Defund the Police, Promote Mutual Aid

Sofia Del Vita

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Not Your Rescue Project, by Chanelle Gallant and Elene Lam, with a foreword by Harsha Walia and a postscript by Robyn Maynard, explores the mutual solidarity work and theoretical framework underpinning the Butterfly Project, an initiative formed by sex workers, social workers and legal and health professionals to support the rights of Asian and migrant sex workers in Canada, the US and internationally. This is therefore a work grounded in empirical foundations drawn from a vast array of lived experiences. Published by Haymarket Books in 2024, the book serves as a guide to understanding abolitionism in the broadest sense, opposing criminalisation and punitive and carceral systems, and interrogating the role of anti-trafficking policies in amplifying state and police violence against migrant sex workers.

As the title itself highlights, the book's objective is to deconstruct the victimising narrative surrounding sex workers and to critique its harmful effects. The work thus challenges the dominant discourse that frames every sex worker as a victim in need of rescue, offering instead a perspective that recentres the notions of agency and collective organising. The book proposes a paradigm shift: the goal is not to 'save' sex workers but to guarantee their rights, safety, and autonomy. It argues that the primary issue in the condition of migrant sex workers lies not in trafficking per se, but rather in migration control, the criminalisation of sex work, and labour exploitation under capitalism. Sex workers are often required to prove they 'freely chose' their profession, while no such scrutiny is applied to others forced into exploitative work under capitalism. The authors argue that under capitalism, work, particularly for precarious workers, is rarely a matter of free will. Through this analysis, the book illuminates how anti-trafficking rhetoric, while ostensibly expressing concern for racialised migrants, in fact, reproduces models of 'aid' that perpetuate the very systems of oppression they claim to combat. To deepen this critique and also contextualise the EU context, it is worth reading the critical scholarship on humanitarian aid, such as the works of Laura Agustín (2007), Martina Tazzioli (2021), and Mariam Ticktin (2011).

The authors aim to demonstrate, and they do it powerfully, that the struggle for migrant sex workers' rights should not be treated as an exception but as an integral part of broader struggles for labour rights. From this perspective, the text underscores the need to foster a discourse that recognises how sex workers' battles are

intertwined with other social justice movements, such as anti-racist, anti-carceral, and freedom-of-movement struggles. In fact, the violence that undocumented migrant sex workers face stems from their juridical irregularity and the racialised regimes structuring economic stratification. Consequently, their demands must be situated within the broader struggles for undocumented migrants' labour rights. For this reason, the authors call for the recognition of legal status for all migrant workers, along with adequate labour protections.

The book opens with an introduction to its key themes, which are subsequently developed in later chapters. It is structured into three parts, each subdivided into subchapters and interludes. These interludes consist of biographical accounts that enrich and illustrate the discussed topics, alternating between first- and third-person narratives of migrant sex workers who have engaged in Butterfly's activities.

Most individuals featured in the book, though from heterogeneous migratory paths, live and work in Canada. As such, the case studies are primarily situated in North America, with particular attention paid to the Canadian context. Therefore, while extraordinarily rich in empirical data from the Canadian and North America context, the book lacks data from the perspectives of the Global South and Eastern Europe.

Part 1: Migrant Sex Workers Realities

This section examines the factors that lead many migrants to engage in sex work as a means of survival. Unlike other forms of employment, sex work provides an immediate and accessible source of income, requiring no formal education, professional credentials, or fluency in the local language. For migrants facing economic instability or legal precarity, it becomes a viable option, allowing them to sustain themselves, finance their journeys, and maintain financial independence regardless of their immigration status.

The book does not invisibilise how the sex industry reproduces dynamics of exploitation and structural inequalities. Migrant sex workers, for instance, are often paid less than their white, Anglophone counterparts and are more exposed to unstable and dangerous working conditions. However, the authors argue that these disparities are not exceptions unique to sex work but reflect broader economic and racial injustices endemic to capitalist labour markets.

From this perspective, the narrative that isolates sex work as a singular phenomenon distinct from other precarious labour sectors is challenged. The struggles migrant sex workers face, such as lower wages, exploitation, lack of protections, are no different from those of other precarious workers and should thus be recognised and addressed within broader labour rights struggles.

