“MY GOD! IF ONLY I COULD GET OUT OF HERE!” The Construction of “White Slavery” as a Social Problem in Progressive-Era Chicago

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The Construction of “White Slavery” as a Social Problem in Progressive-Era Chicago

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INTRODUCTION

This presentation draws from my dissertation research, in which I examined how Progressive-Era Chicago social reformers constructed prostitution as a social problem. Today, I will specifically discuss the rhetorical persuasiveness of the “white slavery” construction, which is primarily examined in Chapter 3 of my dissertation (available online: http://bit.ly/10c2GH1).
My analyses were primarily guided by Best’s (1987, 1990) social problem construction and claims-making theoretical frameworks, complemented by elements of Ibarra and Kitsuse’s (1993) framework of rhetorical idioms, motifs, and claims-making styles, and Loseke (1992, 1993) and Loseke and Fawcett’s (1995) analytics of people-types and moral-worthiness. Using these frameworks, I explored the following questions:

• What were the rhetorical features of the claims being made, and what about them were/were not compelling?

• Who were the claims-makers, and how did their different statuses (race, class, gender) and related values/interests influence the rhetorical features of their claims?

• What broader social, historical, or cultural themes/discourses were used and/or challenged in the claims, and would these have resonated with the target audiences?
I focused on white slave crusades in Chicago, from the years 1907 to 1915. Prior to the 1900-1910s, prostitution in Chicago was largely tolerated as a “necessary evil” and thus, while technically illegal, flourished in segregated districts, such as the 20-block Levee District. However, Chicago’s anti-prostitution fervor was ignited in 1907 with journalist George Kibbe Turner’s (1907) exposé, entitled “The City of Chicago: A Study of the Great Immoralities”—and the construction of prostitution as a “social evil” and as a “white slave” problem was born.

Chicago was a microcosm of the broader U.S. anti-prostitution movement, and its crusade against white slavery during the first decades of the 20th century was globally unprecedented. Chicago’s white slave crusaders came from varied backgrounds, including ministers and missionaries, district and state attorneys, physicians, and education administrators. Likewise, the crusaders were not dominated
by a particular gender: women and men alike took up arms against the white slave traffic. However, they all shared two common statuses: white, and middle/upper-middle class.

For my analyses, I gleaned from the secondary literature the primary actors and organizations involved in Progressive-Era Chicago’s white slave crusades, and then sampled their paramount published works regarding the prostitution problem. Also, I limited my date range from 1907 (when Turner’s exposé was published) to 1915, when the advent of WWI caused a dramatic shift in the construction of prostitution as a social problem.

History scholars (Rosen 1982; Hobson 1987; Grittner 1990) assert that the majority of Progressive-Era prostitutes were not entrapped into prostitution via white slave traffickers or held as white slaves. In fact, by historian Ruth Rosen’s (1982) estimate, only approximately ten percent of prostitutes were “white slaves” in the strictest sense. Moreover, various crusaders readily admitted that a concrete estimate of how many prostitutes were indeed “white slaves” was ultimately unattainable—even Chicago State’s Attorney Clifford Roe admonished that exaggeration and “fanciful figures” regarding white slavery were detrimental to the public’s acceptance of the “enormity” of this problem, and that “conservative and sane statements” were the proper route (Roe [1911] 1979:170). Yet, these crusaders persisted in constructing the prostitution problem as largely a problem of “white slavery.” Thus, deconstructing the crusaders’ claims reveals insights regarding the persuasiveness of their construction of white slavery as a social problem and their attempts to overcome the dearth of concrete statistics.
Doubtless the crusaders’ most powerful rhetorical device was their unrelenting construction of nearly all prostitutes as “white slaves.” This signification of the prostitute as white slavery – as opposed to the previous construction of sinful, debauched women—may be interpreted as a reorientation device, as discussed by Joel Best (1987; 1990), that was integral to the claims-making success of these crusaders. The extremely detailed descriptions of women’s entrapment by wily white slave traders and subsequent imprisonment in slave-like conditions were key to constructing prostitutes as “victims” and thus sympathy-worthy, versus “victimizers” and thus condemnation-worthy (Loseke 1993). The crusaders’ elaborate use of typifying examples, as discussed by Best (1987; 1990), further buttressed the persuasiveness of their claims. These typifying examples provided emotional appeals that constructed the “morality” (Loseke and Fawcett 1995) of the white slavery victims—attesting to the good, moral-upbringing of the victims and their subsequent fall into white slavery due to unforeseeable and
undeserved circumstances. Likewise, these detailed and heart-wrenching cases grabbed their audience’s attention as well as evoked the audience’s empathy toward those victimized by the white slave trade. Consequently, rather than condemn the women/girls as deserving of their plight, this rhetorical device evokes the audience’s sympathy for the “victims.” Crusader Jean Turner-Zimmerman (1912), a physician and president of the Chicago Rescue Mission, related the following particularly sympathy-evoking story from a white slave:

