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We Fight with God's Weapons: Sex Work and Pragmatic Penance in Neoliberal Costa Rica

At Esperanza Foundation, Costa Rica's evangelical organization for assisting sex workers, renouncing prostitution is required in order to receive resources and support.[1] Today the group is talking about why leaving sex work is so hard. Ronda, pregnant with her second child and struggling with her partner, says "prostitution is what I automatically turn to when times are tough." Esperanza Foundation's director explains that there are magical ties to prostitution, but that all magic is black (that is, bad). She calls the desire to return to sex work a "demonic tie" and then discusses Satan's strategies for getting women to abandon Esperanza Foundation's support group. These include gossip, envy, mean comments, violence, material and economic interests, and spiritual struggles. She tells the story of a participant who was murdered by her partner last year, explaining "we all have the opportunity as individuals to choose between good and bad, including choosing to stay in violent situations that harm us or not. Yorleny made the wrong choice, and was killed." The group leader starts to pray, asking for protection and guidance for everyone in the room, and we all jump when she starts clapping loudly to scare off the devil. She goes around to each individual, offering specific (and loud) prayers for each woman present. A lot of the women cry, and then when she gets to Marieta she starts yelling and Marieta hits the floor. She lies on the ground with her eyes closed but twitching so the director covers her with her sweater while the praying continues. After about five minutes, Marieta wakes up and is helped into a chair. The director finishes by saying that leaving behind the evil and illness of prostitution is a holy war but one that each woman here can win if she puts her faith in the Lord.

—Taken from the author's fieldnotes, San José, Costa Rica.

This article explores the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as new agents of governance in the context of a downsized neoliberal state and shrinking gendered labor market. Based on participant obser-

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[1] The name of the organization and those of all interviewees are pseudonyms.

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vation and interviews with staff and sex workers at an NGO in San José, Costa Rica, I focus on an example of what has been called the "NGO-ization" (Alvarez 1998, 306) of social welfare in Latin America. This article demonstrates that help for sex workers is focused on very individualized projects of assisting women to overcome prostitution and that these projects define prostitution as something to be escaped rather than as an income-generating work activity that is often also a method of class ascendancy or social mobility (Brennan 2004; Cabezas 2004; Rivers-Moore 2010). How sex workers interact with this particular organization and how that organization presents its goals and work must be situated within the broader structural context, namely, the neoliberal focus on individual problems over systemic issues. While I have previously written about changes in how the state deals with sex workers, arguing that the state has long defined sex workers as victims in order to justify the use of mass repression (Rivers-Moore 2016), we know that downsized states, particularly in Latin America, have often offloaded this kind of work to the nongovernmental sector. The question is, what happens next? How can we understand the dynamics that emerge when a repressive state apparatus is replaced, at least in part, by Esperanza Foundation, an evangelical Christian rescue organization? In this article I consider sex workers' experience of neoliberalism on the ground through their relationships with attempts to help them via individual uplift. Sex workers participate in a form of emotional labor that I call "pragmatic penance," the performance of victimhood when strategic and beneficial. Women's individual aspirations are encouraged at Esperanza, as long as a particular kind of victimhood is embraced. I begin with a brief discussion of studies of efforts to help sex workers and then provide the specific context of neoliberalism and the sex industry in Costa Rica. Next, I describe the work undertaken by Esperanza Foundation and the ways that sex workers deploy pragmatic penance in order to take advantage of the resources available to them. Finally, I offer some concluding thoughts on why we should be paying attention to how sex workers are helped.

Helping sex workers

There is a complicated and difficult history of organizations attempting to assist sex workers around the world. As Gail Pheterson argues, "never have prostitutes been legitimized as spokespersons or self-determining agents, not by those who defend them against male abuse and not by those who depend upon them for sexual service" (1989, 3). On the one hand, sex workers have long been portrayed as pathological, disordered, and diseased. Whether these disease vectors should be considered victims to be helped or dirty sources of contagion to be contained and disciplined has varied considerably accord-

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ing to time and place.[2] On the other hand, sex workers have sometimes been interpreted as sex radicals, rejecting the traditional trappings of femininity and domesticity, challenging the separation of sex and money, demanding payment for what men expect to access for free.[3] In this sense, they are sometimes read as outlaws and rebels but also fundamentally as subjects of rights.[4]

During the 1980s and 1990s, there were significant efforts by sex workers to organize around human and labor rights in many places across the world (Jenness 1993; Gall 2007; Hardy 2010), including in Costa Rica to a very limited extent, but this approach has largely shifted out of the spotlight in favor of the view that sex workers are being bought and sold as objects and therefore must be saved. New policies, laws, and popular culture representations conflate sex work and trafficking, often using deeply problematic and emotive terms like "sexual slavery." Antitrafficking work aimed at saving sex workers is being carried out by a diverse group of academics, activists, and policy makers, including feminists and evangelical Christians. Concerns about trafficking on a global stage frequently present sex workers primarily as hapless victims but, significantly, victims who can be helped and improved. This is arguably an example of the broader trend identified by Jonathan Simon (2007, 105) of the "victim subject" taking the place of the rights-bearing citizen as the idealized legal subject. Much has been written about this international trend in terms of policy and NGO discourse surrounding the sex industry.[5] Numerous authors have made links between Victorian-era antitrafficking campaigns and contemporary rescue efforts (Doezema 2001; Day 2010). Elizabeth Bernstein's generative work has looked at evangelical activism in the United States in order to make a compelling argument for why young Christian women are interested in saving "third world" trafficking victims (2010, 63). In the United Kingdom, Annie Hill (2014) notes the "sympathetic shift" in defining sex workers as victims of gender-based violence rather than as criminals. However, we know significantly less about how these dynamics actually play out in the lives of sex workers, with a few exceptions. For example, Christine Jacobsen and May-Len Skilbrei have explored how migrant sex workers in Norway respond to representations of themselves as victims but found that rather than making use of the victim category, they rely on "ethnicized" discourses about femininity and masculinity

[2] See Bell (1994), Whitehead (1995), Law (2000), Bliss (2001), and Katsulis (2008).

