
Going Beyond a Simple Evangelical Salvation Narrative in Anti-Sex Trafficking: The Contributions of Asian and Asian American Christian Feminist Scholars

Joy Lee

This article examines the significant involvement of Western Evangelical Christians in anti-sex trafficking efforts in Southeast Asia, focusing on how theological frameworks influence understanding and responses to sex trafficking. While attention has been given to how Christian faith shapes an understanding of trafficking and faith-driven motivations, less focus has been on the limitations imposed by specific theological narratives, particularly the "simple" Evangelical salvation narrative (SESN). I argue that this narrative, emphasizing rescue, individualism, and dualism, creates blind spots and underpins challenging practices, potentially undermining the effectiveness of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in anti-sex trafficking efforts. I look at how Asian/Asian American Christian feminist scholars can provide contextual frameworks that center sexually exploited Asian women and their complex experiences. These perspectives offer a nuanced understanding of God's presence and empowerment, enabling more effective, trauma-informed, and multidimensional insights and practices.

Prelude

As a transnational Chinese Singaporean North American woman, my grandmother's experience in Singapore during the invasion of the Japanese Imperial Army in World War II never crossed my mind. Advocating with and studying the testimonies of survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery ("Comfort Women") led me to ask questions about the impact of violence on my ancestors. While trauma has hidden many stories, fragments of my grandmother's experience helped me understand a bit more about her and trace our family's experience within this global context as immigrants. I found a place in the work with comfort women survivors and activists that welcomed my voice in advocating with and for unrealized justice, remembrance, and reparations. These voices cry out for the suffering of the 200,000 "comfort women" from Korea, China, the Philippines, Indonesia (formerly the Dutch East Indies), and surrounding islands in Southeast Asia. The Japanese imperial military's sexual enslavement of an estimated 200,000 women in 1932-45 was the largest case of sex trafficking in modern history (Dudden 2022). No prosecutions were held for wartime sexual violence because it was not recognized

as a crime against humanity until 1998 (United Nations n.d.).

The number of "comfort women" survivors is dwindling with each passing year (McCarthy 2020; Cai 2023; Ko 2023). Inspired by the "grandma" activists and their faith, the writings of Asian/Asian American Christian feminist theologians and biblical scholars, and my own hopes to contribute to faith-based relief and development education, I began exploring the contemporary complex issues of human trafficking.

Introduction

Scholars have noted the strong representation and influence of Western Evangelical Christians in anti-trafficking work, (Crawford et al. 2017; Henriksson 2024; Twis and Praetorius 2021; Gee and Smith 2015; Lewis et al. 2020; Marshall 2012). Some of this work examines the ways Christian faith impacts conceptualizations of human-trafficking and the motivation to address it (Lewis et al. 2020, Gee and Smith 2015; Zimmerman 2011; Knight and Kagotho 2022; Choi-Fitzpatrick 2014; Frame 2020; Henriksson 2024). Still, aside from recent publications by Matthew

Clarke (2022) and Andreas Henriksson (2024), less research focuses on the different types of theological frames that can shape the ways that Christians define, understand, and respond to trafficking. Given the significant involvement of Evangelical Christian efforts in this field, expanding the discourse on Christian theological frameworks that have the potential to shape anti-trafficking efforts is important. While this paper is mostly centered on anti-sex trafficking efforts in Southeast Asia, the theological frameworks explored can shape both anti-sex trafficking and development work more broadly.

The paper begins with a brief sociohistorical context of sex trafficking in Southeast Asia. Following this, I discuss how a simple Evangelical salvation narrative (SESN) based on Western Evangelical soteriology, especially its emphasis on rescue, individualism, and dualism, can shape anti-sex trafficking efforts in a way that ignores the agency of the women involved and can lead to harmful responses. Lastly, I examine how Asian/Asian American feminist theological and biblical scholarship—in particular the insights on the importance of presence, empowerment, and complexity—can contribute to transforming the problematic aspects of the SESN dimensions and inform more multidimensional insights and practices.

Sex Trafficking in Southeast Asia: Sociohistorical Context of Asian Women and White America

The realities of sexually exploited women in Southeast Asia are complex; in part, they are driven by White sexual imperialism, but also by local and cross-cultural forms of oppression (Boonprasat Lewis 2007). The term “White sexual imperialism” describes the relationship between Asian women and White America and the sociohistorical situations that have perpetuated harmful stereotypes of Asian women and caused physical harm (Woan 2008). Its legacy is still intertwined in media and social discourse, impacting Asian women in Asia and the diaspora today. Tropes of exoticism, hyper-sexualized yet submissive women, and the objectification of Asian women in general can be traced back to a “White heterosexual male presence in East Asian wars, particularly the Philippine-American War, World War II, and the Vietnam War” (Woan 2008, 278). For example, sex industries created in the Philippines and Thailand for U.S. military men’s “rest and recreation” have persisted because they

became substantially profitable industries that were reinforced by systemic poverty and local patriarchy/cultural values (Woan 2008). Furthermore, the Western conceptualization of “women of the East” leads them to be seen through a lens of “male power-fantasy” (Said in “Orientalism,” as cited in Woan 2008). In short,

[i]n Southeast Asia both female and male sex workers [including those who are trafficked] are viewed as victims of the global economy; of the tourism industries; of internal warfare; such as the Burmese and Cambodian situations; of neocolonialism, militarism and imperialism; and of racism, patriarchy, and the institutionalized, traditional values and moral system that privilege the haves and the powerful over the Other...The problems are also exacerbated by cultural ideologies, attitudes toward sexuality, gender inequality, and violence against women (Boonprasat Lewis 2007, 223).