…I saw my father bayoneted to the earth by Russian soldiers because he was a Jew. I saw my mother work over the washtub until her hands were bloody that I and my little brother might have bread and my virtue be protected. One day a man came to our house...saying he was an agent for a steamship company and that he had good work in America for many girls, where they could earn as much in one month as they could earn in two years in Russia. My heart leaped with joy.... I left all—my mother, my brother. I came to America. Soon I could send for them, for I was strong and could work—work day and night.... Here I was taken from the Polk Street Station to Armour Avenue where by force I was ruined. I was there many months, sick and starving, and finally got out and crawled over to the West Side…but now I am dying and I want my mother. (P. 52-53)

Even the book illustrations like those on this slide attested to the imprisonment of innocent young girls as white slaves and were particularly dramatic and thus sympathy evoking: Doe-eyed young girls, both lifting their eyes to Heaven in a desperate prayer, as a dastardly man leers in the background. These various claims constructing girls as blameless, innocent victims entrapped into white slavery resonated with broader gender and sexual discourses that women’s sexual purity was a priceless treasure that needed protection—protection that had to come from without, as women by nature were naïve, mentally weak, and unable to protect themselves from the wiles of wicked men.

Moreover, even when admitting that some may have freely chosen to become prostitutes, the crusaders immediately countered by claiming that the majority of prostitutes were in fact white slaves, thus persisting in constructing them as blameless victims in need of protection. Often, these claims, similar to constructions of “wife abuse” in Loseke’s (1992:28) analyses, constructed the prostitute as a person who could not “‘cope with the outside world without some assistance and intervention,’ as ‘too demoralized to assert herself,’ as ‘bewildered and helpless,’ and as ‘overwhelmingly passive and unable to act on her own behalf’.” The following passages illustrate this rhetoric:
I am asked to say whether the unfortunate girls in these places are slaves in the sense that they cannot get away. My answer to that must depend upon your interpretation of “can not.”....

To walk out on a winter’s day into the streets of Chicago, with nothing with which to buy a meal and no shelter and no friend under the wide, pitiless sky, is a heroic course to which some resolute Spartan matron might be driven in protection of her virtue, but it’s a course which can hardly be expected from a mistreated, deluded, ignorant, disgraced, modern American girl.... (Bell 1910:239-40)

Similarly, through the persistent connotation of those victimized by white slavery as “girls”—or, as Reverend Bell declared, “BLAMELSS GIRLS ENSNARED IN CHICAGO...blameless Chicago virgins” (Bell 1910:278-9), the crusaders forwarded a “child-victim” (Best 1987, 1990) claim, which, as Best proclaims, is “uncontroversial” (1990:5) and thus readily ratified.