[3] See Rubin (1975), McClintock (1993), Bell (1994), Califia (1994), and Chapkis (1997).

[4] This is specific to women involved in heterosexual sex work and does not account for male or trans* sex workers.

[5] See Chapkis (2003), Agustín (2007), Andrijasevic (2007), Parreñas (2011), Kempadoo (2012), and Hill (2014).

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to help explain why Norwegian men are interested in having sex with migrant sex workers (2010, 196). Veronica Magar's (2012) work looks at a sex worker community organization in India and its struggles to put HIV prevention and antitrafficking programs into effect, goals that often contradict each other in that the former relies on empowerment discourses and the latter on victim identities. The aim of this article is to contribute to the literature on how sex workers are helped by exploring the dynamics at play in a particular location in the global South, where these international policy trends are empirically enacted.

Representing sex workers as victims is not new, and there has been some important work on how migrant sex workers respond to victim narratives (Jacobsen and Skilbrei 2010; Cheng and Kim 2014), how migrant sex workers embrace the victim role in order to receive state assistance (Chapkis 2003), and how sex workers in the criminal justice system manipulate the perception that they are victims (Shdaimah and Leon 2015). It is striking just how forcefully the victim narrative has come to drown out any alternative efforts, such as working toward labor rights, justice for migrant workers, or sexual freedom. That said, at the international level there has been a significant shift recently, with Amnesty International's report (2016) urging the decriminalization of the sex industry and the recognition of sex workers' human rights and a widely discussed *New York Times Magazine* article (Bazelon 2016) perhaps marking the most important developments. These interventions are significant and welcome in that they are opening up debates at the international level to some degree, particularly around the experiences of female, cisgendered, adult sex workers. However, the victim narrative and panic about trafficking remain endemic, and as such, this article offers a discussion of what that means in practice for sex-working women in a particular place. What is interesting in the Costa Rican case is that Esperanza Foundation turned its attention to trafficking relatively late in the game (beginning to discuss the issue around 2007 when it was already front and center in many other places, including on the international agenda), and while their website discusses trafficking, they are still primarily working with Costa Rican women who entered the sex industry without force. If the most deserving victims are women who have been trafficked, particularly those who have been duped or forced into selling sex, then local women who choose to work in the sex industry must perform an especially convincing penance if they are to be considered worthy of help.

It is important to discuss the specifics of the Costa Rican case in relation to the broader context, and I suggest that the focus on entrepreneurial self-improvement at Esperanza Foundation needs to be read as part of the political economy of neoliberalism. This article therefore builds on work by other

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researchers to think about the relationship between macro- and microlevel social, political, and economic processes, especially in terms of how broad political economic trends play out on the ground in the lives of particular people in specific places (Bernstein 2007; Padilla 2007; Padilla et al. 2007). I consider how neoliberalism impacts responses to sex work and sex workers, exploring how "programs of improvement are shaped by political-economic relations they cannot change" (Li 2007, 4). As such, sex workers' embrace of pragmatic penance is a reaction to the broader context that frames the ways in which they are helped. I argue that sex workers have proven to be quite astute at adjusting to the focus of the organization that seeks to help them in this context, strategically deploying pragmatic penance in order to benefit as much as possible.

Arlie Hochschild's influential work (2002) on "the managed heart" was groundbreaking in defining emotional labor as the management of feeling to create public display that is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value. Hochschild's notion of emotional labor has prompted a great number of studies that have explored how emotion is, literally, put to work in contexts as varied as corporate offices, airplanes, cafés, and police stations (see Steinberg and Figart 1999 for a useful review). The concept of emotional labor has been fruitfully used by scholars of the sex industry in a variety of contexts. For example, Kimberly Hoang (2010) has written persuasively about the repressive and expressive emotional labor that sex workers perform with clients in different sex markets; indeed, there is by now significant published research on the relationships between sex workers and their clients that draws explicitly or implicitly on Hochschild's work (Bernstein 2007; Sanders 2008; Rivers-Moore 2012). However, we know comparatively less about the relationships that sex workers have with the organizations ostensibly set up to improve their lives and the emotional labor that might be carried out in that context. This article aims to complicate our understanding of the politics of victimhood so prevalent in trafficking and anti–sex work discourses by looking at what one rescue project looks like in practice and how sex workers actually experience their participation in the program. I tease out the contradictions in victimhood discourses that become apparent when we actually look at the day-to-day experiences of the very women who are being defined as victims in the first place. The emotional appeals to moral improvement that the foundation aims at women are answered with a specific kind of emotional labor: pragmatic penance. Sex workers involved with the NGO manage their feelings and work to perform a particular emotional state centered on victimhood and penance. While this is not emotional labor exchanged for a wage, the display of pragmatic penance is exchanged for various kinds of support, both financial and in-kind. Sex workers who are already highly

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attuned to providing emotional labor for clients are involved in a different kind of "relational work" (Zelizer 2007) with the NGO, a dynamic that has been studied much less.