This backdrop is important to keep mind while examining the relationship between Western Evangelical faith-based organizations (FBOs) and sexually exploited women in Southeast Asia, because anti-trafficking efforts do not happen in a vacuum, outside of a sociohistorical context that situates power dynamics. As Western Evangelical FBOs have only recently become more self-aware of how their faith-based practices and values do in fact carry a western cultural perspective, some Evangelical Christians and organizations may still carry a theological framework that sustains a kind of self-righteous benevolence that inadvertently hides Western sexual imperialism within “faith-driven rescue” and reinforces local harmful patriarchal beliefs and practices.

Anti sex-trafficking work in Asia has undoubtedly been shaped by a Western Evangelical Christian “gaze” and engagement. According to Glenn Miles, the 2003 NBC broadcast of the Christian NGO International Justice Mission’s raid in Cambodia launched the issue of sex trafficking into global and Western consciousness in the early 2000s (Marshall 2012). Not only did the broadcast bring awareness to trafficking in Cambodia, but it also sparked U.S. government interest and funding, motivating many Christian FBOs to work in Southeast Asia, and across Asia (Marshall 2012; Henriksson 2024; Swartz 2019).² Scholars like Shih

¹ A good definition of the “Western gaze” is the following: “The Western Gaze is defined as a more privilege (*sic*) audience (people from the west) gazing/looking at people who are not from the west and projecting their preconceptions, biases and ‘what have you’s’ onto them” (“What is Ethical Storytelling?” 2021).

² Karen Marshall says that in 2003, President George W. Bush promised \$50 million USD for anti-human trafficking work as “encouragement” (2012).

contend that “moral panic around sex work has framed sex trafficking as a more urgent concern than nonsexual-labor” trafficking for Evangelical Christians (Shih 2023; Gee and Smith 2015). A sketch of the anti-trafficking NGO landscape in Asia reveals a saturation of Western-led Christian FBOs with local staff (Henriksson 2024). While Christian FBOs have been shifting towards practices like localisation and survivor-centered efforts, historically many have not been respectful of survivor insights and perspectives (Kempadoo 2012 and Russell 2018 as cited in Cordisco Tsai et al. 2020). This article examines how a theological narrative like SESN plays a role in undermining Christian FBOs’ anti-sex trafficking efforts and how Asian/Asian American feminist biblical scholarship and theologies provide contextual frameworks that center sexually exploited Asian women and their complex situations and offer a nuanced understanding of God’s presence and empowerment, which enables better practices.

The Simple Evangelical Salvation Narrative Theological Framework (SESN): Implications for Anti-Sex Trafficking Efforts

While making broad assumptions is risky when it comes to Evangelical theological frameworks, authors have noted that there appear to be widespread commonalities among most Evangelicals and Evangelical organizations around what might be called a “simple” Evangelical salvation narrative (SESN).

The implications of SESN for Evangelical anti-sex trafficking work have one positive dimension and three that are problematic. First, SESN *is part of* the Evangelical soteriology that holds the seeds of what has been labeled a theology of “holistic development,” meaning change through personal transformations of various aspects (physical, emotional, mental, social, financial, and spiritual), and this is foundational to Evangelical anti-trafficking FBOs (Henriksson 2024). According to Henriksson, holistic development arises from an Evangelical understanding of the “doctrines of creation, fall, and redemption” (2024, 97). Through Christ’s reconciling work, all broken relationships can be restored towards wholeness. For Evangelical Christians, holistic development in anti-trafficking work often addresses emotional trauma and a “brokenness of the soul” that requires “(re)building self-esteem, trauma healing, and individual morality” (Henriksson 2024, 86, 114). The influence of holistic development theology is

seen especially through FBOs’ focus on preventative and protective work, commonly implementing post-trauma and self-reforming restorative interventions even though this theology is compatible with addressing structural issues (Henriksson 2024).

A critique of this salvation narrative, and by extension of this particular kind of holistic development framework as well, is that it has tended to over-emphasize the “individual” person and can be closely tied to converting individual souls for “spiritual rescue” against a framework of good vs. evil (Bird 2013, 1318), downplaying the ways the gospel speaks to the multidimensional nature of the good news. In such a view, Jesus Christ was like a superhero sent by God the Father to come down to earth to die for peoples’ sins and was resurrected to glory, rescuing souls for heaven; metaphors like “ticket to heaven” and “fire insurance” exemplify this view (Bird 2013). One Evangelical church leader reflects, “Well, like a quick bridge model. You know, that’s like, sin separates humans from God, the cross is the bridge. Good. But there’s a lot more to it. I don’t say that’s wrong, but there’s a lot more to it, right?” (Knight and Kagotho 2022, 17).

Alternatively, the Evangelical doctrine of salvation (soteriology) includes God’s redemptive plan for the world *and* transformation within individual persons to be more like Christ; both creation and humanity will be reunited with God and renewed for eternal peace (Bird 2013; Treier 2019; Nordling 2007). Jesus Christ, in this understanding, atoned for the sins of the world.³ Amid an array of Evangelical perspective on salvation and sin, there is consensus around how a “holistic soteriology addresses past, present and future...removes sin’s penalty and confront sin’s power, it progressively removes sin’s power altogether, and it ultimately removes sin’s presence” (Treier 2019, 193). The SESN’s myopic focus on “rescue” in personal salvation through Jesus’ death and resurrection inadvertently obscures how the saving grace and power of Christ is holistic and multidimensional (beyond the spiritual dimension of individual persons).