In defining white slavery, most of the crusaders were explicit in noting that “white slavery,” implied by its connotation, included white women only. In contrast, Clifford Roe, Assistant State’s Attorney for Chicago’s Cook County and also a vocal white slavery investigator, stated that “The phrase, white slave traffic, is a misnomer, for there is a traffic in yellow and black women and girls, as well as in white girls,” but then immediately countered, “however, the term has become so widely and extensively used that it seems futile to ever change it” ([1911] 1979:97). Roe’s (1912; [1911] 1979) inclusion of “yellow and black women and girls” in the “white” slave traffic is interesting, as it may have acted as a reorientation of white slavery to be more inclusive. Likewise, it may be read as a domain statement—increasing the domain of white slavery. In contrast, the other crusaders limited the domain of white slavery to only include white women and girls. The latter’s domain limitation and the former’s domain expansion perhaps could have been strategic. For example, by limiting their definition of white slavery to white women and girls, these crusaders perhaps wished to appeal to their predominantly white audience. In contrast, Roe perhaps wished to expand the domain of white slavery to increase the perceived magnitude of the problem. However, Roe’s persistence in using the nomenclature reinforces the notion that the enslavement of white women and girls was of primary concern—and thus reflects the crusaders’ white racial status interests and those of their perceived white audience.
HAVE YOU A GIRL TO SPARE?

Furthering empathy toward the victims of white slavery, the crusaders’ construction of the range of vulnerability to white slavery was another key rhetorical device. By arguing that any woman/girl—be she a “country” girl (who was constructed as comparatively more innocent and pure than the worldly-wise city girl), an immigrant girl, or a girl of the privileged or working class—could at any given moment be ensnared in the white slave trader’s net of debauchery, the crusaders exploded the range of vulnerability. Thus, as Best (1987:108) argues when discussing range claims, the crusaders “[made] everyone in the audience feel that they had a vested interest in the problem’s solution”—particularly if they had a daughter at stake. The following passage from Superintendent of the Illinois Training School for Girls, Ophelia Amigh, invokes this rhetorical device:

In this day and age of the world no young girl is safe! And all young girls who are not surrounded by the alert, constant and intelligent protection of those who love them unselfishly
are in imminent and deadly peril...The dragnets of the inhuman men and women who ply this
terrible trade are spread day and night and are manipulated with a skill and precision which
ought to strike terror to the heart of every careless or indifferent parent. (Amigh 1910:119)

As alluded to in the above passage, parents were often targeted as to blame for their daughters’
vulnerability to white slavers. Reverend Bell (1910:246, 248) deemed the principal cause of girls’
“downfall” as “parental inefficiency, through lack of character, knowledge or vigilance,” asking, “But
what must be the feelings of the father and mother who thoughtlessly leave their young daughters
exposed to these serpents? A mother bird is more watchful of her chicks or a cat of her kittens....” The
following claim by Roe regarding this presumed family breakdown is saturated with traditional gender connotations:

Mothers and daughters have grown apart....In olden days mother and daughter sat by the fire
and knitted and darned and sewed. Confidences were exchanged and mother and daughter
knew each other intimately, while today quite often they are employed in offices, stores or
factories.... (Roe [1911] 1979:51-52)

Roe (1910b) and other crusaders also pointed to parents’ greedy social aspirations and shirking
of their familial financial duties as exacerbating the white slavery problem, as it placed young working
women at the mercy of white slavers trolling the department stores at which they worked:

...Mothers and fathers...Do not be too anxious to make money, or for higher position in the
social life at the expense of your daughter. Do not be over ready to cast off the burden of
supporting your family by sending your daughter out to earn a livelihood at an early age, lest the
price you get be the price of a soul. (Roe 1910b:173)

These claims resonated with broader discourses of anxiety regarding women’s unprecedented foray into
the workforce during the Progressive Era and their subsequent relative economic and social
independence. Furthermore, they reflect the crusaders’ middle-class status bias: the assumption is that
working-class mothers and their daughters are working for selfish reasons—not out of economic
necessity. As well, I would argue that Roe’s statement betrays a class interest of keeping the working class down.

**THE WHITE SLAVER**


The crusaders’ statuses of being white and American-born visibly influenced their claims regarding whom they perceived as the white slavers. The white slave crusaders, while allowing that “Americans” were sometimes white slavers, often pointed to “foreigners” as the culprits. According to the crusaders, these “foreigners” would prey upon “American” and “foreign” girls alike: an illustration on this slide renders a Madonna-like Italian girl, “innocent and rarely attractive for a girl of her class” (Sims 1910:18) according to States District Attorney Edwin W. Sims, emerging from the depths of the lower-class steerage to be entrapped by her “friends.”