Methods and setting

This article forms part of a larger ethnography of the sex tourism industry in San José, Costa Rica (Rivers-Moore 2016). Methods included fourteen months of continuous participant observation (in two NGOs, the state's HIV/AIDS prevention clinic, and several sex tourism bars) as well as multiple follow-up trips that added up to at least another year on the ground. I also carried out 136 semistructured interviews with sex workers, sex tourists, state and NGO officials, and employees in sex tourism businesses. Finally, I conducted targeted archival research, primarily to triangulate unclear data. This article is based on participant observation at one NGO for sex workers in San José, as well as on interviews with NGO employees and sex workers.[6]

As in most places, sex is sold in a variety of contexts and in a variety of ways in San José. The city's historical red-light district is where sex is sold on the street or in small brothels, usually to working-class local men or Central American migrants. Brothels that cater to middle-class clients dot the city in numerous different neighborhoods, while bars and restaurants where tourists connect with sex workers are concentrated in an area known colloquially as Gringo Gulch. The purchase and sale of sex by adults is not criminalized in Costa Rica (although pimping and living on the avails of prostitution are). Sex work is organized differently in different spaces: independently in Gringo Gulch and on the street, via administrators in brothels.[7] As is everywhere the case, sex markets in San José are diverse and complex.

Neoliberalism, gender, and sex work in Costa Rica

"Neoliberalism" is a term used so broadly, to explain so many disparate social processes, that it becomes necessary to specify which neoliberalisms are being referred to, where they are being implemented, and how they actually play out on the ground. This avoids setting up neoliberalism as the proverbial straw man, used to provide an oversimplified and easy explanation for complex processes. As Aiwha Ong indicates, "neoliberalism seems to mean many different things depending on one's vantage point" (2006, 1). Neoliberalism is sometimes used to describe particular economic politics, first tested out in

[6] For a more detailed discussion of methods and ethics, see Rivers-Moore (2016).

[7] For a more detailed description of the varying contexts in which sex is sold in San José, see Rivers-Moore (2016).

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earnest in Latin America (Harvey 2005); it sometimes refers to a cultural project based on creating self-regulating, individual subjects (Rose 1999), and sometimes to a political project of state transformation based on an ideology born from the Chicago School, embraced by Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States, and spread around the globe via international financial institutions (Wacquant 2009, 2012). Sometimes neoliberalism refers to the political, economic, and cultural context of a specific time period, covering the last decades of the twentieth and first decades of the twenty-first centuries (Bernstein and Jakobsen 2013). Lisa Duggan argues persuasively for considering the "dense interrelations" between cultural, economic, and political analyses of neoliberalism (2003, 14). For the purposes of this article, I am interested in tracing the impact of these dense interrelations, not just the concrete economic policies but also the broader political and ideological thrust of neoliberalism, on the possibilities of improving the lives of sex workers in Costa Rica.

The complex and dense interrelations of cultural, economic, and political neoliberalism that Duggan refers to have been a defining feature of Costa Rican economic and cultural politics since the 1980s, when the country signed six different agreements with the International Monetary Fund aimed primarily at decreasing fiscal debt through reduced spending. Two major structural adjustment packages were signed with the World Bank, and eight loan and donation agreements geared toward privatization were signed with United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in the 1980s (Raventós 1997). USAID had a particularly significant impact on the Costa Rican economy: between 1983 and 1985, the $592 million provided by the United States represented 35.7 percent of the national budget, one-fifth of exports, and approximately 10 percent of gross domestic product (Edelman and Monge Oviedo 1993). The significance of how NGOs interact with sex workers needs to be understood within this broader context of neoliberalism in Costa Rica, both in terms of what this has meant for accessing funding for projects and the kinds of cultural ideas circulating about gender and sexuality.[8] Costa Rica was especially receptive to neoliberalism for various reasons.[9] The country's na-

[8] See Mannon (2006), Vandegrift (2008), Mannon and Kemp (2010), and Rivers-Moore (2014).

[9] Some argue that Latin America is postneoliberal, particularly with reference to the election of populist, Left-leaning governments in several countries (Macdonald and Ruckert 2009; Lind 2010). Mario Pecheny (2013) offers an optimistic assessment of sexual politics in Latin America as postneoliberal. While his argument holds true for some countries, it is less relevant in Costa Rica. Sexual politics are certainly playing an increasingly important role in neoliberal Latin America (Bedford 2009; Pecheny 2013), as recent struggles around issues such as equal

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tional identity, based around imagining itself as unique in the region, an oasis of peace and whiteness in an isthmus defined by racial mixing and violent conflict, has led to a strong individualist strand in politics and culture. In the context of revolutionary upheaval across Central America in the 1970s and 1980s, Costa Rica's tradition of anticommunism and suspicion of the Left was encouraged by the United States, which supplied massive amounts of financial aid in exchange for Costa Rica's "neutrality."

Despite the fact that sex work has virtually always been decriminalized in Costa Rica (except briefly between 1943 and 1948), sex workers have faced a variety of forms of surveillance and discipline by public health institutions (in cahoots with police) over many years, and state practices impacted both the production of sex workers as a pathologized collective and the spatial organization of prostitution in the city. The state's primary model of regulating the sex industry, in place for decades, was based on collective repression: sex workers were seen as dangerous disease vectors in need of control and were the targets of frequent sanitary raids (involving mass detention and forced testing for sexually transmitted infections). Declining state revenue in the 1980s and 1990s; decreased state spending on social programs, including public health (in accordance with structural adjustment policies); and the country's ineligibility for international assistance (because it is defined as "middle-income") combined to stay the state's repressive hand, in that it could no longer afford to carry out mass repression.[10] It was in this context that Esperanza Foundation emerged and began to offer services to sex workers.