The language of “rescue” in personal salvation likely grew out of American dispensationalism, drawing on the eschatological belief in Christ’s return to reign and separation of the “spiritual church” and “worldly society,” reflecting dualistic thinking (Mangum 2011). People experience conversion and disavow the sinful world as they exhibit “moral” behavioral changes. In turn, this dualistic framework of strong opposites perpetuates binary thinking in concepts like

³ It is important to note that while this understanding can trace back to Anselm of Canterbury’s theory of substitutionary atonement, Long suggests that Anselm’s theology has been widely misunderstood as God’s demand for bloodshed (2007). According to Anselm, the death of Christ on the cross was not willed by God, “but Christ himself freely underwent death...on an account of his obedience in maintaining justice, because he so steadfastly persevered in it that he brought death on himself” (Anselm as cited in Long 2007, 89).

belief/doubt, saved/unsaved, literal/figurative, body/soul, sinful/innocent, and more, which are problematic when it comes to engaging in complex issues of poverty, justice, and reconciliation in the world. As shown below, when applied to Christian anti-sex trafficking efforts in Asia, the SESN and ideas associated with it, especially those of rescue, individualism, and dualism, can lead Christian communities to understand and engage in their efforts in distorted ways, leading to unproductive and even harmful outcomes.

Rescue: As outlined above, the SESN centers on how Jesus “rescues” individual souls for heaven. It can seem natural for the SESN to carry over into anti-sex trafficking work in Evangelical organizations. In fact, a study of Christian anti-trafficking NGOs found that “rescue for a greater purpose” is one of the four main themes found in Evangelical Christian anti-sex trafficking narratives (Twis and Praetorius 2021). Moreover, additional research on the work of Western FBOs in Cambodia also found that many of their marketing materials “focused on the individual action that someone can do to help “solve,” “cure,” and/or “rescue” people from sex trafficking and exploitation” (Miles et al. 2024, 7). The hero-based narratives in Western media and SESN are mutually bolstered to perpetuate a stereotypical ‘damsel in distress’ trope in sex-trafficking and have a great ability to compel and resonate with Evangelical American Christians. As a result, many Christian communities in the West resonate strongly with the traditional ideas of rescue in anti-sex trafficking efforts, such as that popularized in the highly successful film *The Sound Of Freedom*, a 2023 independent film based on a “raid and rescue” operation (Coscarelli and Tracy 2023). In short, as Swartz says, because “stories of rescue appeal to the Western mind,” the language and intervention of rescue “sells,” and western FBOs feel “constrained by the evangelical markets in the United States” (Swartz 2019; Choi-Fitzpatrick 2014; Twis and Praetorius 2021; Jones et al. 2018).

There are three main problems that have come to the fore based on this framework and methods of “rescue.” First, such a narrative excludes the perspectives of women in local contexts as well as those most impacted by trafficking, leading at times to harm and trauma. In other words, Asian women are embodied persons who can construct their own experiences but are often left without consent during rescue transitions (Kwok 2000). For example, the rescue transitions may deny agency to those being “rescued” by forcing women to go to shelters against their will, turning the shelters into a place of incarceration and confinement as supposed to one of safety and healing. One effect of this is that both the

rescue operation itself and then the transition contribute to trauma, as testimony from two “rescued” women makes clear:

One woman, Seda, who was placed in a shelter following a police raid said: “I did not want to go [to the shelter], but I have been brought, so [it’s] not a choice...”

Phhoung also described her emotional distress upon being brought to a shelter following a raid, saying “They told me they brought us to Phnom Penh. Once I heard like this, I cried until I nearly died” (Cordisco Tsai et al. 2022).

These observations are part of an expanding body of research that prioritize testimonies and lived experiences of sexually exploited women in Southeast Asia. A growing proportion of testimonies and research corroborate this perspective thus underscoring the importance of centering the voices of sexually exploited women in academic discourse, best practices, and systemic change (Shih 2023, Parmanand 2021, Whitford 2020, Jones 2017).

Second, and related to the problem of agency, Asian women can become the racialized and sexualized objects of rescue in a local patriarchal cultural context reinforced by the Western imperial gaze (Katoppo 2001), especially when it comes to marketing the cause of anti-sex trafficking efforts. In many cases, as FBO staff and donors are the main decision makers and “saved” survivors remain as the passive “objects” for marketing content, the content can impact survivor’s identity and sense of agency (Miles et al. 2024; Cordisco Tsai et al. 2022). This is particularly true when the issue of respect and honor are very important in the local culture.

For example, survivors from one western FBO in Cambodia expressed how they did not know that they were publicly known as “former sex workers” in the organization’s promotion and marketing materials because it was in English (Miles et al. 2024). One survivor explained that she felt “dishonored by the pity sought from foreigners using her life story” in leaflets while at the same time felt exposed and discriminated against by local Cambodians coming to the social enterprise restaurant because of the concept of *srey kouc* (Miles et al. 2024). In the context of Cambodia, *srey kouc*, in the Khmer language, is a Cambodian concept that translates to “broken woman;” it describes a woman who has had sex with men outside of marriage or sells sex and is “despised, disrespected and shunned because they think she is impure and a very bad person” (Miles et al. 2024). Another survivor expressed how the FBOs are “good because they help” but “they do not know how much they hurt” (Miles et al. 2024).

This powerlessness goes hand in hand with a sense of obligation and gratitude that can skew their feedback and even choice to consent for their images to be used in promotional materials when they may not actually want to (Miles et al. 2024). As a participant in “Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid” says, “There should be nothing communicated about us, without us” (Lentfer et al. 2014). In short, while hero-based narratives are compelling and effective for nonprofit promotion toward a Western audience, they cannot take precedence over treating survivors with dignity and respect and should not perpetuate harmful stereotypes like that of the diminutive Asian woman. Meaningful participation and input from survivors in the development of promotion and marketing approaches, materials, and media is empowering and acknowledges the inherent dignity within them.

Third, and finally, understanding anti-sex trafficking efforts through the lens of “rescue” can also simplify sex trafficking as an emergency crisis, shifting attention away from advancing long term preventive impact interventions and in some cases, “ease[s] the need for producing programmatic evidence of ‘success’” (Molland 2019, 781; Shih 2023; Jones et al. 2018).