Part 2: Migrant Sex Workers and State Violence: Introducing the Anti-Trafficking Industry

This section analyses the anti-trafficking industry and its role in amplifying the criminalisation and repression of migrant sex workers. Here, the text exposes how anti-trafficking laws and policies, far from protecting victims, operate to justify escalating state violence and reinforce control over the bodies and labour of those in the sex sector.

A particularly striking aspect of the anti-trafficking industry, as analysed in the book, is its ability to conceal its true objective, punishing sex workers under the guise of 'victim protection'. The text scrutinises the 'end demand' (or Nordic) model, adopted in Sweden, Norway, France, Canada, and Maine, which presents itself as a form of 'partial decriminalisation' but, in practice, penalises both the sellers and buyers of sexual services. Though liberal and radical feminists promote this model as targeting only clients, sex workers continue to be criminalised for work-related activities such as sharing spaces, exchanging contacts, or collaborating to identify safer workplaces. According to the book, the criminalising and anti-migrant effects of these laws are not collateral effects but inherent to their design. In fact, one of the book's key arguments is that laws criminalising third parties in sex work produce harmful and often violent effects. By preventing sex workers from collaborating, these laws obstruct mutual aid networks and make it more difficult for workers to organise for safety and support. Moreover, the moral panic surrounding trafficking functions as a tool of isolation, discouraging anyone from associating with migrant sex workers out of fear of being linked to individuals under state surveillance. In practice, criminalisation leads to exploitative labour conditions, such as wage theft, unsafe workplaces, and employer abuse, since reporting violations or forming labour unions remains inaccessible to those targeted by these laws.

Through an intersectional lens, the book highlights how oppression is particularly acute for trans migrants, who are often framed by police as 'dangerous aggressors' rather than victims. This occurs, for example, when carrying tools of self-defence is interpreted as aggression, leading to severe legal consequences. Rather than offering 'rescue and rehabilitation', the state exercises control by excluding them from formal labour markets, denying legal recognition, and restricting access to public services, making it nearly impossible to find alternative employment.

The book reconstructs how, between 1995 and 2000, US Republican strategists merged white carceral feminism with Christian right campaigns to generate a humanitarian alarm around 'modern slavery', which revived old alliances between evangelicals and 1980s anti-pornography feminists and was markedly xenophobic. In this context, the anti-trafficking industry functions not as a social justice movement but as an apparatus that facilitates and legitimises state violence. Many anti-trafficking

NGOs, in fact, operate in close alliance with conservative and carceral feminist forces thus undermining principles of racial, social, and economic justice. This sector encompasses a vast network of actors, ranging from white-supremacist Republicans to anti-union corporations, from police to immigration officials, and from reactionary religious groups to weapons manufacturers.

Through 'rescue' campaigns and training programmes targeting governments, businesses, and private citizens, these organisations create a market predicated on the criminalisation of sex workers. Major corporations, by supporting these initiatives, seek to cleanse their public image and divert attention away from their own roles in perpetuating labour exploitation. Moreover, the appropriation of feminist anti-violence language, with NGOs branding themselves as 'survivor-led', reinforces a discourse that, while appearing progressive, consolidates state control.

One of the most visible effects of the policies of criminalisation and 'rescue' is the expansion of power granted to institutions like the police, resulting in heightened state control and surveillance. The book argues that police, far from representing an effective response to migrant sex workers' struggles, constitute one of the primary threats to their safety. Even those who seek help risk being flagged as trafficking suspects, triggering investigations that implicate not only victims but colleagues, friends, and family members. The authors thus assert the need to defund policing institutions, since even if trafficking laws were repealed, state control would persist through other means, such as housing regulations and zoning laws.

For instance, anti-trafficking measures are weaponised to intensify migrant control through the collection of personal data and racial profiling by border authorities, which demand detailed information far beyond standard immigration procedures. The authors claim that 78% of arrests made under anti-trafficking policies target Black and Indigenous women and that this finding should reshape transfeminist debates. The book, centred on the North America context, offers as an example a pointed critique of the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) and the distinction it makes between 'good' and 'bad' trafficking victims. This legislation grants immigration protections only to those recognised as victims of 'severe sexual trafficking', but excludes those deemed voluntary sex workers. It also rigidly distinguishes 'sexual trafficking' from 'labour trafficking. This removes any acknowledgment of 'work' or 'labor' within the sex industry, undermining the legitimacy of sex work as work and isolating it from all other labor sectors. Moreover, this framework reinforces the narrative that 'modern slavery' is no longer a crime perpetrated by white individuals but by Black men identified as sexual predators.