There is a significant literature debating the role of NGOs in relation to the state from a variety of perspectives. While some have celebrated the role of NGOs in mobilizing grassroots movements and opposition to state power (Fisher 1998; Kudva 2005), others have suggested that NGOs are imperialist agents of neoliberalism (Kamat 2004; Schuller 2009; Karim 2014). More nuanced perspectives suggest that NGOs do not replace states but rather are intimately entwined with them in complex ways (Mercer 2002; Grewal 2005; Bernal and Grewal 2014). Neoliberalism is often presented as the cold extension of market logics into everyday life, relying on instrumental and tech-

marriage and abortion make clear. While Costa Rica's recent election of a president from a third party considered more progressive was initially seen as hopeful by many, his filling of cabinet positions with members of the traditional political elite and his unwillingness to tackle controversial issues like state religion and abortion has been disappointing. In economic policy and in cultural and sexual politics, Costa Rica is a long way from postneoliberal.

[10] For a detailed analysis of the changing role of the state in regulating the sex industry in Costa Rica, see Rivers-Moore (2014).

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nocratic arguments in favor of professionalization, entrepreneurship, and audit culture.[11] This has frequently been linked to law-and-order responses on the part of the state, and scholars have been critical of the ways in which NGOs work with the state in criminalizing particular populations (Sudbury 2005; Wacquant 2009; Bernstein 2012). In the case of Esperanza Foundation, the neoliberal emphasis on entrepreneurialism and individual uplift is accompanied by moral and emotional claims, which are in fact central. The decline in state repression has not been accompanied by a decline in moral judgments in relation to the sex industry. Much to the contrary, the space left by the retreat of the state has been filled by a focus on emotional appeals to moral improvement. Consumerism, individuality, entrepreneurialism, and capitalism are certainly all fundamental to the foundation's approach, but this does not include calls for a more punitive state. While there has certainly been pressure on the Costa Rican state to address trafficking, particularly through the US Department of State's annual "Trafficking in Persons Report" (which has regularly placed Costa Rica on the tier 2 watch list), this has taken the form of sporadic and ineffective immigration raids (Rivers-Moore 2014). Informal pressure from the US embassy has not resulted in the kinds of punitive rescue spectacles seen elsewhere (Kinney 2006, 2014). Esperanza Foundation has not publicly advocated for increased criminalization of the adult sex industry, keeping its emphasis much more on individual emotional and spiritual healing, and especially on moral uplift. This is reminiscent of James Ferguson's "anti-politics machine" (1994), the process by which social problems are made nonpolitical by ignoring the underlying political economic relations. In the Costa Rican context, this is the result of decades of rural-to-urban migration, declining levels of formal employment, and increased precarity, especially for young people and women. Esperanza Foundation's embrace of individual entrepreneurialism as a strategy is not random; rather, it reflects the broader political economic context at work in Costa Rica, in the region, and around the world. That said, NGOs are "not passive agents of capital. They are also active producers of new subjectivities and social meanings for people through their various economic and social programs" (Karim 2014, 197). The question is, what happens in practice when the attempts to help sex workers embrace market-driven models of victimhood and entrepreneurship?

[11] See Barry, Osborne, and Rose (1996), Rose (1996), Foucault (1997), Strathern (2000), Gledhill (2004), and Harvey (2005).

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Esperanza Foundation and pragmatic penance

Esperanza Foundation was founded in 1997 after executive director Ramona Martínez's religious awakening. In an interview, she describes herself as starting out as "an atheist sociologist" who one day saw the word "prostitution" written across the sky. Her early work was carried out alone and involved visiting sex workers on the streets at night. She prayed with them and invited them to meet her at an office she borrowed: "It was incredibly powerful. Women arrived who had terminal cancer, and our prayers cured them." The organization works from a strongly evangelical Christian perspective, and the main goal is to assist women in leaving prostitution.

Like most of Latin America, Costa Rica is a majority Catholic country. It is also, however, one of the world's few remaining confessional states: the country's constitution lists Catholicism as the official state religion, and there is no separation of church and state, as all public institutions (such as schools and hospitals) are Catholic. This is a significant factor in helping to explain the country's conservative sexual politics; it also makes the emergence of Esperanza Foundation especially noteworthy. The organization is not affiliated with a specific religious denomination or a single church; rather, it identifies broadly as "*evangélico*" (evangelical) and sometimes as "*protestante*" (Protestant).[12] Services took place at different community churches; connections were made with various international missions. The primary identification was as non-Catholic, with significant flexibility in connecting with pastors, churches, and missionaries as opportunities for collaboration arose. Scholars of religion might quibble over whether the activities discussed here would be better described as pentecostal rather than evangelical. I have chosen to use the terminology that the foundation itself uses and would also emphasize that this article is less about defining the particular belief systems at work and more about considering concrete human activities, focusing on lived experiences over conceptual abstractions.

It is certainly significant that women have a central role in the foundation, including the theological and religious aspects. This is markedly different from the Catholic Church and was sometimes noted by sex worker participants. For example, some women who had been married talked about attending premarriage religious instruction through the Catholic Church that emphasized that men are the head of the family and should be obeyed. Esperanza Foundation offers a place that is definitely not male dominated, which in part can explain its attraction for sex workers. Why else do sex workers choose to come to Esperanza? The most important explanation is far more instrumental than philosophical or theological, and far simpler: Espe-

[12] This is commonly the case throughout Latin America (Freston 1998).

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ranza Foundation is the only organization in Costa Rica for sex workers who want to leave the sex industry. There are literally no other viable choices if sex workers want help *as sex workers*.[13] In this sense, embracing pragmatic penance becomes less about freely choosing victimhood and redemption and more about being strategic when there are no other options available.