What is encouraging is that “rescue operations” have been critiqued in the past decade and this critique has seemingly led to change, especially with well-established FBOs (Carroll 2021). For example, International Justice Missions (IJM) has publicly stated that it has learned from past mistakes and now works differently and collaboratively with local authorities (Swartz 2019). It is still important, however, for all Evangelical organizations involved in this work to ask themselves whether they are following best practices and evidence-based policies to help women exit from exploitation in a trauma-informed way (Henricksson 2024),⁴ and to consider how their theological frameworks, especially those revolving around salvation, may lead them to have blind spots.

Individualism: The second dimension of the SESN focuses on saving *individual* souls. Again, it is no surprise that this dimension appears to influence the

anti-sex trafficking work of Evangelical organizations by focusing their work on rescue and restoration of individuals instead of also addressing the structural dimensions of the sex-trafficking problem.

An emphasis on individualism often paints a reality that is tied to an Evangelical Christian *salvation schema* based on biblical imperatives from Luke 19:10 and Isaiah 1:17 that help frame human trafficking in a way that motivates a “commitment to immediate emancipation that lacks a structural critique” because “individuals are lost and in need of salvation” (Choi-Fitzpatrick 2014, 134-135).⁵ This emphasis creates a blind spot, obscuring how structural realities shape individual circumstances. Research has shown that U.S. Christians with an evangelical worldview more frequently recommend a focus on individual deficits (“job skills, life options, family support or police protection”), the work of spiritual forces like “evil, brokenness or sin,” and interventions that deal with the individuals (rescue, police raids, etc.) when it comes to conceptualizing trafficking (Choi-Fitzpatrick 2014). Other research also notes the “racial identity of white Evangelicals has been connected with their inability to recognize the importance of systemic issues” (Reynolds and Offutt 2013). Finally, the overwhelming preference for individualistic approaches to trafficking can be connected to emotive decisions laced with a saviour complex to “fight evil.” One former IJM Thailand director explains how many middle-aged women “watch a documentary [about trafficking] and then proclaim that “God called me to Thailand,” but do so without expertise or informed strategies (Swartz 2019, 101). This type of thinking and planning has also led American college students doing missionary work in Thailand to see sex-trafficking as a problem of individual deficits and focus on the victimhood of sexually exploited women (Swartz 2019).

This is not to say that factors related to the individual are not important to understanding trafficking and to tackling emotional trauma and spiritual brokenness (Henricksson 2024). But given that systemic poverty is often the most significant pre-existing factor that contributes to the sex industry and the vulnerability of trafficked peoples (UNODC 2020; Parmanand 2021), it is notable that Evangelical

⁴ Current research points to survivor-centered empowerment-based approaches as best practices rather than moral-based approaches (Cordisco Tsai 2023; Edwards et al. 2023). A moral-based approach to aftercare shelter programming that undermines women’s agency violates the trauma-informed principles: physical and psychological safety, trust, mutual peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural, historical, and gender-responsiveness (Huang et al. 2014). Based on these principles, survivor-centered empowerment-based approaches could help survivors and exploited persons feel “empowered, respected, informed, connected, and hopeful about their recovery” (Edwards et al. 2023).

⁵ In the field of social science, schema is a “mental structure that individuals use to organize knowledge and guide cognitive processes and behaviours” (Britannica n.d.).

organizations rarely focus on that aspect of the problem, and that the SESN may very well play a part in creating and reinforcing that blind spot.

Dualism: As outlined above, the third main component of the SESN has to do with dualism, a theological framework that organizes ideas in terms of opposites and can reinforce binary thinking, leaving little room for nuance and complexity, especially in the context of having multiple “target” audiences. The dualistic framework raises two main problems when it leads to binary thinking in anti-sex trafficking work.

The first, arising from the dualism of good vs. evil, is that this framework has led to binary thinking when applied to understanding a trafficker’s complex positionality because the narrative ‘requires’ a villain (the trafficker) from which the victim is rescued from—good vs. evil. This is particularly notable in the marketing and promotions around anti-sex trafficking work. For example, a study interviewing FBO staff in Thailand highlights that Western media perpetuate a stereotypical understanding about traffickers as one dimensional “villains,” whereas the FBO staff explains that traffickers should not all be characterized as “monsters,” when they themselves are also victimized by socioeconomic systemic inequalities and exploitations (Jones et al. 2018).

The second is that the dualism of SESN does not provide groundwork to understand complex realities in sex trafficking, especially when it comes to the agency of the women involved. The dualistic aspect of this salvation narrative reinforces the ignoring of how structural issues like systemic poverty and cultural values like filial piety might be push factors that contribute to a woman’s decision to return to the sex industry and not want to enter a rehabilitation shelter for low wage “racialized redemptive labor programs” (Shih 2023; Whitford 2020; Miles et al. 2024).⁶ In doing so, it can often group all women in the sex industry as “trafficked,” and as noted above, “rescued” women may not always see themselves as “survivors” of trafficking and do not want to be “rescued” (Shih 2023; Parmanand 2021). In short, dualism in SESN makes it difficult to wrestle with the idea that someone would not want to be “saved” from a brothel and they may be exercising “agency” to enter the sex industry (Whitford 2020). Jo Doezema sees this as racialized victimization,

the “refus[ing] to respect the choice of a woman from a developing country” and disregards her story (Doezema 1998 as cited in Shih 2023, 41; Gee and Smith 2015).

