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turn-of-the-century England**

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Nothing new under the sun?

Representations of trafficking in turn-of-the-century England

Rachael Attwood

A longer version of this article first appeared in the [Anti-Trafficking Review, issue 7](#).

	1899.	1898.	1897.
Total number of unprotected girls assisted	655	364	315
Girls left at the Home in default of destinations, or because of imperfect addresses	145	93	60
Girls conducted to ships, railway stations, or to addresses in London	510	271	255
Non-Jewesses assisted (included in the above figures)	70	41	30
Unprotected children assisted (ages varying from 3½ to 12)	25		

As a historian of trafficking into the sex sector, I am often surprised and disturbed by how much truth there is in the cliché ‘there’s nothing new under the sun’. In a recent issue of *ATR*, Elena Krsmanovic [observed](#) the distinction made by the Serbian media between ‘innocent (but not entirely blameless) trafficking victims’ and ‘immoral prostitutes’ who succumbed to trafficking. Elena could have been writing about representations of trafficking that were aired over a century ago.

A case in point comes from English history. Popular representations of trafficked women in England between 1880 and 1914 switched between ‘good women’ (the image of the blameless ‘white slave’ who had been duped into sex work between 1885 and 1910) and ‘bad women’. The ‘bad women’ came in two different forms: ‘the foreign traveller’, who was partly to blame for being trafficked, and ‘the immoral migrant’, who was entirely to blame for her ‘predicament’. Both were referred to as examples of the threat posed by unregulated migration into England and by the free mobility of working-class women.

I do not, in this short piece, draw links between past and present-day depictions of trafficked women. However, I explore the nature and the danger of the seemingly ‘perennial aspects’ of the negative representation of trafficking victims using an example drawn from the discourses mobilised between 1885 and 1910 by a leading force in England’s early anti-trafficking movement, the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women (JAPGW).

The Backdrop

By the 1890s, a series of international trafficking networks had developed. Following the onset of the Long Depression in the 1870s, and the upsurge in the persecution of Jews in and beyond Imperial Russia, many Europeans migrated overseas to access a better life. Among them, hundreds of female migrants, often facilitated by third parties, travelled to work in the sex

industries in destinations including Buenos Aires, Johannesburg, and Mumbai. England was a conduit in trafficking networks, housing four major passenger ports. It was also a procuring ground and trafficking destination. Much of this activity occurred in London's East End, where many East European Jews, then the country's biggest immigrant group, had settled. England also harboured the leading anti-trafficking groups, the multi-denominational National Vigilance Association and the JAPGW.

The JAPGW was established in 1885 by members of the Anglo-Jewish elite in response to the lack of moral welfare provision in London for Jewish girls from the poor migrant community. In 1889, it established a Gentlemen's Committee to co-ordinate its anti-trafficking work at home and abroad. The Jewish migrants settling in England engendered socio-economic strain and acute hostility, particularly in the East End. Middle-class anti-alienists invoked Antisemitic discourses focused on (male) Jews as degenerates to argue that Jewish migrants represented a dangerous 'race apart'. The immigration restriction measure, the 1905 Aliens Act, failed to suppress these prejudices. From the vantage point of Anglo-Jewry, the migrant population seemed foreign, ostensibly and morally, and therefore potentially dangerous. The association's anti-trafficking work was a politicised mechanism of 'Jewish community control', directed by Anglo-Jewry at the impoverished 'foreign Jews' it deemed most problematic—lone female labour migrants. It was designed to safeguard the place of the Jewish elite in England amid a seemingly rising tide of Antisemitism.

Potential Victim 1: The Foreign Traveller

The type of female Jewish migrant the Association cast as most at risk of being trafficked was the foreign traveller. She, according to the Association, was an ignorant young woman who had upped sticks on a whim, dreaming of a bright new life abroad, only to be duped by a trafficker. 'The victims are often very weak, ignorant and helpless', the JAPGW proclaimed in its 1904 Report, '...constantly devoid of moral fibre, lacking religious teaching, of low education'. The supposed intellectual deficiencies of the foreign traveller were also emphasised through illustrations of their poor command of written English. These representations were not rooted in the JAPGW's 'Jewishness', but rather in its status as a bourgeois English group. Both the JAPGW and NVA rehearsed discourses of the threat posed by girls' 'wayward' desires and materialism that had resonance in English society, thanks to middle-class commentators.

Potential Victim 2: The Immoral Migrant

The other focus of the JAPGW's anti-trafficking discourses was 'the immoral migrant'. She was cast as a sexually-experienced woman who had travelled to England with a third party specifically to sell sex. Its reports refer to trafficking victims who were 'sometimes not unwilling to be victims'. In private, though, its members resolved that 'the names and addresses of girls who come over here...who are living immoral lives should be sent to the Rabbis of their own towns' with a view to repatriation. The JAPGW did relate the 'flaws' of potential trafficking victims to the poverty and discrimination rife in their home countries. However, such factors were portrayed as exacerbating these women's inherent shortcomings.

Consequences

Trafficking was misrepresented by the JAPGW as a problem that was caused by foreign working-class women who, to varying degrees, had rendered themselves prone to sexual abuse because of their inborn moral inferiority. To the JAPGW, the more agency a woman exercised, the more morally deficient she must be, and the more susceptible to, and culpable for the injury sustained to her person she was—especially if she happened to be working-class and foreign.

Further, through its representations, the JAPGW unintentionally made a case for 'alien women' being as dangerous as 'foreign men' and cast England as a target for 'undesirable foreigners'.

The example of the JAPGW and its clear parallels to the observations made regarding contemporary trafficking representations by Krsmanovic and many others, suggests that to understand the deeper ideological roots of today's trafficking discourses, we need to build a more comprehensive and nuanced appreciation of the ways in which the world's first anti-trafficking organisations problematised trafficking. Because, after all, there is very little that is new under the sun.

Rachael Attwood is a Lecturer in History at the University of Westminster, UK. Her research focuses on the history of trafficking in Britain between 1880 and 1940, and particularly on the discourses of trafficking for sex work mobilised during this period. She has published on the politics guiding representations of trafficking in turn-of-the-century Britain in journals including *Gender & History* and the *Women's History Review*.