Despite difficult beginnings, when Martínez worked alone out of a tiny rented office, Esperanza Foundation has been very successful at tapping into the current interest in trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of minors in recent years. It has carried out a few small projects on these topics, though its regular activities focus on helping local adult sex workers to exit the industry.[14] Sex workers are admitted into a two-year program. The first year involves group sessions that are a combination of therapy and religious instruction. These sessions were frequently intensely emotional and could get quite dramatic (as evidenced in the excerpt from my field notes at the beginning of this article). "Here, they start to see themselves as victims. They are not the bad ones, and that's a very different focus," explained Martínez. "When they can see themselves as victims, then they feel the love of God in their lives. Spirituality is the fundamental part of our work. God called me to do this."

It was difficult to get a straight answer about the source of funding for Esperanza Foundation's work. When pressed, Martínez would only say, "we have no financing. We pray every day. Every day before we start working we meet and we pray, we ask for what we need." That said, it was clear that money came from different sources for particular projects, including the US Department of State, the US embassy, the Dutch embassy, the International Labor Organization, and the International Organization for Migration. Furthermore, several churches in the United States sent volunteers and participated in fund-raising for the foundation. Donors from churches were regularly shown around the foundation's offices by Martínez, often interrupting group sessions to say hello and sometimes to pray. There were a few young women volunteers who stayed for a month at a time, running afternoon Bible study sessions in broken Spanish that were a source of great boredom for

[13] There are certainly other organizations that assist low-income and poor women, but the only other group specifically for sex workers is a sex workers' rights organization located in the red-light district. It is open for only a few hours a day, offering women a place to sit down and drink coffee, and the occasional workshop.

[14] While definitions of trafficking are notoriously problematic, Esperanza Foundation takes an especially broad view in order to fill the spaces in its antitrafficking programs and satisfy funders. All sex workers new to the foundation were asked if they had ever worked anywhere other than San José. If the answer was yes, their information was quickly added to the trafficking project, and they were counted as saved trafficking victims.

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participants (I have many field notes taken during these sessions that include a list of the number of participants who fell asleep).

While the details of the foundation's funding were difficult to tease out, it clearly displayed its own pragmatic approach to how it presented itself and its work. The foundation certainly did not misrepresent itself, but the religious aspects of the program were significantly downplayed in conversations with representatives from secular organizations. A young social worker hired by the foundation to run a large project funded by an international organization described having a major falling out with Martínez: "The terms of reference agreed upon with the funder for the project did not have any religious content, but once we started working it was clear that conversion was a central goal. I refused to allow the religious components, and it was a constant battle. We parted ways when the project was over, and it was not amicable." A program officer for the US embassy, which has funded various projects for Esperanza, said "You get more bang for your buck with faith-based organizations. Maybe working for a higher cause makes them more successful. Non-faith NGOs put in more padded grant requests, requiring more money for less time."[15] Though doing more with less made the foundation more appealing to some funders, this was achieved by hiring few full-time staff and instead relying on consultants hired for single projects. Full-time staff worked without the social security benefits employees are entitled to under Costa Rican law.

While this faith-based response to the sex industry is absolutely focused on deviant individuals rather than on addressing structural or institutional inequalities, in Costa Rica this has not been accompanied by a major shift toward carceral solutions, an important trend seen in other places (Bernstein 2012; Hill 2014, Kinney 2014). Esperanza Foundation remains focused on saving women through religious conversion but without turning to the state for criminal justice approaches. While Esperanza Foundation's success has not involved focusing energy and attention on law-and-order paradigms, its work absolutely mirrors a more general trend identified by Bernstein (2010) in evangelical work that defines sex workers as victims who need to be saved. By embracing a narrative of saving victims, Esperanza Foundation's work ignores and effectively neutralizes the struggles of women still working in the industry. While the foundation chose to emphasize or downplay the religious component of its work according to the audience of its appeals for funding, in fact evangelical subjectivities and neoliberal subjectivities would seem to mesh perfectly well in their embrace of individuality and entrepreneurialism over

[15] For a fascinating discussion of the role of George W. Bush's administration in supporting faith-based NGOs, see Hofer (2003).

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collective struggles and rights. Studies of evangelicals in Latin America suggest they are relatively conservative, emphasize individual conversion, and have frequently supported the region's most stridently neoliberal politicians (Stoll 1994; Freston 1998). Esperanza has been successful at securing funding for its work because its model matches the broader neoliberal emphasis on individuality and efficiency. This approach demands that individual sex workers change, while the context in which they turned to sex work in the first place does not. This demonstrates the importance of looking at these international dynamics as they play out in different places, where the particularities will lead to different outcomes. While we can clearly see trends in how sex work and trafficking are being addressed by evangelicals under neoliberalism, the specificities of the Costa Rican case exemplify the importance of examining empirical data about particular places rather than generalizing broadly. While NGOs are certainly involved in the neoliberal process of casting certain social issues as "non-political and non-ideological problems that need technical solutions" (Ong 2006, 3), Esperanza Foundation is an example of why we also must critically interrogate how technocratic rationales combine with moral and emotional claims in complex ways.

"We have to change everything about them": Scrutiny and surveillance

The program's approach involves intense personal scrutiny and surveillance. For a participant to be admitted, Esperanza staff carry out a home visit and a complete socioeconomic study of her background. According to Martínez, the home study is necessary because "many of these women come from families of prostitutes . . . it's almost a genetic inheritance." While any sex worker would be considered eligible for help from the organization, home studies helped determine the extent of involvement in the sex industry and what kind of help was needed. Many sex workers indeed appreciated the fact that while the sex industry itself was described as a source of immorality and evil, they themselves were not. That said, sex workers also constantly described feeling judged by Esperanza Foundation's staff, and the staff often discussed sex workers in terms that were judgmental at best, and sometimes downright offensive. For example, one staff member explained, "We have to change everything about them. Everything. They have to learn to be on time, to be polite. We have to train them to be polite, to behave properly. They have always been like little wild animals, so it's our job to educate them."[16]

[16] It is worth noting that the translation "little wild animals" does not fully capture just how condescending the term used in Spanish (*animalitos salvajes*) was.