Part 3: Migrant Sex Workers Fighting for Power

This final section focuses on the role of collective organising in countering repressive policies and anti-sex work feminist paternalism. The authors critique anti-sex work feminists' identification as 'abolitionist', arguing they would be better defined as prohibitionists. The authors contend that while true abolition seeks to dismantle carceral systems and border controls, these feminists do not pursue an end to exploitation but instead reinforce criminalisation and state control. The core problem with the prohibitionist approach, the book argues, is not the idea that sex work can be exploitative, because many sex workers themselves acknowledge the difficulties of their profession, as is true of other labour sectors. The problem is that prohibitionism seeks to abolish sex work by actively opposing grassroots organising, obstructing the fight for better working conditions and enabling state repression. This prohibitionism manifests in police operations that target racialised women, seize their earnings, arrest them, and deport them. A key example analysed, always in the North America context, is the negative impact of the *SESTA/FOSTA* laws, which criminalised online sex work advertisements and shut down platforms used to screen clients safely. The book argues that the true motive behind these laws was not to protect sex workers but expand state surveillance and repression.

This section also offers a compelling critique of how social and labour movements often treat sex work as an exception to labour exploitation. While leftist activists typically acknowledge capitalist exploitation, they frequently frame sex work as uniquely oppressive, rather than recognising it as labour subject to the same economic forces as other sectors. Similarly, white-led sex workers' rights organisations often overlook the specific dynamics of racial capitalism. For instance, when migrant sex workers charge lower rates and work longer hours, they are often assumed to be trafficking victims, disregarding how these wage disparities mirror the racial hierarchies present across all labour sectors.

According to the book, the most effective strategy to combat exploitation in sex work is not through criminalisation or state regulation, but by building a collective movement against patriarchy and white supremacy. The book challenges the notion that legalisation, like in the Netherlands or in Germany, offers a viable solution, pointing out that, in many cases, it has paradoxically led to increased criminalisation by imposing regulations that further marginalise sex workers.

The authors therefore advocate for an approach that recognises sex workers as political agents rather than passive victims in need of rescue, while working to dismantle the stigma and repression they face. This approach also calls for granting all migrants worker protections and legal status. The authors stress that no migrant worker, sex

workers included, should be bound by precarious temporary visas or have their mobility tied to their employment. They argue that simply decriminalising sex work is insufficient without also addressing the need to dismantle policing and repressive institutions that disproportionately target racialised communities. Ultimately, the goal is not to eliminate sex work, but to establish a system in which the rights of migrant workers are protected, regardless of their industry.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Not Your Rescue Project* is a foundational contribution to intersectional strategies that addresses the needs and demands of migrant sex workers. The text does not merely expose the contradictions of current legislation but serves as a call to promote research and practices that move beyond criminalising frameworks. This work makes three crucial interventions: it recentres migrant sex workers as knowledge producers rather than victims; it exposes the racial capitalism embedded in anti-trafficking industries; and it challenges anti-sex work feminists to confront their own carceral tendencies.

A useful reference for deepening the understanding of *Not Your Rescue Project* is the book *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* by sex worker activists Juno Mac and Molly Smith (2018). Both texts adopt a feminist, abolitionist stance against criminalisation and state repression but differ in thematic focus. *Revolting Prostitutes* offers a comparative analysis of regulatory models, from criminalisation to legalisation to decriminalisation, and their consequences for sex workers' lives. Notably, the authors highlight how criminalisation not only penalizes sex workers but also exacerbates violence, surveillance, stigma, and barriers to healthcare and support.

Not Your Rescue Project is therefore a call to integrate social and economic justice in fights, urging sex workers to self-organise and assert their own rights and needs, while rejecting carceral 'protection' rhetoric that imposes paternalistic control over them instead of recognizing their autonomy. The authors skilfully demonstrate how this logic is deeply embedded in patriarchal, racial capitalism, perpetuating exclusion and exploitation. The strength of the text is limited by the lack of perspectives from the Global South, but the book remains essential reading. A fundamental contribution of this text is therefore its ability to connect and bring into dialogue the struggles of sex workers with prison industrial complex abolitionism, emphasising how, in our lives, we do not need more police, but more empathy, mutual aid, and solidarity and a common struggle against patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy.

References

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