Insights from Asian/Asian American Christian Feminist Scholars: Transforming the SESN Framework in Anti-Sex Trafficking

Asian/Asian American feminist theologians and biblical scholars have long carried the injustices experienced by their sisters in how they speak of God, understand God, and act as agents of change in God’s work among those who experience exploitation and suffering. Indonesian theologian and novelist Marianne Katoppo is often considered to be the first Asian woman to do Asian feminist theology in the 1970s (Katoppo 2001; Fabella and Park 2015; Kwok 2000; Orevillo-Montenegro 2010; Kim 2022). She is part of a legacy of women who have been in solidarity with and encouraged and inspired by majority world scholars and early white American feminist scholars globally since the 70s to theologize and “reclaim the right to speak about God as subject of their own destiny” (Kwok 2005, 150). Other prominent Asian/Asian American feminist theologians are Sharon A. Bong, who has explored questions of the presence of Jesus with those who experience suffering and exploitation; Naw Eh Tar Gay who has focused hermeneutically on the question of living in harmony through God’s empowerment; and Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw’s who have put forth a theological methodology that emphasizes the need to look at and understand the complexity of structural sin and lived experiences within that. In what follows, the insights from these and other Asian/Asian American feminist theologians are brought to bear on the problematic aspects of the three dimensions of SESN outlined above—rescue, individualism, dualism—in order to transform them and provide a more complete theological grounding to guide the analysis and actions of Evangelical organizations involved in anti-sex trafficking work.

Transforming Rescue - The Importance of Presence: The SESN tends to lead to seeing the physical bodies of women who are sexually exploited as objectified, objects of fear or pity, or invisible, what has

⁶ “Racialized redemptive labor” is a term that Shih uses to describe the ways western FBOs develop vocational programs (often times the making of jewelry) framed as ethical consumerism targeting customers in the U.S. These “traditional exchanges of wages for labor are replaced with affective commitments between white First World rescuers and their purported victims in Asia” (2023, 266). The racialization refers to identifying the “histories of colonial and imperial dispossession” and affirmation of a “racial order of moral righteousness and division of low-wage labor” (2023, 266). Shih argues that these programs do not provide authentic opportunities for long-term economic change and self-sufficiency; rather they contribute creating a “new form of dependence on American aid and intervention” (2023, 266).

been described as an “individualistic [and] disembodied view of being human” (Nordling 2007, 75). As a result, thirty years ago Global South theologians gathered in 1994 to call for an alternative “theo/ethical” framework “where embodiment is central and where the objectification of women’s bodies is denounced and renounced” (EATWOT as cited in Grovijahn 1997, 252). More recently, Malaysian feminist theologian Sharon A. Bong (2010) has addressed this problem by putting forth a theology of Christ’s presence among Asian women who have suffered, which brings a crucial dimension to transforming the perception of all that is involved in the concept of “rescue.”

In Bong’s essay, “The Suffering Christ and the Asian Body,” she provides insights into an embodied Christology that gives space to the process that women’s bodies go through in suffering, in resisting, and in healing. First, she suggests that the “suffering Christ literalized in women (and men) who are dehumanized” acknowledges the lived realities of Asian women (and men) who are sexually exploited in the context of systemic poverty (2010, 187). Considering the cultural patriarchal contexts where female bodies are less than male bodies, the approach of presence associates the suffering Christ’s body with female bodies and elevates females wholistically in their humanity, in their Imago Dei, emphasizing that God laments and is present in their suffering. This focus elevates the dignity of the women who are embodying Christ in their suffering, and mitigates the tendency to objectify them simply as victims to be “saved.”

Second, Bong’s focus on the agency of women and their embodied process of resistance similarly brings new and important aspects to bear on “rescue” and “salvation.” For example, bodies that resist can redetermine dignity and “reject the construct of virginity as proof of a woman’s marriageable worth” or worth as a human person made in the image of God (Bong 2010, 190). Resistance can also consist of destigmatizing exploited bodies, insisting that they are important sources to listen to on trauma healing and resisting disembodiment, and refuse to simplify lived experiences as linear conversions from “rescue to saved/safe.” Finally, resistance implies that their bodies are not simply objects to be saved but a reminder of an incarnational God in Christ on whose body unjust violence was inflicted and who became a symbol of resistance against cosmic evil, empire, and structural sins.

Finally, the space given by Bong to the importance of the bodily process of healing beckons an “epistemology of the broken body” in which the body becomes a site of sacred wholeness with all the scars

and complexities in spite of exploitation (Chung 2013 as cited in Bong 2010, 338). Understanding the “spirit as corporeal and the body as sacred” restores agency of the inherent dignity Asian women have as image bearers of God (Bong 2010, 190). God listens to their voices and sees the context of their complex realities in which they made challenging decisions, and “[k]nowledge of God as omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent is arbitrated through the agency of the suffering and resistant, and God the signifier thus becomes known, present, and empowering” (Bong 2010, 291). This leads to insisting that the exploited and objectified bodies of Asian women also call for restoration in the Asian Church, an ecclesiastical body, and for it to be in solidarity with those who are marginalized and in a process of healing. How is the body of Christ living out Christ’s teachings when women who are sexually exploited bear the weight of cultural shame and guilt and cannot find authentic belonging and spaces to heal within the body of Christ? Furthermore, women can come to know a God that suffers, resists, and heals alongside them. The liberation Jesus proclaims in Luke 4:18-19 is not limited, but rather expressed as wholistic embodied liberation of the whole self. Instead of shame and stigma, sexually exploited women can indeed say, “...I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”⁷

Transforming Individualism - The Importance of Empowering Gender Parity:

As outlined above, the SESN has an individualistic focus that ignores crucial aspects of the structural dimensions of culture and power that are so important to understanding the roots of sex trafficking and challenging Evangelical organizations to allocate their attention there as well. Asian feminist theologian Naw Eh Tar Gay from Myanmar provides useful insights to remedy those blind spots, with a specific focus on the unequal cultural and structural valuing of men as opposed to women. The foundation of those insights come from her contextualized gender-egalitarian hermeneutics called *Majjima Patipada* (middle way), which focuses on how “male and female are created in the image of God,” and she “aims for liberation of all genders from patriarchal and structural sin, which enslaves all genders alike” (2023, 212). Looking at Galatians 3:28, Naw Eh Tar Gay sees the *Majjima Patipada* of the baptismal formula’s antithetical gender pair of “no male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” as an emphasis on the shared humanness between male and female in the patriarchal context of Myanmar. Thus, the approach of a Christian contextualized gender egalitarian interpretation of “the middle way” could see males and females as both “bestowed with full dignity

⁷ Psalm 139: 14 (New Revised Standard Version Anglicized).

and rights” rather than understanding only males as the ones with full glory and dignity because they are more “human” according to Myanmar Buddhist traditions (Gay 2023, 226). Both males and females are empowered by God in full dignity and glory as image bearers of God to resist a power dichotomy. “This concept calls for balancing where there is unbalance, for equality where there is inequality, and for justice where there is injustice” (Gay 2023, 212).

Reading Galatians 3:28 through *Maijjina Patipada* encourages Myanmar Christians towards co-laborship and a rereading of this biblical text leads to a consideration of how the issues of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation are rooted in a context where males are still preferred over females. From the SESN framework, its individualistic focus on inner healing can be empowering for females but does not address the root causes of the exploitation and trafficking that lie in the structural and religio-cultural values that assumes men are of more value than women. Naw Eh Tar Gay’s insights help expand that individualistic dimension to a communal and cultural one, making clear the importance of working towards changing the societal norms, values, and power dynamics that are at the root of sex trafficking.

Transforming Dualism - The Importance of Complexity: The third dimension of the SESN, that of dualism, has significant limitations when it comes to shaping anti-sex trafficking efforts as outlined above. In particular, its tendency to reinforce binary thinking with a framework of rescuer vs. victim does not provide the groundwork to understand the paradox of being someone who both has agency and is also victimized. It is here that the work of Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw on intersectional theology provides a way to amplify the voices of those who paradoxically have agency and are victimized (2018). Notably, it helps shed light on how the women’s lived experiences shed light on understanding the complexity of structural sins.

Intersectional theology has a bias towards justice, recognizes the different aspects of human identities, and is a framework that identifies structures of power while facilitating inclusion and equity (Kim and Shaw 2018). Intersectional theology is not afraid of complexities and paradoxes as “complexities are a reflection of the diverse realities of differently situated lives” (Kim 2021, 526). Intersectional theology has women’s identities and personal experiences as the starting place of theology and does not try to make experiences fit or align with particular religious beliefs. This is of particular importance as gender-based discrimination compounds with racism and xenophobia in human-trafficking (Mullally 2021). In short, Asian/Asian American feminist theologians and biblical scholars trace the vision of God’s liberative

presence. The limitations of binary thinking (pure/unpure, worthy/unworthy) disintegrate because Asian/Asian American feminist theologies can hold space for process, paradox—and most importantly for God’s spiritual and tangible liberation. Through intersectional theology we can still understand God as one who embraces complexity by remembering how God is simultaneously omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, and still mysterious. “By making space for greater complexity in the being of God, we open possibilities for a God who is both/and, whose complexity is wide and deep enough to embrace us all” (Kim and Shaw 2018).

Through this lens, the voices and experiences of survivors and those who enter the sex industry, however paradoxical, would be valued, listened to, and understood considering structural sins of systemic poverty and dehumanizing patriarchal cultural contexts. Their experiences are not shamefully hidden or simply used for content marketing. Intersectional theology aligns with trauma-informed principles and survivors are recognized as knowledgeable beyond just their lived experience; they are empowered towards agency in their own lives, in policy making, and addressing structural issues that harm them as women who have been trafficked or voluntarily entered the sex industry. In other words, the paradox of recognizing the agency of sexually exploited women while understanding the toxic structure of the sex industry can be held within intersectional theology and sets up FBOs to see sexually exploited women as partners in responding to the root causes related to systemic poverty.

Conclusion

The insight proffered by Asian feminist theologies and biblical scholarship present a deep challenge to the SESN and an opportunity for ecumenical insights to contribute to transformation. These insights center the inherent dignity and agency of sexually exploited Asian women and their complex realities while deepening an understanding of who God is to the marginalized and vulnerable without a western gaze that creates an imbalanced power dynamic between “rescuer” and victim. We see how God, in incarnational love, comes alongside those who experience suffering, seeks to empower, and can hold complexities. However well-intentioned, the SESN framework’s characteristics of rescue, individualism, and dualism have led to a tendency to not center sexually exploited women in their contexts for long term flourishing and creates a blind spot when it concerns the wholistic redemption of God. This framework can inadvertently lead to a savior complex and make it challenging to hold space for complexity. In some cases, this has resulted in harmful conceptualization of sexually exploited women in Asia, uninformed rescue operations, and FBO anti-

trafficking marketing and promotions that contribute to undignified depictions and further stigma.

As Christian FBOs continue to have a strong influence in anti-trafficking efforts, expanding the discourse on Christian theological frameworks that have the potential to shape anti-trafficking work is important, especially along the lines of revealing God's presence, empowerment, and complexity while centering the inherent dignity and agency of survivors and sexually exploited Asian women in their realities from a trauma-informed approach. This article has sought to do just that, and I hope it contributes to helpful transformations of theological frameworks that address the distortions that are present and the liberation that Katoppo describes:

As a woman, I too have felt bent and distorted. As a matter of fact, I still often feel that way. And it is the power of Jesus which liberates woman, in the space of the Kingdom of God. So that woman can stretch herself to her full length, and glorify God (2001, 63).