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The association of prostitution with evil and prostitutes with victimhood was repeated regularly. For example, one day a group of sex workers were discussing the fact that they can always recognize each other. "There is some sort of invisible sign," said Glenda. "Some kind of energy we give off, you can always tell. Men can always tell." Vanessa emphatically agreed. "It doesn't matter what I wear, men in cars honk their horns at me, men say nasty things. They know what I am." The group leader asked Vanessa to stand at the front of the room. "Let's look at Vanessa. She is wearing jeans, running shoes, a T-shirt, and a sweater. She's very covered up. But she's still attracting men. Why is that? How can they tell what she is?" The group was silent, other than some nervous giggles: "She is still attracting men because the problem isn't her body. The issue isn't your body, it's your spirit and your soul. Prostitution contaminates your body, but especially your soul. And people can tell, they know. It's not your fault, it's that the devil is all around you in prostitution. But the good news is he can be fought. We fight with God's weapons: prayer, fasting, this support group, and the Bible." Vanessa made her way awkwardly back to her seat, and the group leader began praying loudly for the cleansing of the participants' souls.[17]

Staff at the organization did recognize, grudgingly, that many women ultimately left the program and returned to the sex industry. One staff member said "I hope they leave prostitution for good, but if they go back, at least they go back knowing that they're worth something. They have more self-esteem. They know that they're valuable." The organization's project manager similarly stated, "If they fall back into prostitution, at least they can no longer sin with pleasure. They see themselves as victims who can make other choices." However, every attempt was made to direct women away from the industry. When given a donation of a large number of condoms from a church, the organization refused to give them out, arguing that it was akin to telling the participants to go out into the streets and be promiscuous. There was a great deal of debate among staff members about this, with one staff member arguing, "Prostitution contaminates your body, spirit, and soul. The men who sleep with sex workers are rife with lust, sexual perversions, and evil. They are Satanists, wizards, and murderers. All these things get passed over during sex, and condoms don't protect you from them." Ultimately the condoms were returned. Several staff members expressed their frustration

[17] It is worth noting that despite what this conversation implies, street harassment of all women in Costa Rica occurs constantly. While sometimes defended as "cultural," the topic recently came to the fore when a young man who filmed a woman being harassed and posted a critique on social media was later stabbed in retribution. He eventually died of his injuries. See Tuckman and Gorbea (2015).

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at this decision to me privately, but none of them confronted the director. Indeed, the general dynamic among staff was to go along with Martínez's decisions without question, while sometimes grumbling about them informally and out of earshot.

Entrepreneurship and exploitation

In general, Esperanza Foundation has been very successful at generating both funding and media interest for its work. It has a very consistent message, presenting sex workers as victims of commercial sexual exploitation who deserve compassion and the possibility of being refashioned as empowered entrepreneurs. What this meant in practice was various kinds of job training during the second year of the program aimed at giving sex workers other income-generating skills. For example, many women took part in an intensive sewing course designed to prepare them for work in maquiladoras. Other courses being run regularly while I was visiting Esperanza Foundation included cooking and baking, hairdressing, jewelry making, and a microenterprise training program run by a church. The programs were not just about sex workers gaining new skills; they were also designed to help generate funds for the organization. Participants who were initially excited about getting the chance to make jewelery were disappointed when they found that the project was actually geared toward learning to assemble a single piece as quickly as possible. A local company dropped off the raw materials, and the foundation received payment according to the number of pieces the women could complete. Similarly, sewing training involved producing aprons, tea towels, and other items that could be sold out of the office and online. Given the expanding market for products made by trafficking victims (Bernstein 2010), rescue and rehabilitation through the production of consumer goods was pushed as a way of helping both women and the organization. Thus, while women were encouraged to become entrepreneurs, their labor was in fact regularly being harnessed to generate funds for the foundation. As Jason Rodriguez (2016) has cogently argued, NGOs are contexts that are characterized by work and markets, often creating wage relations that contribute to organizations' productivity and expansion. It is especially worth noting that most sex workers in Costa Rica work independently, negotiating directly with clients and retaining all of their earnings. They are operating within the sex industry as independent entrepreneurs and might be the consummate neoliberal subjects if only they were selling something other than sex. In the process of being remade as moral, Christian entrepreneurs, they enter into what is ultimately an exploitative relationship, as the foundation profits from their labor.

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A few individuals were rewarded with specific jobs offered by the foundation's contacts: one cleaning an office building, another doing dispatch for an evangelical tow truck company. This latter job created additional tensions within the organization, as women who were initially eager for the job quit the position one after another due to the owner's abusive behavior. Staff at Esperanza Foundation were frustrated with the women who quit, criticizing their lack of work ethic and urging them to stop complaining since the owner of the company was an important donor to the organization, and a Christian.

The kinds of jobs women were being trained for, the kinds of businesses they were encouraged to pursue, were not based on any market research. Indeed, bakeries, hair salons, and sewing services being run out of private homes are common in working-class neighborhoods across Costa Rica, and are all markets that are arguably fully glutted. Training women to sew in maquiladoras was a particularly odd choice, given how many sex workers already had experience working in maquilas and chose sex work instead (Rivers-Moore 2010). When I asked a few of the women who were taking the sewing course but had already left maquiladora work why they were participating, they said that it was "something to do" (Marieta) and "an easy way to complete a course and keep getting Esperanza Foundation's help" (Johana). Esperanza Foundation's job-training programs push sex workers to embrace new kinds of employment considered gender and class appropriate, work that is respectable and typical for working-class women. Sex workers are redeemed from the taint of prostitution through Jesus but also through new gendered and classed skills and values. This is remarkably similar to nineteenth-century projects run by middle-class women directed at reforming sex workers, with an emphasis on remaking them primarily as domestic workers and docile wives (Walkowitz 1982; Doezema 2001; Agustín 2007). Esperanza Foundation's vision of remaking sex workers as productive workers and entrepreneurs ultimately reproduces gendered and classed hierarchies, emphasizing the connection between women and domesticity and shoring up the false divide between sexuality and the market.