Likewise, the crusaders primarily pinpointed “new” immigrants of the Progressive Era, Southern and Eastern Europeans, but also threw Asians and blacks into the mix occasionally. Moreover, some
 crusaders’ claims were peppered with xenophobic and racist sentiment—reflecting a widespread xenophobic discourse during the Progressive Era toward these “new” immigrants and racial minorities. For example, Turner (1907:578,580) proffered descriptions of “Russian Jews” and “Italians, Greeks, Lithuanians, and Poles” as “rough and hairy tribes,” and declared of the “European peasant” and the “vicious Negro from the countryside of the South” that “none of these folk, perhaps, have progressed far along the way of civilization.” Zimmerman (1912) offered the following:

...America is becoming more and more un-American every day. Each ship, each train Westward or Eastward bound, is now daily dumping into our Land...thousands of the scum and vice and criminal element of South Eastern Europe, Asia and the Orient, and remember, too, that a short five-years of residence here converts the filthiest criminal from Turkey, Arabia, Syria, Italy, or of any place else where vice and brutality reign supreme, into an American citizen with the right to vote into office men who will and are sworn to protect and aid in every possible way the Jewish, Russian, French or Chinese whore-master as he rents a shanty and proceeds to fatten on the very life-blood of the young girlhood of this and other lands. (P. 7-8)

Rev. Ernest Bell (1910) also made the following impassioned plea laced with derogatory connotations:

Unless we make energetic and successful war upon the red light districts and all that pertains to them, we shall have Oriental brothel slavery thrust upon us from China and Japan, and Parisian white slavery, with all its unnatural and abominable practices, established among us by the French traders. Jew traders, too, will people our “levees” with Polish Jewesses and any others who will make money for them. Shall we defend our American civilization, or lower our flag to the most despicable foreigners—French, Irish, Italians, Jews and Mongolians? (P. 260)

Even such outwardly benign amusements as ice cream parlors and fruit and/or candy stores—run by “foreigners”—were identified as places where white slavers trolled for victims to feed into an international trafficking ring. An illustration included on this slide from Reverend Bell’s (1910) collection encapsulates the dangers of the ice cream parlor—a swarthy young man wiling an innocent young woman, with a “foreign” owner lurking in the background.
Despite their xenophobic and racist sentiment, many of the same crusaders made allusions to the injustices of the enslavement of blacks to incite action against the present white slavery problem. However, several of these associations were invoked to demonstrate white slavery as being comparably worse and more atrocious than the enslavement of blacks, as the following passages illustrate:

Are we in Illinois, the State that sent Abraham Lincoln forth as leader in the conflict for freedom of the slaves of the south, going to let an evil, worse, yea, far worse than that ever was, or could be, exist and triumph, and not rise up in arms against it? (Dedrick 1910:98)

The blackest slavery that has ever stained the human races. (Bell 1910:3)

...[T]he white slave traffic which would, by contrast, make the Congo slave traders of the old days appear like Good Samaritans. (CHS, EB, Box 6, September, 1908)

[T]he foulest slavery the world has ever known... (Roe [1911] 1979:6)

It behooves the sons and daughters of the brave men who freed the black slaves to rise in another and holier crusade to free the white slaves from a bondage blacker and more damning than any the world has yet known. (Boynton 1910:404)