References

- Bird, Michael F. 2013. *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Bong, Sharon. 2010 "The Suffering Christ and the Asian Body." In *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology* edited by Pui Lan Kwok, 186–193. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Boonprasat Lewis, Nantawan. 2007. "When Justice Collapses: A Religious Response to Sexual Violence and Trafficking in Women in Asia." In *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology* edited by Ha Kim Jung, Pui Lan Kwok, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Seung Ai Yang, 217–230. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. <https://archive.org/details/offmenuasianasia0000unse/page/n5/mode/2up?view=theater>
- Cai, Derek. 2023 (June 21) "'Comfort Women': Last Known Taiwanese Survivor Dies at 92." *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-65669626>
- Carroll, Matthew. 2021 (June 21). "Furor Erupts Over Anti-sex Trafficker Exodus Road." *Global Observer*. <https://gobserver.net/4806/global-diaries/thailand/furor-erupts-over-anti-sex-trafficker-exodus-road/>
- Choi-Fitzpatrick, Austin. 2014. "To Seek and Save the Lost: Human Trafficking and Salvation Schemas among American Evangelicals." *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 1 (2): 119–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2014.924421>
- Clarke, Matthew C. 2022. "Four Theological Schemas for Actively Responding to Modern Slavery." *Journal of Sociology and Christianity* 12 (1): 10–32. <https://www.sociologyandchristianity.org/index.php/jsc/article/view/227>
- Cordisco Tsai, Laura, Vanntheary Lim, Elizabeth Hentschel, and Chamntha Nanh. 2023. "Strengthening Services for Survivors of Human Trafficking: Recommendations from Survivors in Cambodia." *Journal of Human Trafficking* 9 (3): 311–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1899526>.
- Cordisco Tsai, Laura, Vanntheary Lim, and Chamntha Nanh. 2020. "Perspectives of Survivors of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation on Their Relationships with Shelter Staff: Findings from a Longitudinal Study in Cambodia." *The British Journal of Social Work* 50 (1): 176–94. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz128>
- Cordisco Tsai, Laura, Vanntheary Lim, Chamntha Nanh, and Sophie Namy. 2022. "'They Did Not Pay Attention or Want to Listen When We Spoke': Women's Experiences in a Trafficking-Specific Shelter in Cambodia." *Affilia* 37 (1): 151–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109920984839>
- Coscarelli, Joe, and Marc Tracy. 2023 (August 21). "How 'Rich Men North of Richmond' Reached the Top of the Charts." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/21/arts/music/rich-men-north-of-richmond-oliver-anthony.html>
- Crawford, Christa Foster, Glenn Miles, and Gundelina Velasco. 2017. *Finding Our Way through the Traffick: Navigating the Complexities of a Christian Response to Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking*. Oxford: Regnum Books International.
- Dudden, Alexis. 2022 (September 16). "A Guide to Understanding the History of the 'Comfort Women' Issue." *United States Institute of Peace*. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/guide-understanding-history-comfort-women-issue>
- Edwards, Katie M, Laura Siller, Shana Cerny, Julie Klinger, Molly Broin, Lorey A Wheeler, and Lee Baugh. 2023. "Call to Freedom: A Promising Approach to Supporting Recovery among Survivors of Sex Trafficking." *Journal of Human Trafficking* 9 (2): 168–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1894410>
- Fabella, Virginia, and Sun Ai Lee Park, eds. 2015. *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

- Frame, John. 2020. "Sharing Our Strengths - Understanding Similarities and Differences Between Faith-Based and Non-Faith-Based Anti-trafficking NGOs." *Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities*. <https://jilflc.com/resources/sharing-our-strengths-understanding-similarities-and-differences/>
- Huang, Larke N., Rebecca Flatow, Tenly Biggs, Sara Afayee, Kelley Smith, Thomas Clark, and Mary Blake. 2014 (July). "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach." *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*. <https://archive.hshsl.umaryland.edu/handle/10713/18559>
- Gay, Naw Eh Tar. 2023. "Human Dignity as Women's Dignity: Reading Galatians 3:28 from Myanmar Gender Perspective." In *Asian Feminist Biblical Studies: Perspectives and Methods* edited by Maggie Low, 210-228. Divinity School of Chung Chi College, CUHK.
- Gee, Martha Bettis, and Ryan D Smith. 2015. "Moral Imperatives: Faith-Based Approaches to Human Trafficking." In *The Changing World Religion Map*, edited by Stanley D. Brunn, 3623-48. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9376-6_189
- Grovijahn, Jane Marie. 1997. "A Feminist Theology of Survival: Sexually Abused Women Reclaim Their Broken Bodies as Imago Dei." PhD Thesis, Graduate Theological Union. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/feminist-theology-survival-sexually-abused-women/docview/304375614/se-2>
- Henriksson, Andreas. 2024. "A Matter of Faith? Combatting Human Trafficking in Thailand & Cambodia." PhD diss., Umeå University. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1849741/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Jones, Stephanie, Julie King, and Niki Edwards. 2018. "Human-Trafficking Prevention Is Not 'Sexy': Impact of the Rescue Industry on Thailand NGO Programs and the Need for a Human Rights Approach." *Journal of Human Trafficking* 4 (3): 231-55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2017.1355161>
- Katoppo, Marianne. 2001. *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman's Theology*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Kim, An Sung. 2022. "Shame, Sexual Violence, and the Imago Dei: A Practical Theological Approach to Empowering Korean Christian Women Suffering Shame following Sexual Assault." PhD diss., University of Toronto. <https://hdl.handle.net/1807/124509>
- Kim, Grace Ji-Sun. 2021. *Invisible: Theology and the Experience of Asian American Women*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Kim, Grace Ji-Sun, and Susan M. Shaw. 2018. *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Knight, Logan, and Njeri Kagotho. 2022. "On Earth and as It Is in Heaven—There Is No Sex Trafficking in Heaven: A Qualitative Study Bringing Christian Church Leaders' Anti-Trafficking Viewpoints to Trafficking Discourse." *Religions* 13 (1): 65. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13010065>
- Kwok, Pui-lan. 2000. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic.
- Kwok, Pui-lan. 2005. *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (1st ed). Louisville: Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Ko, Byung Chan. 2023 (May 3). "Another Death Leaves Only 9 Surviving Korean 'Comfort Women.'" *Hankyoreh*. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english/1090418
- Lentfer, Jennifer. 2014 (June 30). "The Development Element." *Issuu*. https://issuu.com/howmatters/docs/the_development_element
- Lewis, Hannah, Gwyneth Lonergan, Rebecca Murray, Emma Tomalin, and Louise Waite. 2020. "Faith Responses to Modern Slavery." Leeds/Sheffield: University of Sheffield, University of Leeds & Economic and Social Research Council. https://eurel.info/IMG/pdf/2020_faith_responses_to_modern_slavery_uni_sheffield_and_leeds.pdf
- Long D., Stephen. 2007. "Justification and Atonement." In *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* edited by T. Larsen and D.J. Treier, 79-92. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521846986.006>
- Mangum, Todd. 2011. "The Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy, the Inerrancy of Scripture, and the Development of American Dispensationalism." In *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture: Historical, Biblical, and Theoretical Perspectives* edited by Carlos R. Bovell. Eugene: Pickwick Publications.
- Marshall, Katherine, Kelly Robbins, Claudia Zambra, Ethan Carroll, and Nathaniel Adams. 2012. "Faith Roles in Cambodia's efforts to Counter Trafficking in Persons." *World Faiths Development Dialogue: Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs*. <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications>