Pragmatic penance as exchange

Participants were initially encouraged and then eventually pressured to leave the sex industry. Significant tensions arose as women were told they had to "pay the price" (which is to say, make the sacrifice of leaving sex work) in order to access Esperanza Foundation's resources, including job training and scholarships to help pay for school supplies for adolescents (funded by the Dutch embassy). Resources and opportunities were also withheld from women who did not attend the obligatory Saturday religious services. This

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was a source of frustration for many: "They say they just want to help us, but why do I have to go to their church? I go to mass on Sundays in my community, but now they won't give me the *diario* or the scholarship for my daughter" (Susan).[18] Many other women agreed with Susan's argument and offered sympathy in private. However, no one accompanied Susan when she angrily decided to confront staff members about their decision to withhold support. The conversations among staff members that followed were revealing. "They think they should be given everything on a silver platter. They are so ungrateful for what we do for them," complained one social worker. "They want us to solve their problems, but they don't want to pay the price," concluded the director.

In discussions when staff were not around, sex workers frequently identified what they saw as the organization's hypocrisy. "They are professionals, social workers, whatever, making good salaries and asking us to pay the price. Do you know what paying the price means? No food for my kids. Who are they to judge me?" (Susan). Sex workers who participated in the program very quickly learned the importance of embracing a victim narrative, and the performance of shame and redemption. "I made the mistake of being honest at the beginning, and then they said they wouldn't help me since I wasn't making the sacrifice of leaving sex work. Lots of women still do sex work, they just know not to say so. I'd be happy to stop working if Esperanza Foundation wants to feed my kids and pay my mortgage. Now I know better. I tell them about how awful it is to sell sex and how happy I am that they got me out" (Prisila).

Sex workers strategically embrace pragmatic penance in an exchange relationship with the foundation: only by doing the emotional work of performing victimhood and regret were they able to take advantage of the services on offer. The contrast between the way sex workers talked about the sex industry during group sessions and at lunchtime, when Esperanza staff members were not around, was stark. Gaudi, a thirty-nine-year-old who had worked in a factory from the age of fourteen before entering the sex industry as a young adult, provides a useful example. Gaudi was an especially talkative member of the group and a gifted storyteller. She would participate actively in each session, often describing in intimate detail the horrors of her experiences in the sex industry. After one particularly long and awful story, Gaudi said, "I've done so much, how could God not judge me? My prostitution CV is so long, Jesus would say 'mama mía!'" and then burst into tears. She was

[18] The *diario* is a parcel of basic foods (rice, beans, sugar, cooking oil). Given that her younger daughter was malnourished, this was especially difficult for Susan.

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promptly comforted and prayed over by visiting volunteers from the United States. Yet at lunchtime that same day, Gaudi had the group in hysterics while describing a lingerie malfunction while on the job. If group sessions centered stories of disgust and catastrophe for the benefit of staff, lunch discussions often descended into gales of laughter at ridiculous requests from clients and strange fetishes. Some women also privately described praying to God to send them clients when they were especially in need of money. Participants quickly learned to speak about their time in the sex industry as always negative and firmly in their pasts when staff were present.

Sex workers' relationship to the foundation and the emotional labor of pragmatic penance varied. While embracing victimhood and penance was absolutely a requirement in order to access resources, women bought into the foundation's narrative in different ways. Jill McCorkel's (2013) fascinating study of a private prison rehabilitation program describes the different levels of participation: some women fully surrendered, some described "renting out their heads" in order to maintain a sense of self while participating, some graduated from the program while rejecting its philosophy (a "fake it 'til you make it" approach), while others were openly defiant and, as a result, were asked to leave. Similarly, at Esperanza Foundation, women's embrace of pragmatic penance varied, and there was certainly no single, simple narrative of conversion. Performing pragmatic penance in exchange for resources was complex: some women became involved fully in the foundation's work, rejecting sex work and converting wholeheartedly to evangelical Christianity (Marieta, described in the excerpt from my field notes above, is a good example of this). More common, however, was a much more complicated relationship with the foundation, as seen in the examples of Susan, Prisila, and Gaudi above, participants who frequently expressed frustration at some aspects of the organization while learning how to do the necessary emotional labor required to demonstrate enough penance in exchange for help. Because sex workers understood that the foundation was expecting a particular kind of analysis of the sex industry, they would try to use it to their advantage whenever possible. For example, women who had left the sex industry (or at least who were presenting themselves to the organization as having left the sex industry) would use the threat of returning in order to secure additional resources. Ronda, a twenty-nine-year-old sex worker originally from Nicaragua, discovered she was pregnant while participating in the program. She had given up a previous child for adoption, and the staff at Esperanza Foundation was eager to help Ronda keep this baby. She would frequently discuss her precarious financial position and how easy it would be to make money in the sex industry. After the baby was born, staff told me they were paying Ronda's rent for a few months and generally helping with

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her expenses since the temptation to return to sex work would be particularly strong at that moment. When I spoke privately with Ronda, she was matter-of-fact about her embrace of pragmatic penance: "I tell them what they want to hear, obviously. Prostitution is terrible, I'm so glad to be out, I'm so ashamed of having done that. You have to remember that [Esperanza Foundation] gets a lot of help, they get money to run their programs and they need us there. They need us to fill the spaces so they can say they are helping us. Some of them are definitely judging us, but they need us."