To speculate the reasons for this recurring rhetorical feature, the sexual nature of white slavery was perhaps perceived as comparably more detestable than the enslavement of blacks for (primarily) labor purposes (although today we well know the history of sexual victimization of black women during slavery). Likewise, persisting Victorian constructions of women as asexual and the value placed upon women’s sexual purity by society perhaps made the crusaders envision their sexual enslavement as particularly abhorrent. Moreover, lingering racist sentiment of the superiority of whites and the inferiority of blacks feasibly prejudiced the crusaders’ beliefs that the enslavement of white women was necessarily far worse than the enslavement of blacks. Whatever the aim, I would argue these claims emanate from the crusaders’ white racial status.
The burgeoning offerings of commercialized recreations (e.g., movie theaters, amusement parks, dance halls, etc.) were a favorite target of the crusaders, who argued white slave traffickers frequented what Roe called “shallow cheap amusements” ([1911] 1979:156) in search of fresh victims. These various forms of commercial recreations were viewed as particularly dangerous because most girls frequented these places without chaperones and thus unprotected from the dangers that presumably abounded. Several of the crusaders held particular trepidations for the dance halls and saloons, where procurers trolled for victims—the presence of alcohol and access to nearby hotels further placing young girls’ virtue in jeopardy. An illustration on this slide from Reverend Bell’s (1910) collection provides a visual example, portraying a man luring a hesitant young woman into a dance hall—“the brilliant entrance to hell itself”—flanked by a “wine café” and hotel that rents rooms “by day or week”—foreshadowing the demise of this innocent young lady. Again, the broader discourse of
anxieties surrounding young women’s social and economic independence, which foreshadowed the “flapper” culture of the 1920s, is reflected in the white slave crusaders’ claims. Also, the middle-class crusaders’ deeming these amusements “shallow” and “cheap” reflects their classist and elitist views toward affordable and thus working-class frequented recreations.

“FROM SCARLET BABYLON TO SMOKY CHICAGO”

Lastly, an underlying current permeating all the white slave crusaders’ claims were anxieties about urban living. Claims that depicted various aspects of city life as unsavory, such as crowded tenement housing, poor working conditions with pitiful pay, tawdry commercialized recreations, and corrupt city officials, resonated with the broader anti-urban discourse present in the Progressive Era. Roe ([1911] 1979) illustrates a particularly dismal portrait of city life:

No, the picture [the procurer] paints does not show the tired, languid girls of the city, wearily wending their way homeward from the day’s work...hurrying to catch the car or the elevated train in the morning, the crowding and jostling of the men and women struggling to find a vacant seat as they ride to the center of din and noise; the pulling, jerking and hauling to be the first one out of the car.... At noon a quick lunch in a cheap dyspepsia factory, and then the grinding routine of the afternoon.... (P. 155-56)

Similarly, some crusaders’ nostalgic depictions of, and their pleas to keep girls safe in, the country also resonated with this broader anti-urban discourse. Below, Roe waxes poetically on the divine beauty of the country:

Stay rather at home where all is pure, beautiful and really grand, for no artisan can build forests and mountains like the great Creator has given you; no artist can paint the growing grain and the flowers as beautiful as He. The crowded smelling car cannot supplant the good old horses and carriage. Nor is love so sweet in the gilded drawing room as in the winding shady lane where the moon mellows the heart and fills the soul with joy. (Roe [1911] 1979:156)

Although at the time of their crusading activities the majority of the white slave crusaders called Chicago their home, they largely originated from rural, Midwestern communities (Linehan 1991). Their rural beginnings may explain their general discontent with the urban environment. Their idealized version of the rural family and home life often did not mesh with the conditions they observed in the urban communities; consequently, their reform ideals often comprised the image of the nurturing (and, by default, rural) hearth and home.
In conclusion, while sometimes wavering in their resolve, the crusaders attempted to reconstruct prostitution from that of vicious and immoral women plying their trade to one of innocent girls either forced or connived into white slavery by scheming men. This victim construction, however, would be short-lived. As the United States’ involvement in World War I erupted in 1917, suddenly the prostitute was no longer a helpless victim in need of protection: she was instead a vector of disease that threatened to weaken the moral and physical strength of the troops (Brandt 1987; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988). Consequently, while a social justice frame dominated the rhetoric of the crusaders’ pre-war claims, the social control frame and social hygiene concerns prevailed after U.S. entry into the war. However, while fleeting, the victim construction embodied the Progressive reformers’ optimism and activism: in the face of social injustice, society had the power, the drive, and the duty to obliterate this blight upon greater humanity.
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