.), *New visions of crime victims* (pp. 1-22). Oxford, UK: Hart.
- Rock, P. (2010). Hearing victims of crime': The delivery of impact statements as ritual behaviour in four London trials for murder and manslaughter. In A. Bottoms & J. Roberts (Eds.), *Victims in the criminal justice system* (Chapter 8). Cullompton, UK: Willan.
- Ryan-Flood, R., & Gill, R. (Eds.). (2010). *Secrecy and silency in the research process: Feminist reflections*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Saunders, T. (2009). Controlling the "anti-sexual" city: Sexual citizenship and the disciplining of female street sex workers. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 9, 507-525.
- Scott, J. (1991). The evidence of experience. *Critical Inquiry*, 178, 773-797.
- Sherman, L. W. (2009) Evidence and liberty: The promise of experimental criminology. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 9(1), 5-28.
- Stanley, L., & Wise, S. (1983) *Breaking out: Feminist consciousness and feminist research*. London, UK: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Temkin, J. (2002). *Rape and the legal process* (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- The Guardian*, 15 February 2011. Amelia Gentleman, Women's refuge chief returns OBE in protest over cuts. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/feb/15/women-refuge-chief-protest-cuts>
- The Guardian*, 11 April, 2011. Alan Travis, Sex trafficking victim wins substantial damages from Home Office. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/apr/11/sex-trafficking-home-office-damages>
- Topping, A. (2011, January 17). Child sex trafficking in UK on the rise with even younger victims targeted. *Guardian*, p. 3.
- Travis, A. (2008, November 19). For men who pay for sex with trafficked women, ignorance is no longer a defence. *Guardian*, p. 4
- Turner, J., & L. Kelly. (2009). Trade secrets: Intersections between diasporas and crime groups in the constitution of the human trafficking chain. *British Journal of Criminology*, 49, 184-201.
- Tyldum, G. (2010). Limitations in research on human trafficking. *International Migration*, 48(5), 1-12.
- Urry, J. (2000). *Sociology beyond societies: Mobilities for the twenty-first century*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Websdale, N. (1999). *Understanding domestic homicide*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Woodward, W. (2007, December 21). Harman calls for prostitution ban to tackle trafficking. *Guardian*, p. 16.
- Young, W. (2006). *Caught in the crossfire: displaced Colombians at risk of trafficking*. New York, NY: Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.
- Young, W., & Pyne, S. (2006). *Abuse without end: Burmese refugee women and children at risk of trafficking*. New York, NY: Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.

## Bios

**Mary Bosworth** is reader in criminology and fellow of St Cross College at the University of Oxford and, concurrently, professor of criminology at Monash University Australia. She has published widely on issues to do with race, gender, and citizenship with a particular focus on prisons and immigration detention. Her work is interdisciplinary and comparative and has been supported by research fellowships in Australia, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Her books include *Engendering Resistance* (1999), *The US Federal Prison System* (2002), *Race Gender and Punishment* (coedited with Jeanne Flavin, 2007),

*Explaining US Imprisonment* (2010), and *What is Criminology?* (coedited with Carolyn Hoyle, 2011). She is currently conducting an ethnography of life in immigration detention centers in the United Kingdom.

**Carolyn Hoyle** is reader in criminology and fellow of Green Templeton College at the University of Oxford. She has published widely on victims, domestic abuse, restorative justice, and the death penalty. Her publications include *Negotiating Domestic Violence* (1998; OUP); *An Evaluation of the "One Stop Shop" and Victim Statement Pilot Projects* (1998, Home Office, with Cape, Morgan, and Sanders); *New Visions of Crime Victims* (2002, Hart Publishing, coedited with Richard Young); *The Death Penalty* (4th ed., 2008, OUP, with Roger Hood); *Debating Restorative Justice* (2011, Hart Publishing, with Chris Cunneen); and *What is Criminology?* (2011, OUP, coedited with Mary Bosworth). She is currently conducting research on miscarriages of justice in the United Kingdom.

**Michelle Madden Dempsey** is associate professor of law at Villanova University, Pennsylvania, USA. Professor Dempsey teaches and writes in the areas of criminal law, feminist legal theory, and jurisprudence. Her writings have been published in *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, *Modern Law Review*, *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, *Theoretical Criminology*, and *Criminal Law Review*. Her book, *Prosecuting Domestic Violence: A Philosophical Analysis*, published by Oxford University Press in 2009, was awarded second prize in the UK's Society of Legal Scholars Peter Birks Award for Outstanding Legal Scholarship. Professor Dempsey received her BA from the University of Illinois, her JD from the University of Michigan Law School, her LLM from the London School of Economics, and her DPhil (PhD) from Oxford University. Following law school, she worked as a prosecutor in the Champaign (Illinois) County State's Attorney's Office and later as a civil trial lawyer in Chicago. She was a tutor in law at University College London before joining the Oxford faculty in 2005. At Villanova, she teaches criminal law, evidence, and feminist legal theory.