- [/faith-roles-in-cambodia-s-efforts-to-counter-trafficking-in-persons](#)
- McCarthy, Julie. 2020 (November 29). "Philippine Survivor Recounts Her Struggle as a "Comfort Woman" for Wartime Japan." *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/29/939811000/philippine-survivor-recounts-her-struggle-as-a-comfort-woman-for-wartime-japan>
- Miles, Siobhan, Glenn Miles, Jill Reimer, Anjum Umrani, and Madeline Stenersen. 2024. "What We Say Is What You See: Portrayal by Christian Faith-Based Organizations of Female Survivors of Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking in Cambodia." *Journal of Human Trafficking*. (February): 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2023.2281871>
- Mullally, Siobhán. 2021 (July 30). "Racism and Xenophobia Put Human Rights of Human Trafficking Victims at Risk - UN Expert." *Media Center*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/07/racism-and-xenophobia-put-human-rights-human-trafficking-victims-risk-un>
- Nordling, Cherith Fee. 2007. "The Human Person in the Christian Story." In *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (1st ed.) edited by Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier, 65-78. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://i-share.whe.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01CAR/01_WHE/u36ljs/alma9955559313405903
- Orevillo-Montenegro, Muriel. 2010. *The Jesus Of Asian Women*. New Delhi: Logos Press.
- Parmanand, Sharmila. 2021. "Salvation as Violence: Anti-trafficking and the Rehabilitation of Rescued Filipino women into Moral Subjects." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22 (2): 78-91. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss2/8/>
- Reynolds, Amy, and Stephen Offutt. 2013. "Global Poverty and Evangelical Action" In *The New Evangelical Social Engagement*, edited by Brian Steensland, and Philip Goff, 242-262. New York, Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199329533.003.0011>
- "Schema." n.d. *Britannica*. Accessed September 23, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/science/schema-cognition>
- Shih, Elena. 2023. *Manufacturing Freedom: Sex Work, Anti-trafficking Rehab, and the Racial Wages of Rescue*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Swartz, David R. 2019. "Rescue Sells: Narrating Human Trafficking to Evangelical Populists." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17 (3): 94-104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2019.1644014>
- Treier, Daniel J. 2019. *Introducing Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group.
- Twis, Mary, and Regina Praetorius. 2021. "A Qualitative Interpretive Meta-Synthesis of Evangelical Christian Sex Trafficking Narratives." *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work* 40 (2): 189-215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2020.1871153>
- United Nations. n.d. "Crimes of Sexual Violence." Accessed September 23, 2024. <https://www.icty.org/en/features/crimes-sexual-violence>
- UNODC - UN Office on Drugs and Crime. 2020. "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons." United Nations publication. Sales No. E.20.IV.3. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/data-and-analysis/glotip.html>
- "What is the Western Gaze?" 2021 (September 12). *No! Wahala Magazine*. <https://www.nowahalamag.com/post/what-is-ethical-storytelling-the-western-gaze>
- Whitford, Troy. 2020. "Development of Intelligence Collection and Analysis on Sex Trafficking: A Challenge for 'Rescue' NGOs." *Salus Journal* 8 (1): 62-74. <https://view.salusjournal.com/index.php/salusjournal/article/view/110>
- Woan, Sunny. 2007. "White Sexual Imperialism: A Theory of Asian Feminist Jurisprudence." *Washington. & Lee Journal of Civil Rights & Social Justice* 14 (2): 275-301. https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1243&context=crsj_7
- Zimmerman, Yvonne C. 2011. "Christianity and Human Trafficking." *Religion Compass* 5 (10): 567-78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2011.00309.x>
-
- Joy Lee** is Program Administrator - M.A. in Humanitarian & Disaster Leadership (HDL) and HDI Associate Fellow at Wheaton College. She has an M.A. in HDL from Wheaton College and degrees in Semiotics & Theatre, and Education, both from the University of Toronto.
- Author email: joy.m.lee@wheaton.edu
-