What Ronda's comments acknowledge is that there is a certain amount of mutual exploitation, and mutual dependency, occurring in the relationships between the NGO and sex workers. That said, the purse strings remained firmly in the hands of the foundation. Other women who threatened to return to sex work were not always successful in securing support, and there were significant tensions between staff members and sex workers who argued that they would be forced to sell sex without the organization's help. While participants had mixed feelings about performing pragmatic penance and were privately sympathetic to one another's complaints about the difficulties of having to do emotional labor in exchange for support, no space for collective action ever opened up. The foundation's practice of making examples out of women who were not "paying the price" functioned as a very effective disincentive to collective action or active solidarity. Performing the emotional labor of pragmatic penance was ultimately an individualized and individualizing process.

Conclusion

The emergence and success of Esperanza Foundation in Costa Rica needs to be understood as specifically Costa Rican, in the sense that the country's own political culture, its own historical and contemporary attitudes toward gender and sexuality, and its specific regulatory contexts all come into play to help explain the shape that helping sex workers has taken. However, I'm also suggesting the changes in Costa Rica are tied to larger patterns of political economy—the political economy of neoliberalism that emphasizes individual changes over structural transformation. What we see in Costa Rica is what happens when particular models circulate transnationally and are applied in very different places on the ground. Critically examining the experiences of Esperanza Foundation in seeking to help sex workers in Costa Rica demonstrates the ways that the organization has taken advantage of international trends that favor individual self-improvement, with attention to helping women become "productive" members of society rather than subjects of rights who might actually have a say in how their lives could be im-

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proved.[19] The intense scrutiny of individual women, the intrusion into their lives in the name of helping them, and the unabashed promotion of entrepreneurship are all deeply neoliberal logics. That said, we can also see how sex workers are able to deploy pragmatic penance to their advantage. Within the particular limits that they face, sex workers do the best they can to benefit from the resources available to them. As Corey S. Shdaimah and Chrysanthi Leon point out, "compliance with a program can be a strategic choice that is not the same as acceptance of the values or goals of the program" (2015, 332). Sex workers' strategic use of pragmatic penance demonstrates the importance of empirically exploring people's lived experiences of particular social and policy contexts.

While we know that emotional labor is a significant part of the work that sex workers do with their clients, this article has suggested that sex workers perform a different kind of emotional labor in their relationship with those aiming to help them. Pragmatic penance shows us that sex workers are ultimately agentive, though always within existing constraints. Pragmatic penance also reveals that sex work and the experiences of sex workers are much more complicated than the foundation's approach really allows. Sex work is never just one thing, it does not have a single meaning, and sex workers rarely embrace a single narrative. I want to emphasize that pragmatic penance is not simply about sex workers cynically taking advantage of the resources on offer at Esperanza Foundation. Quite to the contrary, many sex workers find great comfort there and are able to work through the stigma and shame of the sex industry, toward some kind of redemption. Stories like Gaudi's above exemplify the ways that sex work can be many things at once: funny, empowering, difficult, embarrassing. The foundation demands a single narrative of victimhood and entrepreneurial self-improvement, but the truth is much more nuanced and complicated. Sex workers' embrace of pragmatic penance demonstrates the strategic emotional labor that is performed in response to the neoliberal focus on entrepreneurial self-improvement and evangelical insistence on victimhood, self-fashioning, and redemption.

While much has been written about sex workers and their clients, this article has broken new ground by offering an empirical rendering of the relationship between sex workers and the evangelicals who help them. I have demonstrated that we cannot simply write off the work of groups like Esperanza Foundation, painting them as religious zealots who are worthy only of feminist condescension. Rather, we need to pay serious attention to the

[19] This trend toward representing women in the sex industry as victims in need of assistance can also be seen in the popularity of legislation that aims to decriminalize the sale of sex but criminalize men who purchase sex, most recently in Canada and France.

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cultural and economic purchase that their work has gained and how the move toward saving women through their insertion into particular kinds of markets, carrying out specific kinds of gendered economic activities, ultimately reproduces problematic limitations on women's economic and social possibilities. The irony, of course, is that given the fact that so many sex workers in Costa Rica work independently, most are in fact already self-fashioning entrepreneurial subjects, but they are not selling what feminine, working-class subjects are supposed to be selling. We also need to remember that "the claim to expertise in optimizing the lives of others is a claim to power" (Li 2007, 5). The tensions between sex workers and staff within the organization discussed above further demonstrate the fraught power dynamics involved with helping sex workers. Given these broader trends linked to neoliberal political economy, sex workers are able to perform pragmatic penance in order to benefit as much as possible from the help being offered but at the expense of collective political mobilization or even of active participation in the process of envisioning a different kind of future.

This significant shift toward saving victimized women who can be retrained is the result of several factors. Changing international funding priorities have favored the fight against trafficking, and NGOs that are able to shift focus in that direction will find themselves in a much stronger position to compete for what little funding is available. Esperanza Foundation has certainly been admirably astute at turning its attention to trafficking and the protection of minors. In addition, the interest in supporting programs that involve individual women's "self-improvement" meshes nicely with neoliberal ideologies of competition and free markets. The focus on women as victims is not merely about a shift in semantics; in practical terms, it means the experiences of women who remain in the industry are being ignored.

Undoubtedly, neoliberalism is the condition of possibility for Esperanza Foundation's work, but its framing of the issue as one of individual morality and uplift means that the broader structural dynamics at play that limit women's work opportunities and choices are obscured and that only women who are able to effectively deploy pragmatic penance will be deemed deserving of help.

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